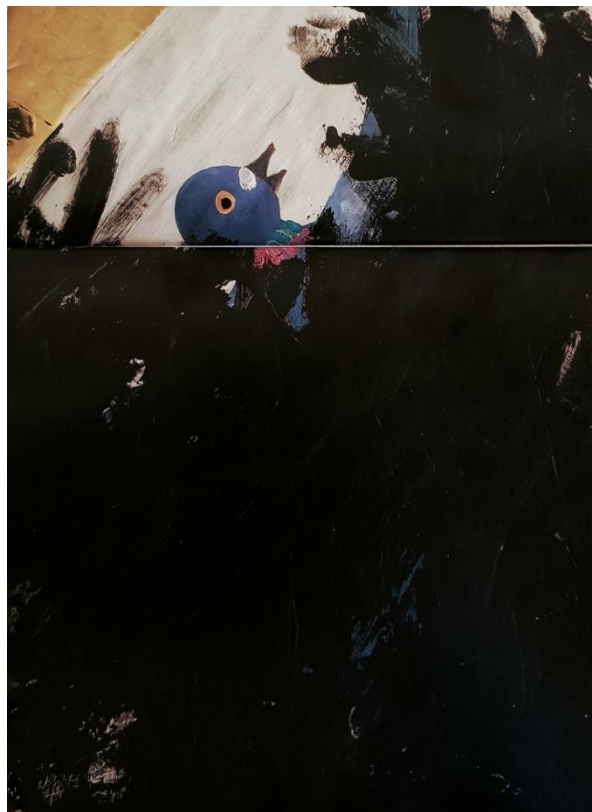


Picture Books and the Refugee Experience

How the Authors of *Lost and Found Cat*, *My Beautiful Birds*, and *Stepping Stones*
Represent Pre- and Trans-Migration Trauma in their Picture Books



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Abstract

This thesis aims to find the different strategies authors use in representing pre- and trans-migration trauma in their picture books. Michelle Balaev's work *Trauma Theory and Its Discontents: The Potentials of Pluralism* will function as the theoretical framework through which these narrative strategies, specifically the concepts of protagonist, place, and "the unspeakable", will be analyzed. The three picture books that are used for this research are *Stepping Stones*, *Lost and Found Cat*, and *My Beautiful Birds*. In all of these books refugee families are followed who have been forced to leave their home because of the war in Syria and Iraq yet different perspectives and styles are used in the representation of their journeys. There are different takes on how trauma and war atrocities should be confronted in children's literature, one of these approaches is outlined in the article "A New Algorithm in Evil: Children's Literature in a post-Holocaust world" by Elizabeth Baer. This article will be applied to the outcome of the close readings of the picture books.

Keywords: Refugees, Syrian war, picture books, children's literature, migration, trauma theory, close reading, war atrocities, *Lost and Found Cat*, *My Beautiful Birds*, and *Stepping Stones*.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	4
Chapter 1 – Literary Trauma Theory	7
1.1 The Pre- and Trans-Migration Stages	7
1.2 Trauma Theory and Its Discontents: The Potentials of Pluralism	8
1.3 A New Algorithm in Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World	11
Chapter 2 – Trauma in <i>Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey</i>	13
2.1 Rama for the People	13
2.2 Attached/Detached	15
2.3 (Gradually) Covering Trauma	16
Chapter 3 – Trauma in <i>Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush’s Incredible Journey</i>	20
3.1 Kunkush the Cat	20
3.2 The Unspeakable Pre-Migration	23
Chapter 4 – Trauma in <i>My Beautiful Birds</i>	24
4.1 The Protagonist: Sami	24
4.2 Longing for the Birds	25
4.3 Placing Pre-Migration	26
4.4 The Unspeakable Black Paint	29
Conclusion	31
Works Cited	34

Introduction

How do you tell your child or the children in your classroom who these people are who have left their country due to war, do not speak the same language as they do, and perhaps also do not look the same as them? This question could also be put differently: How do you tell your child why you have left your hometown and now live in a strange country of which you do not speak the language and the children do not look anything as their friends back home? The refugee experience is an heavily loaded subject with which we are faced almost every day, if it is not through the media then it can absolutely be the case that you have met these families in person in recent time if you are living in one of the host countries. As adults we can create an understanding of what these refugee families are going through, but how do you properly tell a child what is going on in the world and how do you convey the traumatic events some of these children have had to face?

