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ARTICLE

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Representations of migration in U.K. and U.S. children's picture books in the Trump and Brexit era

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of an intensifying hostile environment towards migrants and refugees in the U.S. and Europe, children's picture books play an important role in shaping children's understanding of migration and attitudes towards migrants. How do contemporary children's books depict migration? This article discusses the findings of a thematic analysis of 40 picture books about migration, published between 2015 and 2019 in the U.K. and the U.S. We found that these books typically present successful migration stories where children move from unfortunate circumstances in their home countries to happier lives in the host countries. Host countries are mostly located in the global North and migrants are generally welcomed with generosity and hospitality. We also found that the books give important attention to historical contexts. However, while children's picture books concerning migration contribute to enhancing children's understanding of migration in some ways, they concurrently erase difference and injustice, and thus miss an opportunity to broaden children's knowledge and appreciation of the plurality of cultures, experiences, and places and the urgent need to respect and protect them.

Impact Summary:

Prior State of Knowledge:

Existing research, predominantly in the field of education, highlights how children's books can promote understanding of and empathy towards migrants and refugees, dispel stereotypes, and teach children how to show kindness, respect, and hospitality towards migrants and refugees.

Novel Contributions:

The study highlights not just how children's picture books contribute to enhancing children's understanding of migration, but also how these books concurrently erase difference and injustice, and thus miss an opportunity to broaden children's knowledge and appreciation of difference.

Practical Implications:

The study draws parents' and educators' attention to the lessons children can learn from picture books on immigration, their benefits and limitations. It advances storytellers' understanding of how to broaden children's knowledge and appreciation of difference in books about migration.

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Introduction

Dreamers, a children's picture book written by Yuyi Morales, was published at the height of the 2018 family-separation crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, following the Trump administration's announcement of a "zero tolerance" policy to prosecute all adults who try to cross the border illegally.¹ The book tells the story of a mother's and her son's journey from Mexico to the U.S., recounting their experiences as they find comfort and pleasure in their new country, and especially in the picture books they discover in their local public library. *Dreamers* is only one of a rapidly growing number of children's picture books about migration that have been published in recent years. A handful of such books were published between 2000 and 2006 in the U.S., but by 2018, there were more than 100 (Shoichet, 2019). Similarly, as the number of refugees arriving in Europe increases, and as migration becomes increasingly central in national and international agendas, increasing numbers of picture books about migration are being published in the U.K. (Hope, 2018).

Children's books continue to be influential sources of information and imagination, and they constitute important socializing agents through which values are transmitted (Fisch, 2004; Mourão, 2015; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2013; Sipe, 1998; Tilley, 2013). What do the children's picture books published in recent years tell children about migration? How do they depict immigrants and migration? The study reported in this article seeks to address these questions by examining the representation of migration in contemporary children's picture books published in the U.S. and the U.K.

Migration and the political climate in the U.S. and the U.K.

Recently, as a consequence of escalating regional conflicts, climate change, natural disasters, and globalization, growing numbers of people from the global South and the former communist bloc have left their home countries and sought sanctuary and/or a better life in the more affluent countries of the global North. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) figures, as of 2019, at least 79.5 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes due to war, violence, and persecution, including 26 million refugees, half of whom were under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2020).

It is in this context that immigration and the "refugee crisis" have topped the political agendas in both the U.S. and Europe, with media and cultural texts playing a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of these issues. In the U.S., Donald Trump made immigration the centrepiece of his election campaign, warning Americans that immigrants and refugees were undermining the economy, driving down wages, and taking advantage of government benefits. Trump notoriously called Mexican immigrants criminals and rapists.² Since assuming office in 2017, Trump's administration reduced refugee admissions to the lowest levels since the enactment of the resettlement program in 1980, and attempted to cancel the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides work authorization and temporary relief from deportation for approximately 690,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children (Pew Research Center, 2019).

While Europe too has long been a destination for migrants and refugees, 2015 saw a sharp rise in the numbers of refugees and migrants arriving on the continent's shores.

Approximately one million people fleeing war and poverty arrived in Europe in 2015 (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017), with a significant proportion fleeing war-torn Syria. According to UNHCR figures, by the end of 2018 there were 126,720 refugees in the U.K.³ In the U.K., the issue of migration has been immensely politically charged. The June 2016 referendum (“Brexit”) decision that the U.K. should leave the European Union has been one of the most visible examples of the growing strength of anti-immigrant sentiment in the advanced industrialized world. However, even before the momentous referendum vote, critics warned about the cloud of xenophobia spreading over Europe and the growing “culture of aversion” in the U.K. (Amin, 2012; Bauman, 2016). The terms “refugee crisis” or “migration crisis” have been commonly used to call for attention and action from governments, politicians, and European publics (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Media representation of migration

Both media and migration scholars have highlighted the key role media play in constructing and shaping public discourses and imaginations of migration (Bauman, 2016; Bleiker, Campbell, & Hutchison, 2014; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Orgad, 2012). Studies examine how media depictions of immigrants and refugees help fuel insidious and dangerous “cultures of inhospitality” (Bleiker et al., 2014), xenophobia, and racism by casting “us” in the host society vs. “them,” and by Othering migrants and refugees, depicting them as threatening, criminals, “undesirable,” dirty, and irrational. Conversely, studies show how media representations can foster understanding, recognition of, and hospitality towards migrants and refugees, for example by endowing them agency and voice to articulate their plight and express their vulnerability, abjection, and humanity (e.g., Drüeke & Klaus, 2017; Mummery & Rodan, 2007; Price, 2014; Sanyal, 2017).

