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WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
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Winter 2016

Conflict, Dissonance, and Resolution: Disrupting the Status Quo

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WOW Review: Volume IX Issue 2
Winter 2016
Conflict, Dissonance, and Resolution:
Disrupting the Status Quo

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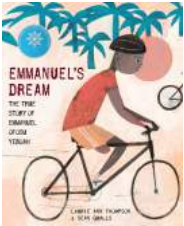
Volume IX, Issue 2: Conflict, Dissonance, and Resolution: Disrupting the Status Quo
Editor's Note:

The realities of conflict, dissonance, and resolution are essential aspects of the human condition. None of us escapes the movement between conflict and resolution, but what that cycle involves and how long it may take is uniquely individual. Conflict can result when challenging or disrupting the status quo, while dissonance may result from a change in the normative. Resolution is often the result of our conflicts and dissonance, but often only after we have explicitly addressed what is causing our discomfort.

In this issue, reviewers considered the books they have read that address conflict, dissonance, and resolution in connection to the typical or expected. These reviewers bring us new ways to think about the world and our interactions with those within it. Starting with *A Rare Nativity*, which will have readers considering their own conflicts with others, this issue also includes books such as *The Red Pencil*, *The Sun is also a Star*, and *Mama's Nightingale*, all of which present complications around displacement and immigration. Other reviews include *Emmanuel's Dream* and *The Other Boy*, which interrupt typical thinking about identity and ability. *Irena's Children*, *Guantanamo Boy*, and *Flight* give readers the opportunity to address issues around the treatment of those who may not fit within the status quo because of ethnicity, religion, or a combination of the two. And then there is *Soldier Sister*, *Fly Home*, which presents internal conflict in respect to one's identity. Regardless of our own conflicts and dissonance, these provocative books give readers a chance to work toward their own or society's treatment of individuals or groups who share elements of a common, but often differing, culture from their own.

Take the time to read some of the books in this issue, but also consider sharing your winter reading. Our next issue has an open theme, and reviews are due February 15, 2017. Let us all resolve to read more, write more, and share more of the wonderful books available from around the world.

Holly Johnson, Editor



Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah

Written by Laurie Ann Thompson

Illustrated by Sean Qualls

Random House, 2015, 40 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-449-81744-5

Emmanuel's Dream is an inspiring, feel-good story. Emmanuel is born in Ghana with one healthy leg and one deformed leg. Emmanuel's father runs, believing that Emmanuel is useless and cursed. However, Emmanuel's mother has faith and she raises him to be strong and independent. When his mother gets sick, Emmanuel has to leave home and earn money in the city to support the family. In the city, people treat him poorly because of his disability, but he does not give up. He decides to send the message that, "being disabled does not mean being unable." Wearing a shirt stating "The POZO," which mean "the disabled person," Emmanuel rides a bike around the country, meeting people who cheer him on and eventually make him a hero. Emmanuel successfully completes his journey by riding four hundred miles in ten days.

This heart-warming partial biography is based on a true story. Simple background and an enlarged character's face draw a reader's attention to the character's feelings. Mixed media and warm oranges in the illustrations imply a bright future for Emmanuel. The illustrations introduce contemporary Ghana and deliver a story that has received multiple books awards, including the 2016 Schneider Family Book Award, 2016 ALSC Notable Children's Book, and 2016 CCBC Choices.

Emmanuel's Dream teaches important life lessons to young readers, such as "never give up," "pursue your dream no matter what other people say," and "you can change your life and the world." These themes can be found in the following picture books as well: 2016 Pura Belpré Illustrator Award Winner *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* written by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Rafael López and *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* written by Paula Yoo and illustrated by Dom Lee (2010). After reading these books, children can discuss or write about what they learned from the main character and what they can do to follow the character's legacy and make the world a better place.

Emmanuel's Dream is Laurie Ann Thompson's first picture book. On her website (<http://lauriethompson.com/>), she expresses her intention to write books that help children and young adults understand the world and contribute to make it a better place to live. Illustrator Sean Qualls has published multiple children's books and his artwork has received numerous awards, including the 2009 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award for *Before John was a Jazz Giant* (2008) by Carole Boston Weatherford. When reading other books by Sean Qualls, readers will notice the unique artistic style he creates. Visit Sean Qualls' website (www.seanqualls.com) to see his artwork.