Picture books could be a helpful means in which we can introduce the refugee story to children. Suzanne Del Rizzo, the author of one of my case studies, *My Beautiful Birds*, sums up perfectly the place of picture books tackling the refugee story in her Malka Penn Award acceptance speech: “I wrote *My Beautiful Birds* in the hope that it would not only provide a window like a gentle yet realistic introduction to the Syrian crisis to our children here, but also hopefully act as a mirror to those children coming over from Syria, to empower resettling refugee children so that they can see their important story reflected back at them” (TheUCTVchannel14, 31:54-32:06). The reality is that every author has a different approach on how they confront the migration journey (the term “journey” is used in two of the titles used for my case studies) these families and their children go through. Therefore the main focus of this thesis will be the ways in which picture books written as a response on the recent refugee crisis represent pre- and trans-migration trauma within the refugee experience.

In the first chapter an overall picture is outlined in which first of all the significance of recognizing the different stages of migration is explained. This is followed up by a summary and evaluation of the main theoretical framework used for my thesis research: *Trauma Theory and Its Discontents: The Potentials of Pluralism* by Michelle Balaev. Balaev outlines an approach for tackling literary trauma theory which she then uses in her book *The Nature of Trauma in the American Novel* (2012). It is a difficult task to find literary trauma theory that is developed

specifically for children's literature yet the final decision to use Balaev's approach had to do with the fact that her work enables distracting as much meaning as is possible from picture books since these works contain limited meaning as opposed to literature works such as novels. At last I will use Elizabeth Baer's article "A New Algorithm in Evil: Children's Literature in a post-Holocaust world" to complement my close reading. Most of the trauma study and children's literature combination comes from World War II and Holocaust texts and Baer introduces a set of criteria by which she measures the usefulness and effectiveness of children's literature in confronting sufficiently trauma under the theme of the Holocaust. I use this article in the conclusion section of my thesis in which I reflect back to it in combination with the outcome to my close reading.

In the second to fourth chapter the picture books I selected and their representation of pre- and trans-migration trauma will be analyzed through close reading each in a chapter of their own. I have selected the following three picture book as my case studies: *Lost and Found Cat: True Story of Kunkush's Incredible Journey* (2017), *My Beautiful Birds* (2017), and *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* (2016). The exact reason for picking these picture books is the fact that on almost any book list I entered in which picture books about the refugee theme were reviewed and recommended these three books kept occurring. The websites that published the lists were among others humaneeducation.org, readbrightly.com, publishersweekly.com, and bibliocommons.com. Because my focus is the recent refugee crisis, the lists I entered were all made in 2017 or 2018 and thus up to date.

What is challenging about this thesis is that I have not come across picture books in the literature classes I have taken in American Studies. The literary devices, however, that I focus on in my close reading definitely have been a part of the literature classes I have taking in my bachelor study. What has complemented my knowledge of literature and literary theories is the minor *Lezen over de grenzen: Europese Letterkunde* which I have taken in the first semester of this academic year. The courses taught in this minor have provided me with a sufficient background on analyzing texts through actively applying literature theories on various different pieces of literature.

All the books mentioned are written for an English speaking audience, except for *Stepping Stones* which includes an Arabic translation next to the English text and it is also translated into the Dutch version *Steen voor Steen*. At this point it looks like these books will

mostly reach (refugee) children living in countries of which the first language is English, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (apart from *Stepping Stones* which can also be used in the Netherlands). Whether it is in a classroom, asylum center, or in a house environment, in my research I keep in view two types of audiences for the books: children who are themselves a refugee and children who live in the host country and are witnesses of the refugee crisis. The former group has gone through traumatizing experiences and thus needs special attention, therefore it is important that they can identify themselves with the stories and with that get a feeling that they are not invisible.