This literature focuses on representations of migration in news (e.g., Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015; Chouliraki & Zaborowski, 2017), films (Donald, 2018; Sanyal, 2017), reality television (Orgad & Nikunen, 2015; Price, 2014), and genres such as video games (Amaya, 2015; Orgad, 2012). The figure of the migrant child has attracted particular scholarly interest for its potential to elicit compassion: from iconic news images of the Kurdish-Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe with his family (Kędra & Sommer, 2018; Sajir & Aouragh, 2019); to children being separated from their parents on the U.S.–Mexico border (Silva & Flynn, 2020) and European borders (Rosen & Crafter, 2018); to cinematic representations of child migration (Donald, 2018). However, to date, little attention has been paid to the role played by children’s media in depicting migration and especially children migrants.

Children’s media representation of migration

Children’s media have long been studied as an important socializing agent through which values are transmitted, imaginations are fed, and attitudes are developed (Lemish, 2015). A large body of research discusses the importance of a diverse universe of images in children’s media related to gender, race, and ethnicity (Bishop, 1990; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2017; Götz & Lemish, 2012; Rivera & Valdivia, 2013). There is also a significant body of research on migrant-children’s consumption and use of media in the context of globalization and transnational migration over the last two decades (de Block & Buckingham, 2007;

Elias, 2013; Elias & Lemish, 2011; Katz, 2014). However, little is known about how children's media depict immigration and how such depictions may play a part in shaping children's feelings and views on immigration and refugees.

An exception is found in TelevIZlon (2017), a publication aimed at children's media professionals, based on the screening of international children's programs during the bi-annual Prix Jeunesse International festival. Additionally, a symposium entitled "Invisible Children: Children's Media, Diversity, and Forced Migration" in 2018, highlighted the significance of representing migration in children's media, given the increasingly diverse societies in Europe and elsewhere, and in light of the rapid changes in children's consumption of content on different media platforms. Building on these critiques, Steemers, Sakr, and Singer (2018) examine screen content made for and about children from the Arab region who arrived in Europe. The authors (2018) reveal that this content tends to depict refugee children "as a set of tragic statistics rather than individuals with unique histories and experiences" (p. 2). They also highlight the lack of female protagonists (a critique made in relation to children's media more generally, see Lemish, 2010), as well as the significance of presenting migration in a historical perspective.

Children's books' representation of migration

While studies of children's media representations of migration are scarce, in the field of education, children's books' portrayals of the topic have received some attention. Scholars highlight the didactic import of children's picture books for nourishing children's imagination and developing an understanding of cultural identities different from their own (Britton, 1993; Lathey, 2001). As Bishop (1990) writes, children need books to find their own mirrors and as windows onto reality. Situating the importance of children's books in the context of societies such as the U.S., "where racism is still one of the major unresolved problems," Bishop (1990, p. ix) observes: "books may be one of the few places where children [...] may meet people unlike themselves." Indeed, children's literature is commonly seen as an ideal vehicle for communicating to children about diverse experiences and adding depth and understanding to what otherwise might tend toward generalization, homogeneity, and stereotyping (Rutter, 2006). Nevertheless, what counts as "diversity book" remains debatable (Lawrence, 2020) since "diversity" is not merely about presenting a range of identities but rather concerns the depth of the representation, the choice of characters, the narratives, and other evaluative criteria.

Existing research on children's books about migration highlights how children's books can promote understanding of and empathy towards migrants and refugees, dispel stereotypes, and teach children how to show others kindness, respect, and hospitality (Braden, 2019; Horne, 2010). Several scholars examine these issues in picture books targeted at young children. For example, drawing on an analysis of early reader picture books about refugees from 1956 to 2011, interviews with authors, and observation of how children in the classroom read and respond to books about refugees, Hope (2007, 2008, 2018) underscores the role these books can play in welcoming and normalizing refugee experiences. Similarly, Lamme, Fu, and Lowery (2004) explore American children's picture books, showing that immigrant families and their experiences are depicted in one of three ways: (1) making the transition (feeling lost and home sick, adjusting to the American experience, and working toward fulfilment of dreams); (2) maintaining the connection

(continuing traditional celebrations, creating memories, and revisiting the homeland); (3) becoming American (bridging two cultures, developing a new identity, and naturalization). In a study of children's books concerning the American-Korean immigrant experience, Yi (2014) identifies similar themes and shows that adaptability, resilience, and willingness to start a new chapter are depicted as the three key positive aspects associated with migrant characters. Smith (2006) presents a more critical reading of the emphasis on assimilation and adjustment to the host country culture. In her study of Michael Bond's popular 1958 U.K. picture book *Paddington*, which recounts the adventures of the stowaway character Paddington Bear upon his arrival in London (and has recently been adapted into a series of popular films), Smith shows how Paddington Bear is constructed as a benign immigrant who enthusiastically assimilates into the dominant British culture. This is coupled with the underlying narrative of control that is exerted over him as Other (however compassionately expressed by the English family who welcomes him into their home). Smith concludes that Bond's Paddington stories are subtle in their articulation of racist and xenophobic discourses: they present the case for tolerance and understanding towards immigrants, but on the condition that immigrants conform to the dominant culture's norms (see also Orgad, 2017).