Jongsun Wee, Winona State University, Winona, MN



Flight

Written by Nadia Wheatley

Illustrated by Armin Greder

Windy Hollow Books, 2015, 32 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1922081483

Named the 2016 Picture Book of the Year in Australia, this book challenges readers to reconsider the status quo in how refugees are currently perceived around the world. The title and cover image suggest that the book is a retelling of the familiar Nativity story when Mary and Joseph flee with their new baby into Egypt to escape King Herod. The author uses the Biblical story as the groundwork for a contemporary version, where the seemingly historical context of the Holy Family on a donkey traveling through the night gives way to Middle Eastern refugees fleeing from armored tanks. The star they follow is the glow of smoke and fire from a city under siege and their donkey is frightened away by the explosions. The young family struggles on alone, barely surviving their long desert journey, until they finally arrive safely at a refugee camp. The story ends several years later in the same camp as the young boy tells his mother, “One day, we will reach our new home.”

This fable is simply told with sketchy charcoal drawings that evoke the emotional uncertainty of a shifting desert and a family’s desperate hope. Nadia Wheatley is an Australian author who grew up in Sydney. She says that her family background provided a continuous sense of refugees—“not as an issue, but as real people of flesh and blood.” Her parents worked in relief efforts at the end of World War II with survivors of concentration camps in Germany. As a young child, a continuous stream of refugees whom her mother had known in various camps came to live in a flat attached to their home. Wheatley talks about the images of desert settings in her mother’s photo albums from her time stationed in camps in Palestine. In 2002, while living in Rome, Wheatley was transfixed by a nativity scene in a church that depicted Mary, Joseph, and the baby alone in a contemporary shelter in the middle of a huge expanse of sand surrounded by helicopter gunships and tanks. That image stayed with her for years until this story started shaping in her imagination. She envisioned a story set 2000 years ago that suddenly shifted to events on the evening news.

The illustrator, Armin Greder, initially turned down the manuscript because he felt the writing was overly descriptive, even though he was drawn to the theme. He says that Wheatley contacted him and offered to revise the text to provide “enough holes for my images to fill” and he began putting charcoal to paper. He was drawn not only to themes around refugees, but also to the silence and emptiness of the desert. He states that he is drawn to deserts due to their inhospitality and inherent threat as unforgiving landscapes. Typically, he does initial sketches in black and white, but with this book he went immediately to color to provide depth since the book occurs at night, and so the images are “little more than two equal horizontal rectangles, the one representing the sky and the other the ground.” The characters provide the only relief on the pages and their arrangement on each page provides a minimal composition.

This moving book leaves the reader with a feeling of uneasiness as they recognize that the family's hope for a new home may never be realized. By connecting the plight of current refugees from places like Syria with the Holy Family, readers are forced to reconsider depictions on news reports. The book thus provides many possible pairings for readers, such as retellings of the traditional Nativity story, particularly the flight into Egypt as found in *Refuge* by Anne Booth (2016). The book could also be paired with stories of refugees, such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2007), Mary Williams' *Brothers in Hope* (2005), Luis Garay's *The Long Road* (1997), Frances Park's *My Freedom Trip* (1998), and Zana Fraillon's *The Bone Sparrow* (2016), or books that reflect different kinds of forced journeys such as *From North to South* by René Colato Laínez and Joe Cepeda (2010). See Volume IV, Issue 2 for reviews of books with forced journeys.

Nadia Wheatley grew up in Sydney, Australia and has a long career in children's books, including *My Place* (1989), illustrated by Donna Rawlins. She is recognized as an historian and author committed to social justice issues. She has engaged in long-term collaborations with Aboriginal students and educators, leading to co-authored books such as *The Papunya Country School Book of Country and History* (2001) and *Playground* (2011) on Indigenous principles of education. *Going Bush* (2006) with Ken Searle is about a project with children from Catholic, Muslim and public schools who explored a patch of bush in their local area and built friendships and understandings across cultures. She was nominated by IBBY Australia for the 2014 Hans Christian Anderson award for Writing.

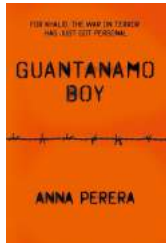
Armin Greder is from Switzerland and migrated to Australia in 1971, where he worked as a graphic designer and taught design and illustration at an art institute. He has written and illustrated other picture books with difficult themes, such as *The Island* (2008), *The City* (2010), *I am Thomas* (2011), and *The Great Bear* (written by Libby Gleeson, 1999). He has received a number of international awards, such as the Bologna Ragazzi Award, and has been nominated for the Hans Christian Anderson Award. His illustrations reflect his European background with his use of charcoal. He now lives in Lima, Peru.