As outlined by Fazel and Stein (2002) in *The Mental Health of Refugee Children* “The stresses to which most refugees are exposed can be understood as occurring at three different stages: (1) while in their country of origin; (2) during the flight to safety; and (3) when having to settle in a country of refuge” (366-367). Especially in the third stage, when they are in the host country, experiences such as poverty, isolation, racism, and an uncertain immigration status awaits these children. When hardship upon hardship is exposed to them, these books, can be a means to acknowledge the hardship they went through and are still going through. Educators, librarians, and parents can use these books as tools to trigger conversation. Even though the issue is controversial, it should not be ignored, it should be tackled properly.

Chapter 1 – Literary Trauma Theory

1.1 The Pre- and Trans-Migration Stages

The focus of my thesis is on the refugee experience displayed in the three picture books I have selected. To have a better understanding of this experience it is important to recognize the different stages in which refugees find themselves since these stages provide knowledge about factors which can lead to stress and ultimately trauma symptoms. These stages are outlined by Fazel and Stein (2002) in *The Mental Health of Refugee Children* as follows: “(1) while in their country of origin; (2) during the flight to safety; and (3) when having to settle in a country of refuge” (366-367). I call these stages the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration stage.

The pre-migration stage is situated in the native country, in the normal living environment that usually through sudden changes have to be left in a short amount of time. Even though the environment is now not what it is used to be and actually is the reason for an individual or a whole family to face uncertainty and danger while fleeing the country, the native country will be looked back at with great sentiment and appreciation. As Coughlan and Owens-Manley describe the sentiment of Bosnian refugees in America, “Life then was remembered nostalgically, as ‘*the beautiful life*’ or ‘*the perfect life*,’ one filled with family, close friends, travel, and a more relaxed lifestyle than they have found in America” (Coughlan and Owens-Manley, 46).

All three books have a different treatment of the pre-migration stage, yet it is clear that the authors have chosen to depict the reality of sudden displacement, war, and loss in some form even though it is a hard topic to convey to children. The refugees have to carry these stress factors through their journey and also in the life they will have to set up in the host country. “Acute responses, chronic patterns, and recovery phases are unique to each individual, although trauma often has long-term effects. People deal with events that are painful and incorporate them as a part of their life experience, over time, to make a healthy adjustment” (Coughlan and Owens-Manley, 83). With the sudden displacement refugees face a sense of bewilderment due to changes in order, stability, and their usual way of life. Many people leave their house bringing with them only as much as they can carry and sometimes this also has to do with the idea of turning back to their home and belongings in the future (Coughlan and Owens-Manley, 62).

The trans-migration following the pre-migration stage, described further in the book of Coughland and Owens-Manley, usually is divided into two different journeys, which both pose a different set of experiences. One is a direct journey from the native country to the host country, which is the trajectory selected refugees from Syria followed to the United States and Canada. The second journey involves countries in between the native and host country where the refugees have to stay in asylum, usually in refugee camps. This stage is important in the sense that the tragic reality the refugees have carried into the camp now are stationed in an environment which is both a place of safety but also a place of uncertainty. This 'movement' of trauma is significant because it can be reason for losing hope. "What is particularly intolerable about this vernacular violence is that it destroys the hope that there might be the possibility to occupy another space—the civic—that is not generative of trauma and violence" (Pugliese, 156).

Besides refugee camps there are other realities refugees have to endure in between countries. Media coverage has displayed many scenes of refugee families, especially Syrian refugees, crossing borders on their feet and the dangerous travel on plastic boats from the coast of Turkey to Greece. The temporary character these travels share with staying in a refugee camp can have the same effect on the refugees who have to endure it. The third and last stage is the post-migration stage when the refugees have reached the host country. This stage opens the door to stress factors such as poverty, isolation, racism, and an uncertain immigration status. In all three books this stage is left out completely or it is briefly mentioned, for this reason I will not elaborate further on this stage.