Similar themes have been explored in young adult literature, although the implicit assumption underpinning research on these books is that older children are better able to engage with the complex political and psychological aspects of migration (Smith, 2006). For example, Verbruggen (2018) found that in young adult novels with immigrant protagonists, immigrants are depicted as coming to the U.S. primarily to escape violence or persecution in their home countries, experiencing a variety of challenges, tending to maintain their home country cultures, and experiencing racism but also finding kindness and friendship in the U.S. In her analysis of young adult books portraying child and teenage immigrants in the U.S., Brown (2011) found that the books foreground future orientation, ambition and initiative, verbal expressiveness, and intentionality as key traits contributing to the immigrant's success in America. In the context of increasing public concern over undocumented children in the U.S., and noting an increase in young adult novels on this topic, Cummins (2012) studied 11 young adult English language novels from the past three decades (1981–2011) which depict undocumented migration between Mexico and the U.S. She found that these books offer sympathetic identification with young border crossing characters as they struggle against antagonistic forces of poverty, physical danger, and immigration laws. However, Cummins (2012) argues that while these literary works implicitly urge "empathetic out-reach" which "abolishes distinctions between legal and undocumented residents" (p. 69), they offer no larger-scale solutions. Overall, studies of both picture books and young reader books reveal a focus on child characters as ordinary people caught up in terrible events who manage to overcome challenges by demonstrating their inner strength, resourcefulness, optimism, and determination.⁴ They highlight the importance of depicting refugees and migrants as taking control of their destiny.

Our study builds on this scholarship and its interest in the ethical, didactic, and socializing role that children's literature and media can play in cultivating children's understanding of and emotional relation to migration. However, unlike the existing research, which is confined to the field of education and is mostly pre-2016, our focus is on books published in the U.S. and the U.K. between 2016 and 2019 – the period following

the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. and the U.K. referendum vote to leave the European Union (Brexit). Also, in contrast to the existing literature, we treat these books as edutainment (educational entertainment) media (Lemish, 2015) which are consumed by children and their parents at home rather than in a classroom context. We are not concerned here with the books' literary aspects, the age appropriateness of the narrative and vocabulary, or their potential educational use. Rather, we analyze the books as media scholars who appreciate the potential of storytelling in its various modalities to shape worldviews from an early age.

Methodology

The study is based on a thematic analysis of children's picture books about migration published in the U.S. and the U.K. Our sample was guided by both *marketability/sales* – since books are consumer products, and *educational value* – based on the literature discussed above which highlights the socializing role played by children's books. The sample was drawn from two main databases: a) the bestselling English language picture-book list published between 2015–2019 as listed on the online marketplace Amazon (representing the first criterion),⁵ and b) the collections in four central public libraries: two in London, in the U.K., and two in New Jersey and New York, in the U.S. (based on the second criterion, namely the books' educational value which is a central consideration in public library collection development). To complement the U.K. library sample, we visited two specialist children's bookstores. The initial search yielded 100 Amazon-recommended books, 52 U.S. library books and 46 U.K. library and children's store books. From these we selected fiction and non-fiction picture books, a decision informed by the fact that both genres appeared on the Amazon "Best Sellers in Children's Books on Immigration" list, and therefore meet our interest in popular books as edutainment consumed by children and parents. The books selected discuss migration explicitly, are aimed at children aged between 3 and 8 years (the main age group for picture books, see Book Editing Associates, 2016), and were published between 2015 and 2019.⁶ The 2015–2019 timeframe seeks to capture trends in children's picture books' depictions of migration in the build-up to, during the campaigns, and following the period of the Brexit vote in June 2016 and Trump's election in November 2016.

After removing overlaps, guided by the above criteria, the selection process resulted in a sample of 40 books which were analyzed thematically. Systematic analysis was enabled by a codebook (see [Appendix 1](#)), and focused on the narrative and characters. The codebook was developed both deductively – drawing on questions and categories examined by other studies in this area (e.g., Götz & Lemish, 2012; Verbruggen, 2018) and inductively, following two pilot studies which provided important insights into the content of the books, and allowed us to add categories (e.g., the nature of the migration journey) and refine them. We examined a) types of migration stories being represented in these books (e.g., current, contemporary, or historical; refugee or voluntary; reasons for migrating, etc.), b) depictions of the migrants' lives before and after migration and in the corresponding countries of origin and host countries (e.g., specific cultural references of the countries or cultures), c) depictions of the migration journey (e.g., modes of transport, level of danger and difficulty, etc.), d) depictions of the characters, their agency and voice

(e.g., type of character, gender, age, religion, family structure; character's agency and main traits, etc.), and e) the stories' overall moral about migration (e.g., the need for optimism, overcoming difficulties, celebrating diversity, the importance of friendship, etc.)