This picture book blends words and images together seamlessly to transform an ancient story into a fable for our times, inviting discussions about displaced people around the world. The book is a reminder of the inhumanity that has existed over centuries and the need for safe havens to provide a glimpse of hope for a better future.

Meet Nadia Wheatley, <http://readingtime.com.au/meet-nadia-wheatley/>

Meet Armin Greder, <http://readingtime.com.au/meet-armin-greder/>

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ



Guantanamo Boy
Written by Anna Perera
Puffin, 2009, 340 pp.
ISBN-13: 097-0-141-32607-8

Hurt is hurt. Harm is harm. Bullying is bullying. What everyone wants is the same thing-kindness. I'd like to see more kindness when I get out of here, because I'm sick of hearing about bombs and seeing pictures of people dying and terrorists doing this and that. I'm just a kid who wants to get A-levels and go to uni and make something of himself (p. 326).

Khalid is a typical fifteen-year-old living in Rochdale in the North of England. He is into football (soccer), playing video games, and an artistic Irish girl. While his mother is from Turkey and his father is from Pakistan, the family is only moderately observant Muslim and Khalid is removed from what is happening in the greater world politically. This changes when he goes to Pakistan with his family during the school's Easter holidays. Khalid is captured as an "Enemy Combatant" and, while being water-boarded by military/government officials, confesses to crimes he never committed. For the next two years Khalid is moved and detained in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and, finally, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The novel describes the physical, emotional, and spiritual torture Khalid endures as he lives day-to-day remembering snippets of his past "normal" life in England to keep himself from going completely crazy. He is eventually released and the story ends with him trying to figure out how to live after such a tragedy. Khalid is caught in the conflict between the West and Islam. He embodies the dissonance between what is often considered Western and Islamic thought as he is both an average kid in England and a Muslim from an immigrant background. He is held for two years as a terrorist because he innocently plays a video game the CIA believes is a meeting place for an Al Qaida cell. Khalid does not reach resolution by the end of the novel, as he must try to make sense of senseless violence and hatred.

As a reviewer, I am concerned with the authenticity of this novel. The author has been quoted as saying she did not interview any child detainee at Guantanamo and that this narrative is just a novel. My research indicates that children have been detained by the US in Guantanamo, as well as at other secret locations, but that does not resolve questions about the author's familiarity with either of the cultures she represents or the novel's settings. More concerning, however, is the black and white binary representations in her story. Khalid is so normal. No one he encounters is an actual terrorist. The detainees are the good guys while the British and American governments are the bad guys. This binary compromises what could have been a powerful story about morality and ethics of an impossible situation.

Anna Perera was inspired to write this novel after she attended a talk given by a

human rights lawyer. She is English and, prior to writing, worked as a teacher. This novel was shortlisted for The Costa Children's Book Award in 2006 and is currently being made into a movie.

Melissa B. Wilson, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK



Irena's Children: Young Reader's Edition; A True Story of Courage

Written by Tilar J. Mazzeo. Adapted by Mary Cronk Farrell.

Margaret Mc Elderry Books. 2016, 257 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1481449915

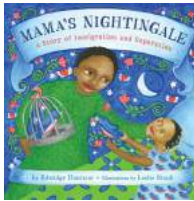
Irena's Children relates the story of the horrific events that took place when the Nazis set out to eliminate the Jewish population of Poland, particularly in the city of Warsaw. "At the start of the war, there were an estimated 3.4 million Jews in Poland. Historians say fewer than 11,000 of the Warsaw Jews survived" (p. 229). The book focuses on the courage of Irena Sendler who, with a network of trusted colleagues, saved approximately 2500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto. With tremendous bravery and personal sacrifice, Irena and her network toiled throughout the war to find hiding places for Jewish children from the ghetto who would have otherwise been murdered. They smuggled children and babies out of the ghetto in coffins, toolboxes, and through the sewer system. At one time, Irena was arrested by the SS and tortured. Her legs and feet were broken, and terrible wounds were inflicted all over her body. She escaped, however, and returned to helping "her" children. In time of great conflict, Irena Sendler disrupted the status quo--ignoring the horrors of Warsaw--and worked toward the freedom and safety of Warsaw children.