1.2 Trauma Theory and Its Discontents: The Potentials of Pluralism

Considering the trauma element and its narrative visibility in picture books, I want to outline the focus on which my analysis will revolve. First off, the protagonist of the stories will be analyzed with attention the refugee subject and also its relation to subjects that revolve around this character. Second, the place(s) in which the stories of the subjects are told will be examined. Since migration is a story about different phases of movement, I will use place to observe its take on representations of trauma. Lastly, an elements that considers mostly the language used in the books will be looked at: the unspeakable. Before I apply these features to my close readings of the books I will elaborate further on it in the next section.

The theory that makes up the core of this thesis and provides the literary background for my close reading is the first chapter of *The Nature of Trauma in the American Novel* (2012) written by Michelle Balaev. There are a lot of works written on trauma and especially my focus, literary trauma studies, yet the reason why Balaev's work appealed to my research project was because it provided me a literary framework which appeared to be the most effective in analyzing picture books. Since picture books tell a complicated story in a few words and simple language, the framework I was looking for was one that enabled me to distract as much meaning as I could from a work that contains limited meaning as opposed to literature works such as novels.

In her work Balaev outlines a framework that could be considered a critique on how trauma in literary criticism is observed in a pattern that has not much changed and relies on the works of Freud. Balaev claims that this notion is supported in the field of psychology as it has proven to have developed more variety than the field of literary criticism (Balaev, 3). Freud has a take on trauma which underlines the fact that it is unperceivable for the human brain, this in turn has created a field for literary critics where the focus of analysis is on the unperceivable and unspeakable characteristic of trauma. Literary critics such as Cathy Caruth and Kali Tal, for example, agree on the notion that the experience of trauma and its vocalization through linguistics is impossible. In her work *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) Tal claims that "accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (Tal, 15).

In the chapter that I have used, *Trauma Theory and Its Discontents: The Potentials of Pluralism*, Balaev mentions a couple of narrative techniques that are used by authors in representing trauma. As mentioned, the techniques I search into are the ones that deal with the protagonist, place, and "the unspeakable". In the paragraph above I have explained how some critics do not see trauma as something that can be expressed fully and true to reality through language. Mentioned before, the critic Kali Tal claims that because a traumatic event can never be told accurately it always needs to be recreated since the trauma is a phenomenon that the mind cannot grasp by itself (Tal, 15). In this way she argues that trauma cannot be represented in narrative or any other form of communication. Balaev dismisses this characteristic of trauma and claims that the unspeakable should be viewed "less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies" (Balaev, 19). What it comes down to, according to Balaev, is that the unspeakable which is expressed in

silence or gaps, for example, actually shows how hard it is to vocalize the traumatic event. She claims that authors use it as a narrative strategy where the vulnerability of the subject is displayed and with that the reader is given space to fill in the gap themselves (Balaev, 20). Lastly, Balaev notes that this does not mean every traumatic event is representable, she underlines that there is a division between what is hard to narrate and what is impossible to narrate. This, however, is tied to outcomes of cultural values rather than an impossibility of representation.

Laurie Vickroy, literary and cultural critic, elaborates further to this notion of giving voice to trauma through silence. She claims that authors of trauma narratives have developed a variety of strategies that open a door to the representation of trauma such as “textual gaps (both in page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and focus on visual and affective states” (Vickroy, 29). Another strategy that is used is the representation of reality through metaphors and symbolism. This use of language and images is used either to convey the actual reality of trauma or the feeling rather than the meaning of the trauma which is done through a dreamish representation (Vickroy, 32).

Two other narrative aspects Balaev focusses on aside from the language are the protagonist and the place of the story. Balaev states that while protagonists always add significant meaning to narratives, in literary trauma studies this aspect has been neglected. According to Balaev, “The experience of the suffering, no matter how private the experience, is situated in relations to the context of a culture that ascribes different value to the experience [and] it follows that the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society (Balaev, 17)”. In this sense it is crucial to have a closer look on the protagonist of the narrative, since the cultural background of this character will add meaning to the style in which trauma is represented. In this way, the reader not only gets a hold on the inner world of the character but also on how trauma fits in a certain culture or place.