The unit of analysis was the entire book – both text and illustrations, and the codebook included evaluation of the relationship between the two (complementary, contradictory, unrelated). This approach follows media studies tradition of analyzing multi-modal texts (e.g., television news; advertising; political campaigns) holistically, and the notion that the meaning of these texts lies in the conjunction of its different modes; in our case, image and text. In our analysis we found that the image and the text reinforce and anchor the same meaning. The coding was conducted by four coders in London; each coded half of the sample independently, and then met in pairs to discuss and agree. The overall initial level of agreement was 72.75% and reached almost a full consensus (99%) following discussion about disagreements (individual levels of agreement for each code can be found in [Appendix 1](#)).

Migration stories in children's picture books

Country of publication

Just over half (52.5%, $n = 21$) of the books in the sample were published in the U.S., and almost a third were published in the U.K. (32.5%, $n = 13$). On the one hand, this is not surprising given that we focus specifically on U.S. and U.K. markets and searched U.S. and U.K. databases. On the other hand, given the topic of migration, a larger representation of books from other countries might have been expected, reflecting stories of migrants from or to destinations outside the U.K. and the U.S. However, our findings show that the market is clearly dominated by books published in the U.S. and the U.K., confirming the broader trend in the children's book publishing sector.⁷ Only one of the books in our sample (*Door*) was published in a non-western country: South Korea (but co-produced in the U.S. and South Korea). The remaining books were published in Canada (10%, $n = 4$) and Australia (2.5%, $n = 1$): both in the global North and English-speaking countries. Therefore, apart from one book, the books in the sample originated from English-speaking countries, and none were translated from another language. However, we gleaned from the biographical notes that some of the authors of the books in our sample are migrants who based their stories on their own migration experiences to countries in the global North.

Key narratives

Before coding, two members of the research team read the entire sample closely and identified three key narratives. These are overarching frames that map the key narrative structures around which the books center. Most books pivot on one of these three narratives, but some include more than one. The narrative identification was done inductively, but was informed by previous research on the narratives employed in children books. In particular, the narratives identified in the books we analyzed echoed those in Lamme et al.'s (2004) study.

The first narrative centers on the migrant's journey and the difficulty involved in transitioning to a new place, within a general story arc that sees migrant(s) continuing to seek a better life and persevere despite hardship and despair (e.g., *The Day that War Came*). The second narrative focuses on the migrant's difference and/or memories of their home country and their quest for social acceptance in a new cultural and/or national context (e.g., *Mustafa*). 90% of the books ($n = 36$) explicitly evoke culturally specific markers of both the home and host countries through the text and/or illustrations: for example, a Persian carpet in *The World is Not a Rectangle* which is based on the story of architect Zaha Hadid who migrated from Iraq to Europe; words in Creole, signifying Haiti as the country of origin of the protagonist's mother's in *Mama's Nightingale*; and objects such as Barbie, Nintendo DS (game console) and a U.S. passport, marking life in the host country in *This is Me: A Story of Who We Are and Where We Came From*. In this second narrative the readers are taught that one's cultural heritage, memories, and traditions are not a problem to be solved or a challenge to overcome, but a difference to be celebrated and endorsed. The third narrative centers on the migrant's hopeful life after immigration (e.g., *Pete Comes to America*; *We Came to America*). In this narrative, construction of the U.S. as a Land of Opportunity is prevalent.

Type of migration

Half of the books ($n = 20$) in the sample focus on stories of forced migration and refuge. Characters migrate to flee violence, war, or oppression and/or escape poverty and/or famine (e.g., *My Name is Not Refugee*; and *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*). These books depict the migration journey as hazardous and difficult (associated with flight from the harsh conditions of war, persecution, and/or poverty or famine) and depict the host country as a haven from these misfortunes – a finding which echoes Verbruggen's (2018) study of contemporary young adult books about migration. The other half of the sample ($n = 20$) includes 14 books (35%) that refer to both forced and voluntary migration and only six books (15%) that focus exclusively on voluntary migration (e.g., *Door*; *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré*). Of these six, only four are stories of migration in order to find a job or obtain financial benefits or opportunities (e.g., *Their Great Gift: Courage, Sacrifice, and Hope in a New Land*; and *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library*).