In our current, disturbing world, there is a tendency to avoid this kind of account. This is a time, however, when we need to be informed not only about our present political and social landscape, but also about historical accounts that help us understand the potential dangers of current events. *Irena's Children* is such a book. Yes, it is disturbing to read about how the Nazis persecuted and murdered Jews prior to and during World War II; this is not pleasant reading, but the account of Irena's courage in the midst of terrible inhumanity is an inspiration.

Young people reading about the Holocaust will find this book makes an important contribution to their understanding of the period. Farrell's adaptation of the adult edition of the book provides important background for young readers and emphasizes the contribution of teens who were in Irena's network. You could pair this with other books about World War II: *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* by M.T. Anderson (2015) or *Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys (2015).

Reading *Irena's Children* may open discussion about events in history and today where personal courage can make a difference. Tilar Mazzeo has written a number of informational narratives for adults. She is an Associate Professor of English at Colby College, in Waterville, Maine, but she is a storyteller first and foremost. More can be read about Mazzeo and this work at www.writerscast.com/tilar-j-mazzeo-irenas-children-a-true-story-of-courage/

Marilyn Carpenter, Eastern Washington University, Spokane, WA



Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation

Written by Edwidge Danticat

Illustrated by Leslie Staub

Dial Books, 2015, 32 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-525-42809-1

Saya finds her life deeply disrupted when her mother is arrested and detained as an undocumented immigrant. Living alone with her father, Saya repeatedly listens to her mother's voice recording on the answering machine in order to feel her mother's presence. One day, however, Saya accidentally erases the message. Following a prison visit in which Saya has a hard time letting her mother go, her father gives her a cassette recording of her mother telling a story based on Haitian folklore. Included is a song that her mother sings to help Saya go to sleep. The song describes the mama nightingale looking for and finding her baby nightingale. Her father's letter-writing campaign targeted to government officials and media outlets does not seem to be helping his wife's case. Saya decides to write her version of the family crisis, and her father includes Saya's letter with his own to the newspaper. Suddenly, the media pays attention and interviews them both for the newspaper and TV. The public gets involved with phone calls and letters, and eventually a judge rules that Mama can come home while her case is being considered. The story concludes when the family is reunited but with no resolution to the mother's legal status in the country.

Mama's Nightingale is an important addition to the literature on immigration, especially because the book is written from an immigrant's perspective. Saya's mother came to the United States before she met her husband. Saya and her father have legal status and their frustration and growing despair is palpable as they wonder if they will ever be together again as a family. The story acts as a counter narrative to the idea that immigrants just want jobs and focuses on the trauma of separation and its impact on a family.

This book is all about the power of voice and how one girl's voice changes the circumstances for her mother. Undocumented immigrants are often voiceless for fear of calling attention to themselves and being deported. Through illustrated speech bubbles--some small and some that take over the page--the illustrations convey the power of voice: the comfort provided through a cassette tape of a mother's story about looking for her baby nightingale; the powerlessness of the repeated letters the father writes to anyone he thinks might help; the power of Saya's voice as she describes her longing for her mother; the power of the news media as they interview and broadcast Saya's voice; the power of the public voice as they call and write letters of support; the voice of the gavel as the judge rules that Saya's mother can be home with her family; and, finally, the power of a mother's voice to soothe, comfort and love her child.

This book would pair well with stories of children taking action such as *Something Beautiful* (Sharon Dennis Wyeth, 1988) or *How to Heal a Broken Wing* (Bob Graham, 2008). It would also pair well with stories where a child's voice makes a change in the

story's path such as *The Recess Queen* (Alexis O'Neill, 2002), *René Has Two Last Names* (René Colato Laínez, 2009), or *My Two Blankets* (Irena Kobald, 2015). It would also pair well with other books about undocumented immigrants such as *Friends from the Other Side* (Gloria Anzaldúa, 1993).

Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian-American storyteller and writer. She spent her childhood in Haiti, living with her brother, aunt and uncle, while her parents worked without documentation in the United States. This is her first picture book; she is better known as a novelist depicting issues surrounding identity. She is also known to be an author who delves into the politics of the diaspora and mother-daughter relationships, both of which are prominent themes in this book.

