

Water Comingling with Safety? Or Fear?: Children's Literature about Immigrants, Refugees, and the Dislocated

In my work with immigrants and refugees, I frequently use, in Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor, "mirror" books, meaning those books that reflect children's communities, heritages, and situations. In this session, I will introduce those books, including immigrant and refugee children's responses to the books. For example, a seven-year-old from Jamaica who had never been to school adored Frane Lessac's *My Little Island* (1987). The book evoked him to tell stories of his beloved island, Caribbean sea and grandmother; we scribed his words and, from this experience, he learned to read.

Other books that feature water in books about immigrants, refugees, and the dislocated are: Latisha Redding's *Calling the Water Drum* (2016); Sybella Wilkes's *One Day We Had to Run! Refugee Children Tell Their Stories in Words and Paintings* (1994); Mary Williams's *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (2005); Liz Lofthouse's *Ziba Came on a Boat* (2007); Minfong Ho's *The Clay Marble* (1991); and Michelle Lord's *A Song for Cambodia* (2008). A theme across each of these books is that the immigrant or refugee child must cross water to arrive to safety. In most of the books the fear of water is mingled with the desire to escape fire and carnage; the child is faced with a terrible choice. To remain at home means certain death; to leave might also mean death by drowning. There are exceptions, for example, *Ziba Came on a Boat* is told in flashback with Robert Ingpen's magnificent illustrations. While on the boat, Ziba longs for the Afghanistan she loved—its food, crafts, art, and customs. What to some of us is an undesirable place (Afghanistan) is the solace of home to others. I will analyze the role of water in each of these books in relation to the immigrant and refugee experience.

I will also consider problematic books—books that, because they are demeaning to "the Other" should not be used with children, such as Melissa Leembruggen's *The Sudan Project* (2007) on those dislocated by the Darfur genocide.