That forced migration is the central type of migration on which contemporary children's picture books focus has potentially important implications. On the one hand, these books play an important pedagogic role in inviting children to engage with a pressing global issue and the dire reality of millions around the world who have escaped or are trying to flee their countries. On the other hand, in associating migration predominantly with refuge and forced movement, contemporary children's picture books arguably reinforce a somewhat narrow view of migration as rooted overwhelmingly in negative experiences. In this sense, children's picture books display a similar limitation to children's television (discussed earlier) and adult media – especially news – representations, which repeatedly are accused of constructing a view of migration that is reduced to and/or is almost exclusively associated with refuge, misfortune, and crisis (Einashé & Roueché, 2019; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Furthermore, as we discuss later, the implied

message is that people migrate to “our country” (the U.S. and the U.K.) which is safe, welcoming, and prosperous, to leave places that are unsafe, dangerous, dirty, and poor. For example, the mother of the protagonist in *My Name is Not Refugee* tells her child that they have to leave their country because it is unsafe; the illustration shows a derelict building alongside which are refuse bags and a black cat. The reader is told that the new place is safe, and the image shows the child and his mother snuggled up in a proper bed under a floral duvet, and this time the cat is ginger.

Time of migration

Nearly half of the books in the sample (47.5%, $n = 19$) focus on migration in a contemporary (21st century) context (e.g., *The Day that War Came*; *The Journey*). However, interestingly, 40% of the books in the entire sample ($n = 16$) depict migration in a historical, pre 21st-century context (e.g., *Irving Berlin: The Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing*; *Gittel's Journey: An Ellis Island Story*; *Refuge*). The temporal context of the remaining books (12.5%, $n = 5$) is mixed/unclear. Amongst the 16 historical books, only half ($n = 8$) exclusively center the experience of forced migration; the other half ($n = 8$) describe voluntary or mixed types of migration. Historical books include stories where the protagonists migrate to find a job or financial opportunities (4/16 books). However, none of the 20 books depicting contemporary contexts include stories of voluntary migration, and 12 of these describe the reason for migrating as escaping violence, war, persecution, or a natural disaster. Thus, a problematic distinction emerges from the sample, whereby migration in the past is shown to include both voluntary and forced movements of people, while contemporary migration is depicted more often (60%, 12/20) as forced by some threat and suffering, involving no or very limited choice.

Media representations of migration are frequently critiqued for their lack of historical perspective (Bauman, 2016; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Orgad, 2016), and a similar critique has been levelled at children's television (Steemers et al., 2018). However, it is interesting to note that in children's picture books, significant attention is paid to historical aspects of migration, and history is used as a prism through which to teach children about migration in the present. For example, *Gittel's Journey: An Ellis Island Story*, recounts the story of a mother's and her daughter's arrival in America in the early 20th century, while *Irving Berlin, The Immigrant Boy who Made America Sing* describes how the protagonist came to the U.S. as a refugee from Tsarist Russia and how New York welcomed him and gave him the chance to express his creativity, which otherwise would have been suppressed. At the same time, it could be argued that historical stories enable engagement with the topic of migration as if it was safely secured in the past, avoiding more controversial and politicized aspects associated with contemporary migration and the “refugee crisis.” Indeed, that 40% of the sample ($n = 16$) focuses on historical contexts might be driven, at least partly, by commercial interests: an attempt to avoid alienating some parents (the potential consumers) whose views of contemporary migration may not chime with the books' overall message of welcoming and appreciating migrants.

Characters

Only 42.5% ($n = 17$) of the books included some reference to antagonist(s), and none of the books centred on its/their presence. This aligns with young children's TV where (with the exception of programs dealing with bullying) antagonists are largely absent, and the world is presented as a safe place full of well-intended people (Lemish & Russo Johnson, 2019). Set against the fact that 50% of the sample focuses on forced migration, the implication of the relative absence of protagonists is that the forces responsible for forced migration are left rather vague. For example, war and conflict are depicted both textually and visually as chaotic and frightening, but rarely embodied in characters such as soldiers or political leaders. A possible explanation for the absence of antagonists (e.g., militias; migration authorities) is that this de-politicizes the books and keeps them removed from the contested political context of contemporary migration. In this context, the book *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* is noteworthy as an outlier which focuses explicitly on critiquing the host country (U.S.) and highlights its unjust deportation and judicial system through the character of a stern prison guard who represents the U.S. immigration system.

Anthropomorphic vs non-anthropomorphic

In most of the books (77.5%, $n = 31$), the protagonist is the migrant, and is predominantly depicted as human (85% of the entire sample, $n = 34$). Unlike other topics in children's literature which use more non-realistic depictions, especially non-human (e.g., animal, imaginary) characters (Li, Eisen, & Lillard, 2019; Oppliger & Davis, 2016), the depiction of migration is overwhelmingly associated with human characters and has a strong realistic orientation. This deviates from the findings of a recent study which shows that while animation comprises over two-thirds of children's television, less than half of its characters are human (Lemish & Russo Johnson, 2019), and this percentage is declining compared to a study based on data collected ten years earlier (Götz & Lemish, 2012).