New Orleans-based artist Leslie Staub uses the warm tropical colors of Haiti to illustrate the insightful, impactful pages in *Mama's Nightingale*. Using a primitive style, Staub fills the illustrations with rich metaphor and symbolism depicting the love between family members, Haitian folklore, and the power of voice. Though the book would not be considered a bilingual text, Staub incorporates Haitian Creole that Danticat used in the written text into the illustrations, adding a rich linguistic layer to the book.

Susan Corapi, Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL



The Other Boy

Written by M. G. Hennessey

Illustrated by Sfé R. Monster

HarperCollins, 2016, 234 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-0624-2766-3

This middle grade novel follows sixth-grader Shane Woods as he experiences the ups and downs of middle school: best friends, bullies, crushes, and parents. Shane is transgender, which challenges the status quo in Shane’s school, community, and our world. The book also challenges the status quo of books on transgender children and teens by illustrating the acceptance that Shane receives. While Shane’s conflicts may be heightened because he is transgender, this novel strives to show that whether boy or girl, transgender or cisgender, we all must stay true to ourselves.

Shane’s first-person narration begins with a conversation with his best friend Josh about their baseball team’s upcoming playoff game. At first, no one at Shane’s school in Los Angeles knows that he is transgender. He moved from San Francisco, where he first started his transition, and chose not to tell his new friends, teammates or classmates. Shane struggles with whether he should tell his best friend about his transition, how he should approach his crush, Madeline, and what to do when the school bully, Nico, spreads the rumor that Shane is really a girl.

By following his heart, Shane challenges the status quo. He wants to become the truest version of himself, and must face many challenges as a result. The first challenge arrives when Shane is in a doctor’s office with his mom and dad. Shane’s father does not want him to start taking testosterone. The confrontation is heated, “in a different way. Kind of an all-the-air-sucked-out-of-the-room way”(p. 45). While Shane and his mom have talked about the pros and cons of starting male hormones, Shane’s dad is only just learning. After hearing some of the consequences, Shane’s dad says, “You’re twelve. ... You don’t know what you want” (p. 45). Shane feels sick as a result of this experience. He had hoped to walk away from the doctor’s appointment with a different outcome. Shane’s setback is detrimental to his growth. Hennessey’s ability to create empathy for Shane strengthens the emotional aspects of his dialogues and internal monologues. The reader feels Shane’s emotions, from his moments of misery and his belief that his current situation is the end of the world, to the moments where Shane feels triumphant due to his parents' and friends' support.

The grandiose feelings that twelve-year-olds experience may seem hyperbolic at times, but Hennessey uses this to show readers the enormity of the conflicts and challenges transgender youth face. Coupled with the low points are the high points. For example, Shane feels elated (and incredibly nervous) when he is invited over to his crush’s house for dinner one night. Later, after Shane’s baseball team plays the highly anticipated playoff game, the team celebrates Shane’s contribution. Shane also finds telling his friends and classmates about his transition is more satisfying than keeping it all to himself. These moments not only cause Shane great joy, but the reader feels

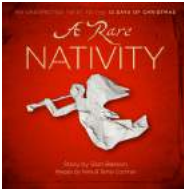
his happiness and relief as well.

The Other Boy fits into the middle grade genre with its sixth-grade narrator. The novel also includes intermittent pages from a graphic novel that the main character works on, breaking up the pages of written text. Shane’s graphic novel is about a space explorer, Hogan Fillion, who fights aliens. When Shane explains his graphic novel and its inspiration, he says, “It was part *Guardians of the Galaxy*, part *Star Trek*, part *Firefly* (the best TV show, hands down)” (p. 13).

Monster’s black-and-white illustrations of the graphic novel use bold lines and solid fill. These pages from Shane’s graphic novel include comic book speech bubbles as well as the “oofs” and “ahhs” and explosions common to the genre. As Shane’s story progresses, so too does his graphic novel, and the reader meets new characters such as the invisible overlords of a faraway planet and the giant bubbles that prevent Hogan and Willoughby from escaping. After Shane’s scene at the doctor’s office, the reader sees a page of Hogan Fillion’s story, with Hogan pleading with the invisible overlords. “Please...” one speech bubble says. “We need your help. I’ll do anything!” says another (p. 49). This reflection of Shane’s own situation, where he hopes his dad will let him take the testosterone, nudges the reader once more by showing Hogan’s worried eyebrows and open-mouthed frown.

The Other Boy explores a very pertinent issue in today’s world and it is satisfyingly real. Like Hogan, twelve-year-old Shane stands tall with the help of his friends and family and inspires hope in the reader, as well as a sense of overcoming the odds and one’s personal reservations. Hennessey is an LGBTQ ally and identifies with she/her pronouns. *The Other Boy* is Hennessey’s first novel and with it she is advocating for more children’s and teen literature that represents all genders, the LGBTQ community, those with learning challenges and people of different religions and beliefs. Monster identifies themselves as trans, queer in their Twitter bio and uses they/them pronouns. For further reading on middle-grade transgender novels, check out *Gracefully Grayson* by Ami Polonsky (2016), *Lily and Dunkin* by Donna Gephart (2016), *George* by Alex Gino (2015), and *Wandering Son, Volume 1* by Takako Shimura, translated by Matt Thorn (2011).

Maya Patterson, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ



A Rare Nativity

Written by Sam Beeson

Illustrated by Nina & Terral Cochran

Ensign Peak, 2015, 32 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1-6297-2062-3

Thinking of disrupting the status quo brought to mind the holidays as a time filled with good cheer and celebration. *A Rare Nativity* definitely had me thinking twice. I passed right over this picturebook sitting on the shelf. It took the bookstore owner to put it in my hands and tell me I needed to read it. I was totally surprised to find this rendition of “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Told in first person, the narrator sends “gifts” to his “enemy” for each of the 12 days of Christmas. With gifts such as a briar from a tanglewood tree and shards of glass, the reader knows there is no love between the giver and the receiver. Upon reflecting about his actions, however, the narrator tosses and turns with regret instead of sleeping easily. When his doorbell rings in the middle of the night, he finds a package on the doorstep with a tag saying, “Forgive me.” The story grows in a positive way from this point.

It is interesting that readers never find out what caused the friction, but I can’t imagine that there is person alive who doesn’t regret their former actions, actions that may even feel criminal and keep them awake at night. While we all might know this feeling, it is so much harder to confront our missteps and forgive. That the receiver of the gifts asks for forgiveness first gives the reader pause. The text requires deep reflection on the reader’s conflicts and what might be necessary to resolve them. It’s never easy. In this story, the receiver forgives the sender of the gifts, but even then, forgiveness is announced under the cover of darkness--the middle of the night rather than meeting with each other to find common ground and perhaps resolution.

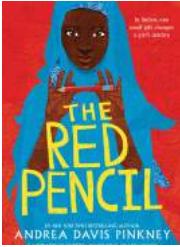
The story is illustrated using photographs. The story begins with photographs in black and white, intentionally shaded to match the mood of the narrator. When the tale becomes restless and the final gift is left, the photographs are in color, lightening the mood. Each image is carefully designed with a minimal number of objects that guide the focus of the reader.

This would be an interesting book to use in discussion with readers of all ages. Not only is there ample opportunity to think about the concept of forgiveness, but also the importance of addressing our slights or bitterness in ways that may lead to resolution rather than further internal struggle. If used as a Christmas story, then a pairing with the classic tale by O. Henry, *The Gift of the Magi*, can provide further insights.

Sam Beeson is a high school English teacher and teaches night classes at Utah Valley University. He gives himself a writing assignment every year. In 2007 he wrote about his wife every day and then gave her the journal for Christmas. He loves reading old family journals. The illustrators, Nina and Terral Cochran, create their art together.

They have fine arts degrees in Photography and Graphic Design. They believe there is always time to rearrange or make something new.

Jean Schroeder, The IDEA School, Tucson, AZ



The Red Pencil

Written by Andrea Davis Pinkney

Illustrated by Shane W. Evans

Little Brown, 2014, 308 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-316-24780-1

Amira, at age 12, has finally become old enough to wear a toob (5-6 meter cloth wrapped around the entire body) and be treated as more than a child. Her home with her father, mother and little sister in Southern Darfur is full of love and happiness, except for one thing: Amira loves to draw in the sand and wants to learn how to draw letters so she can read books that will help her family grow better crops. She bumps up against the belief of her mother that girls do not need that skill to get married and have children. In spite of Amira's disappointment, life is peaceful--until a militant group called Janjaweed raids the village and kills her father.