Agency

In 45% of the sample ($n = 18$), the protagonist is agentic; in 25% ($n = 10$), they transform from passive to active, and in another quarter of the books ($n = 10$), the protagonist is passive and/or a victim (in the other 5%, $n = 2$, it is mixed). Specifically, protagonists are frequently characterized as creative and talented, innovative and entrepreneurial, inquisitive, smart, hardworking, persistent, brave, and/or adventurous, resilient, joyful, optimistic, kind, loving, and empathetic – traits similar to those identified by Yi (2014) in her study of children's books about the American-Korean immigrant experience. For example, in *Adrift at Sea*, the protagonist survives a perilous voyage on a fishing boat overloaded with 60 Vietnamese refugees. He goes on to finish school and build a rich and meaningful life in his host country. *My Name is not Refugee* tells the story of a boy who has to leave his home country (his belongings, his friends, his town) behind, endure a long walk, sleep in strange places, and eat unfamiliar food before everything starts to come together and make sense in his new home. The emphasis on the protagonist's agency corresponds to the use of first person in 45% of the books ($n = 18$), which allows protagonists to tell their

own story. This is characteristic of children's picture books more broadly, which try to inspire children, offer positive role models, and present optimistic stories.

Gender

In 45% of the books in the sample ($n = 18$), the protagonist is male, while in 32.5% ($n = 13$), the protagonist is female, and in the remaining 22.5% ($n = 9$), there are protagonists of both genders, or gender is unclear. These differences align with findings about gender representations across children's television (e.g., Götz & Lemish, 2012; Lemish & Russo Johnson, 2019), which consistently report a balance of two male to one female character. The depiction of protagonist girls' and boys' experiences in the *host country* is mostly similar: the protagonists have an overall happy or mixed experience. However, in the case of the protagonists' experience in their *country of origin*, we see some interesting differences. In books with girl protagonists, more than half of the books (54%, 7/13) depict her experience in the country of origin as happy, and in the remainder 46% ($n = 6$), it is mixed or unclear. None of the books in which the protagonist is a girl describe negative experiences in her country of origin, which arguably fails to reflect the reality of millions of refugee girls who are deprived of education and subjected to violence and/or poverty in the countries from which they flee. However, in stories where the protagonist is a boy, less than a third (28%, $n = 5/18$) depict positive experiences in his home country; the remainder present mixed (28%, $n = 5/18$), negative (22%, $n = 4/18$), or unclear (22%, $n = 4/18$) descriptions.

This finding links to the different depiction of male and female protagonists' agency, that is, whether they actively initiate and/or take action to change their lives and/or adapt to their lives in the new country.⁸ Among the books with girl protagonists ($n = 13$), only five (38%) depict her as active throughout, whereas in books with boy protagonists ($n = 18$), nine (50%) depict him as active throughout. Thus, looking at the entire sample ($n = 40$), almost a quarter of the books (22.5%, $n = 9$) depict an active boy protagonist, while only 12.5% ($n = 5$) of the 40 books show an active girl protagonist. When the protagonist is depicted as passive and/or a victim, only four out of 18 of the books about boy protagonists (22%) describe him as passive and/or a victim while four out of the 13 books with girl protagonists (31%) describe her as passive and/or a victim. Although these are not statistically significant differences, the results nevertheless suggest a tendency to present girls as victims more often than boys, which is consistent with deeply entrenched societal gender stereotyping and the higher frequency in children's media of depicting girls as victims, as compared to boys (Duvall & Moscovitz, 2016; Lemish, 2010).

Skin color

In 37.5% of the sample ($n = 15$), the protagonist has brown skin; in 25% ($n = 10$) it has white, beige or light pink skin; in another 25% ($n = 10$) it has skin colours associated with anthropomorphic characters such as animals or imaginary creatures, and in the remainder 12.5% of the sample ($n = 5$), protagonists have more than one skin color. This is consistent with recent efforts to "diversify" children's media representations as a strategy to allow children with different ethnicities to recognize themselves in characters that can be

interpreted to be representing a variety of ethnicities and races, including Latinx, Middle-Eastern, Asian, bi-racial and even Black (Lemish, 2010).

Religion

Interestingly, the majority of the books avoid references to specific religious backgrounds. In most of the books (85%, $n = 34$), the protagonist's religion is unspecified or unclear. This suggests a deliberate attempt to avoid associating migrant protagonists with a particular religion, perhaps as a response to the political climate of religion-related xenophobia and especially Islamophobia towards refugees and migrants.

Family composition

Just over a third of the sample (37.5%, $n = 15$) depicts the protagonist as a child in a dual-parent family, while 27.5% of the books ($n = 11$) depict the protagonist as a child with a single parent, although notably all these depictions frame single parenting as forced rather than a choice. For example, in *The Journey*, the protagonist's father is killed in the war. The rest of the sample consists of 25% ($n = 10$) where there is no reference to family and/or parents, 5% ($n = 2$) where the parents are left behind in the country of origin, 2.5% ($n = 1$) in which both parents are deceased, and another 2.5% ($n = 1$) where protagonists have different types of family compositions. None of the books in the sample include references to non-heterosexual families. While there is a wider trend in contemporary children's books of including non-heteronormative and non-traditional family structures such as gay parents and single parents, heterosexuality remains the dominant paradigm in this genre (e.g., Capuzza, 2019; Stafford, 2016; Sunderland & McGlashan, 2013). Children's books – both in general and in our sample – also persistently lack representation of other non-normative family structures, including non-nuclear families, single parent and multi-generational families, and families with fostered and adopted children (Droog, Bettridge, Martin, & Yates-MacKay, 2019).