Amira is forced to flee with her remaining family and a neighbor, Old Anwar, walking night after night to the Kalma refugee camp near the city of Nyala. In spite of all the challenges of life in a refugee camp--and there are many--Amira continues to draw and dream of an education. Old Anwar begins to secretly teach her the letters of the English alphabet. One day she receives the gift of a red pencil and a pad of paper from a humanitarian worker. To draw and communicate on paper is wonderful--so wonderful that Amira decides that an education is worth the danger of running away from her family to the city. The story concludes as Old Anwar and Amira begin the journey toward a school in Nyala that welcomes girls.

Told in lyrical prose, the book describes in careful detail not only the real-life challenges of living in Darfur in 2003-2004, but the joys as well. Amira's life before the raid acts as a strong counter-narrative to the images that portray Darfur as a destitute country racked with drought, hunger and civil war. While those realities are a big part of Amira's story, the book also includes lyrical descriptions of the strength of family and community, which give Amira the resilience to keep working and hoping through the emotional pain of her loss. Ultimately, Pinkney creates a balanced character who struggles but is energized by her dreams. While the media only portrays hopelessness in their reports on Darfur, Amira's physical and emotional journey is a story that disrupts those media reports by exuding possibilities for Amira and young people like her. There is one detail, however, that could have used more explanation. Why does Old Anwar begin to teach Amira the English alphabet? Obviously, he is a wise learned villager who knows and loves the Qur'an, but where he learned English and why he instructs in English remains unanswered throughout the story. The official language in schools is primarily Arabic.

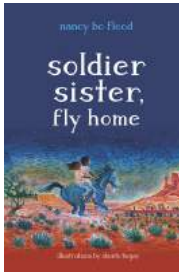
If interested in pairing this book with others about young people facing struggles rooted in political or social conflict, readers are encouraged to read *Golden Boy* by Tara Sullivan (2014) or *Never Fall Down* by Patricia McCormick (2013).

Andrea Davis Pinkney lives in New York with her family. Years ago, when she

complained to her husband, illustrator Brian Pinkney, about the lack of diversity in children's books, he challenged her to write the stories herself. Since then she has contributed over 30 titles, many award-winning, that tell the stories of Africans and African Americans. In the Author's Note, Pinkney describes her careful research process but is quick to state that she is not an expert on Darfur. However, she was passionate about getting the facts straight and made several trips to Africa, and conducted hours of interviews with Sudanese refugees and humanitarian workers. She convincingly describes Amira's conflicting feelings and the cultural dissonance of the refugee camp.

Illustrator Shane W. Evans renovated a space in Kansas City, Missouri called "Dream Studio" in which he supports his own artistry and that of his community. He has also been involved in projects in Uganda, Mali, and Lesotho. His signature lined style fits well with Amira's story as she begins to draw with a twig in the sand, and continues her literary journey with pencil and paper.

Susan Corapi, Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL



Soldier Sister, Fly Home
Written by Nancy Bo Flood
Illustrated by Shonto Begay
Charlesbridge, 2016, 160 pp.
ISBN-13: 978-1-58089-702-0

The struggles of a thirteen-year-old girl searching for her own identity that is shared between her Navajo and white heritage is a universal story of individual conflict. This powerful novel for readers of all ages is set within the larger context of the conflict in Iraq, where, in 2003, Lori Piestewa was the first female Native American to die in combat in a foreign territory. This true event is the starting point for a story narrated by a young girl named Tess, whose sister was a fictional friend of Lori's and is also serving in Iraq.

From the start of this novel, when Tess and her family take part in a ceremony honoring Lori, and throughout the entirety of this powerfully emotional story, readers can learn about Navajo ways of life, as well as the cultural dissonance that challenges members of the tribe at all ages. Tess continually questions her role at home on the Rez and at school in Flagstaff. She, along with the reader, comes to realize that her life is truly a blend of contemporary and traditional: she lives in two different social worlds. She is also faced with coming to terms with her sister's decision to enlist in the army and the fear of losing her in the same way that they have lost Lori. As Tess deals with her personal challenges, her Navajo grandparents help her realize that the two worlds of her life do not have to “fight” inside her. She is also challenged by her sister's request to take care of her stallion, Blue. Blue's personality is often wild, and is challenging but endearing as tragedy creates yet another conflicting element of the story.