The host country/place and the country/place of origin

In 45% of the books ($n = 18$), the protagonist's experience is depicted as overall positive and happy, while in another 45% ($n = 18$), it is mixed, and in the remaining 10% ($n = 4$) it is unclear or unknown. None of the books portray the protagonist's experience in the host country/place as negative. Comparatively, the protagonists' experience in their country/place of origin is depicted as positive and happy only in 30% of the books ($n = 12$), with the rest (70%, $n = 28$) depicting it as negative or mixed. Thus, we observe a tendency to play down protagonists' positive experiences in their places of origin, and emphasize their overall positive experiences in the place to which they migrated.

In 45% of the books ($n = 18$), the host country/place is located in the global North, most frequently the U.S. (17/18 books). In another 50% ($n = 20$), the host country/place is unspecified. Only two books (5%) depict the host country/place as located in the global South: one in Egypt (*Refuge*) and the other in a refugee camp in Lukole, Tanzania (*Banana-Leaf Ball*). This perpetuates the wider bias in media coverage which frequently obscures the fact that the top-refugee hosting countries are in the global South rather than in the global North: Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR, 2020).

Strikingly, while 57% of today's world's refugees come from three countries – namely Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan – none of the books in the sample depict any of these as the migrant's country of origin. In seven of the books (17.5%), the country of origin is the Caribbean and Central America, including Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and El Salvador – countries from which the U.S. receives large numbers of asylum applications. It is interesting also that although three books (7.5%) depict a country of origin in western Europe/global North (Italy, France, and Greece), in none of the books is the country of origin either the U.S. or the U.K. The implication is that these are not countries that children and their families want to leave but are countries which others want to emigrate to. Supporting this positive image of the host country is the finding that in 42.5% of the sample (n = 17), the attitude of the host country's society is supportive, welcoming, and respectful; in another 22.5% (n = 9), it changes from negative to positive. Strikingly, in only two books from the entire sample, the host society's attitude is shown as negative and suspicious (*The Day War Came* and *Mama's Nightingale*).

The U.S. as a host country is shown in a mostly positive light: out of 17 books (42.5%) where the U.S. is the host country, seven describe its attitude towards migrants as supportive and respectful, five as changing from negative to positive and another five as mixed or ambivalent. In nine of these books (9/17, 53%), the protagonist's experience is depicted as positive and happy, and in another eight, as mixed. Even *Mama's Nightingale*, which is arguably the most critical of the books in our sample, tells the story of an American girl's Haitian mother who is incarcerated for not having the required immigration papers, but ultimately is released thanks to the efforts of the U.S.'s ethical press (a reporter publicizes the girl's plight and pleads for her mother's release) and just legal system. Sung and DeMar's (2020) study of Latinx children's picture books reveals a similar emphasis, which, they warn, "risk[s] furthering a postcolonial message that the United States is the land of superior opportunities and a better life" (p. 25).

Consistent with our note about the strong realistic orientation of the stories, only two books (5% of the sample) depict a fictional host country (*Door* and *Chee-Kee: A Panda in Bearland*), and even in these stories the implication is that the host country is the U.S. or the U.K. In *Door*, the dapper dress of the guests at the flowery and orderly garden party are reminiscent of an *Alice in Wonderland* inspired tea party. Similarly, in *Chee-Kee*, culture is symbolized through clothes – specifically, a nón lá conical hat, emphasizing the "otherness" of the panda in a land of North American bears who wear baseball caps. Also interesting is that while half of the books in the sample (n = 20) focus on stories of forced migration and refuge, only three (7.5% of the entire sample) depict the place of arrival as a refugee camp, and only one book (2.5% of the sample), *The Journey*, ends before arrival at a country. Thus, there is a clear focus on a positive closure to the story of migration insofar as the migrants arrive in a country which provides them with safety, stability certainty, and social acceptance. This echoes a wider trend in many contemporary representations of migration which impose closure, certainty, and sometimes a happy ending on what in fact is often an experience characterized by uncertainty and lack of closure (see Orgad, 2012).

Conclusion

In the wake of an intensifying hostile environment and a “culture of aversion” (Amin, 2012) towards migrants and refugees in the U.S. and Europe, children’s media play an important if not urgent role in fostering hospitable attitudes, fighting prejudice, and strengthening children’s understanding of migrants’ experiences and needs. Our study focused on young children’s picture books as one of these media and examined the stories they tell and how they depict migration for English-speaking readers. We found that these books typically present successful migration stories where children move from unfortunate circumstances in their home countries to happier lives in the host countries. The host countries are mostly located in the global North – most frequently the U.S. – and migrants are generally welcomed with generosity and hospitality. Narratives largely lack antagonists and present the world as a place where safety, comfort, and happiness can be achieved.