A significant aspect of this book is the information about Navajo life presented in a highly engaging story--a feature that is realistic and seldom seen for young readers. The traditional Navajo practices and respect for nature are revealed in the daily lives of the characters. The pride and respect of the Navajo regarding those who have served in the military is evident through the ceremonies they give to honor those who passed, to grant protection for those leaving for conflict, and to revere all veterans, such as in the Veterans Day Parade. Tess's Grandfather was a code talker and the respect for this role is widely acknowledged in the novel. Nancy Bo Flood also provides rich descriptions of the natural world and the daily lives of the family through Tess's perspective. Family relationships and respect are authentically reflected as a blend of both traditional and contemporary life. The relationship between the sisters is portrayed both personally as they struggle to negotiate between cultures and universally as they reveal emotions that are experienced by others. One commentary included on the back cover by Linda Ross, a Navajo traditional healer and counselor, states, “Nancy has captured the Navajo way of life today and brought my childhood memories of long ago to life.”

Nancy Bo Flood spent fifteen years on the Navajo reservation teaching and living among its people. Her keen sense of Navajo lifestyle and how the Navajo people attend to the challenges of integrating into contemporary society is evident in *Soldier Sister, Fly Home* as well as in the other books about the Navajo nation she has written. More information on her work can be found at <http://nancyboflood.com/>.

Flood has provided a brief ending commentary about the Navajo language and glossary of words used in the book, as well as questions to guide discussions around the novel. In an author's note, Flood reveals that this powerful, moving story is a tribute to Lori Piestewa. Highly honored for her bravery in service, Lori was a member of the Hopi tribe.

Shonto Begay is well known for his art and poetry that reveal the natural beauty of life on and around the reservation. He has created the cover art for the story and the drawings introducing the chapters. More information can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/Shonto-Begay-6074182987/>

This book can be paired with other books that consider Native Americans and US conflicts, such as *The Unbreakable Code* (Sarah Hoagland Hunter, 1996), *Code Talker* (Chester Nez, 2012), and *Weedflower* (Cynthia Kadhota, 2006). The theme of identity for bicultural teens is present in other novels that would be perfect for paired discussions, such as *Orchards* (Holly Thompson, 2012); *Voices in First Person* (Lori Marie Carlson, 2008); *Inside Out and Back Again* (Thanhha Lai, 2012).

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX



The Sun is also a Star

Written by Nicola Yoon

Published by Delacorte Press, 2016, 344 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-553-49668-0

My mother, the pacifist, would kill me dead if she knew what I'd just done. I rescheduled my interview. For a girl. Not even a Korean girl, a black girl. A black girl I don't really know (p. 118).

This unlikely love story disrupts the typical dating and relationship process by addressing both the poetry *and* the science of attraction and love. Daniel, the son of Korean immigrants, and Natasha, the daughter of illegal immigrants from Jamaica, find themselves inexplicably together on a momentous day. Both Daniel and Natasha are high school seniors who are on missions that will impact their futures. Daniel, the ever dutiful but internally resistant son, has an interview with a Yale University alumnus to discuss Daniel's application for a pre-medical program--but, Daniel thinks he might want to be a poet. Natasha is in the midst of a "hail Mary" to save her family from imminent deportation. If she fails, she is on the plane back to the island later that night.

Daniel's poetic heart and Natasha's analytic mind disrupt each other's perceptions of love and possibility. Daniel believes they were meant to meet and know one another, but recognizes that his family would never accept Natasha. Natasha finds herself intrigued by Daniel's sensitivity and sincerity, but recognizes their chances of seeing each other after this day together is highly improbable. A wonderful and enlightening story with contextual notes and commentary from both Natasha and Daniel, this novel not only presents readers with a love story, but with information about science and the human condition. What is the science of love? What can poetry do to restore the human heart? Daniel and Natasha show us.

The Sun is Also a Star would make a nice pairing with *The Thing about Jellyfish* by Ali Benjamin (2015), as both attend to the role of science in human emotions. Other themes within Yoon's narrative include the choices young people must make if they wish to become individuals, the possibilities available to young people if they choose to take the first steps, and how love cannot be contained within particular and often stereotypical pathways. This would make a wonderful addition to a text set about unlikely relationships, including *If You Come Softly* by Jacqueline Woodson (2010); *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell (2013); *Beast* by Brie Spangler (2016); *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (2014); *Moon by Nine* by Deborah Ellis (2014), and Yoon's other best seller, *Everything, Everything* (2015).

Nicola Yoon grew up between Jamaica and Brooklyn. She now lives in Los Angeles with her family. Currently, her book *Everything, Everything* is being produced as a

movie. More about Yoon and her work can be found on her website at www.NicolaYoon.com.

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