The depiction of migration as an ultimately positive and successful experience challenges the grimmer picture emerging from mainstream media depictions of migration and refugees as theaters of tragedy and suffering. The notable attention given by children’s picture books to historical contexts of migration contributes to understanding the connections between migration today and in the past – a connection too often missing in contemporary representations of migration. At the same time, the overwhelmingly positive depiction of the host country/place as hospitable obscures the very different reality in which most of the readers of these books exist. Crucially, it misses an opportunity to engage children more directly – if more uncomfortably – with experiences of injustice and discrimination whose source is in their *own* societies. Thus, while children’s literature provides a “perfect training field” for young readers’ developing of ethical skills by engaging them with vicarious feeling such as guilt (Niolajeva, 2012, p. 3), our analysis shows that in books about migration, this is limited largely to engaging readers with the injustices migrants experience *before* they arrive in the new place. As mentioned earlier, in this regard, *Mama’s Nightingale* stands out as an exception which boldly centers on the injustice and pain of an American girl’s imposed separation from her mother who is imprisoned because she is undocumented.

Furthermore, while the stories focus on children who are cultural “Others” and explore the theme of dealing with difference, many of their features are rather normative and reinforce existing dominant (and limited) constructions: exclusive portrayals of heteronormative family structures; the focus on children’s and especially girls’ victimhood; the biased attribution of agency to boys; the celebration of “bootstrap neoliberalism” dispositions such as individualism, hard work, perseverance, resilience, optimism, and entrepreneurialism; the binary depiction of the global North/host country and the global South/country of origin; the celebration of the global North as a haven for refugees; and the association of contemporary migration with refuge, misfortune, and crisis. Furthermore, the stories appear to shy away from depicting religious or ethnic and/or racial characteristics. Thus, paradoxically, while children’s picture books concerning migration are aimed at highlighting, appreciating, and celebrating difference and are part of the growing trend of children’s “diversity” books that promote justice and fairness, they seem concurrently to erase difference and injustice. They thus miss an opportunity to broaden children’s knowledge and appreciation of the plurality of cultures, experiences, and places and the urgent need to respect and protect them.

Notes

1. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/16/qa-trump-administrations-zero-tolerance-immigration-policy>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-37230916>
3. <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/facts-about-refugees/>
4. These attributes characterize late twentieth-century children's novels more generally, as opposed to earlier children's literature which tended to depict children as glamorized, heroic, or saintly figures (Agnew & Fox, 2001, p. 56).
5. See: Best Sellers in Children's Books on Immigration, <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Childrens-Immigration/zgbs/books/271597011>
6. In over half of the sample (55%, $n = 22$), the protagonist is a child aged between 4 and 12, with the majority (40% of the total sample, $n = 16$) in middle childhood (6–9 years). This age group is slightly older than the books' primary target audience, which is 3–8: a pattern also typical of children's television where characters are slightly older than the target viewers, representing figures to whom viewers can aspire (Lemish, 2010).
7. <https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/global-childrens-books-market-2020-trends-drivers-strategies-applications-and-competitive-landscape-2025-2020-03-05>
8. For example, in *Imagine*, the migrant protagonist boy practises English and performs in the choir in his new school in the U.S.

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Appendix 1: Codebook and intercoder reliability measures

Code	Intercoder reliability (pre-reconciliation)	Intercoder reliability (post-reconciliation)
Type of migration	58.50%	100%
Time of migration	70.70%	100%
Reason for migration	46.35%	100%
Country/place of origin	75.60%	100%
Life before migration	63.41%	90.24%
Migration journey	75.60%	100%
Nature of journey	73.17%	100%
Country/place of origin	82.92%	100%
Life in new country/place	73.17%	100%
Presentation of rationale for the choice of host country/place	41.46%	97.56%
Protagonist(s)' main identity/position	82.92%	100%
Protagonist(s)' type	95.12%	100%
Protagonist(s)' gender	90.24%	100%
Protagonist(s)' age	60.97%	100%
Protagonist(s)' religion	95.13%	100%
Protagonist(s)' family composition	70.74%	100%
Protagonist(s)' sibling(s)	58.54%	100%
Protagonist(s)' other family members	48.78%	100%
Protagonist(s)' experiences in the new country/place	58.54%	100%
Protagonist(s)' experiences in the country/place of origin	53.65%	100%
Protagonist(s)' agency	60.97%	100%
Protagonist(s)' key traits	80.49%	85.36%
Protagonist(s)' skin color (illustration)	56.10%	100%
Protagonist(s)' voice/narration	92.68%	100%
Antagonist(s)' type	75.60%	100%
Antagonist(s)' gender	85.36%	100%
Antagonist(s)' age	80.49%	100%
Antagonist(s)' country	70.74%	100%
Antagonist(s)' religion	100%	100%
Antagonist(s)' family composition	97.57%	100%
Antagonist(s)' sibling(s)	78.05%	100%
Antagonist(s)' other family members	87.80%	100%
Antagonist(s)' agency	73.17%	100%
Antagonist(s)' key traits	75.60%	100%
Antagonist(s)' skin color (illustration)	70.74%	100%
Antagonist(s)' voice/narration	78.05%	100%
Overall focus of the story	56.09%	100%
Host society's attitude	51.21%	100%
Story's moral	80.49%	90.24%
Relationship between text and image	97.57%	100%
Proportion of text and image	58.54%	100%
Overall	72.75%	99%