One last component that is part of the framework through which trauma narratives should be analyzed according to Balaev is the concept of place. She claims that the place should be treated as the “silent second character, for it is the geographic location, cultural influence, and historical moment that merge to define the value of trauma for the individual and community” (Balaev, xv). It could be said that just like the protagonist, the place serves as a significant piece of context to the traumatic event which is to be conveyed. When tied to each other, these components form the social and cultural dimension of trauma (Balaev, 38). Trauma in this sense

could be a sudden detachment of place, loss, suffering, or (be)longing. What makes this inclusion of background interesting to books narrating the refugee experience is the fact that the protagonists of the story will tell their story in at least two different spaces since the refugee story is a story that “moves”. Places and cultural codes that are strange to the protagonists themselves will be put in one place. All in all, this pluralistic framework of Balaev offers space for a complete picture of trauma.

1.3 A New Algorithm in Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World

First off, I would like to cite Kenneth Kidd to underline the important position of the Holocaust in trauma writing in children’s literature before I take a closer look at Elizabeth Baer’s article: “the Holocaust has arrived as a legitimate subject, and has ushered in the wider sense that trauma writing can be children’s literature. It’s not surprising that the Holocaust has functioned as a sort of primal scene of children’s trauma literature, through which a children’s literature of atrocity has been authorized within the last decade, asserted around both the power and limitations of narrative” (Kidd, “‘A’ is for Auschwitz” 121).

Holocaust writing, in Baer’s case, also serves as a significant background to her article. She centers her article around Lawrence Langer’s book *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* that focuses on the “literature of atrocity” which she then combines to children’s literature. She introduces a set of criteria by which she has measured the usefulness and effectiveness of children’s literature in confronting sufficiently the trauma that has come with the Holocaust and the atrocities around it. Baer has used these requirements as a description of what the best children’s books on this topics are and she also states that these could be used by adults in selecting texts. Two criteria are included here due to their applicability on the atrocities faces during the pre- and trans-migration stages: The first requirement is that “the book must *grapple directly with the evil of the Holocaust*, the evil that is *new* in this post-Holocaust world” (Baer 384). The emphasis on “new” makes a distinction between Baer’s example of evil in Puritan literature for children and evil in post-Holocaust literature. In the latter the “original sin” was the evil and its source was clearly the Devil. Yet in post-Holocaust literature this evil sometimes is hard to name or see. The evil is something that the child could in no way be responsible of or feel guilt of, rather “evil is depicted as something totally irrational, something that springs inexplicably, full blown, unannounced, into one’s life and most often directly destroys family

life” (384). Baer continues to say that for example the depiction of a successful escape in a narrative may leave no pessimistic views on human nature, but it will fail on creating awareness on what occurred in reality.

The second requirement is that the book “should not provide simplistic explanations, but rather it should present *the Holocaust in its proper context of complexity*, even meaninglessness, of difficult questions for which there are no formulaic answers” (384). Baer mentions here the contradiction of texts that provide no information about the evil of the Holocaust while at the same time these books are asked to contextualize the historical events that occurred. The children in these stories usually face a disruption in their life out of the sudden which then is followed by them attempting to create an understanding of what is happening through their observations of for example violence on the streets and adult conversation. According to Baer the author is responsible for creating context, suggesting this could be done through an “addendum, a chronology of events, a glossary, maps, or in the story itself” (385).

Thus Baer asks for two things, the identification of the evil and the presence of historical context, in other words: a direct confrontation with trauma. The evil in Holocaust literature obviously refers to a different evil: that of racism and anti-Semitism. Yet the same motivations to give it a name, face, and a context can be applied to children’s literature about the refugee story: providing clarity in order to protect the child from naiveté.

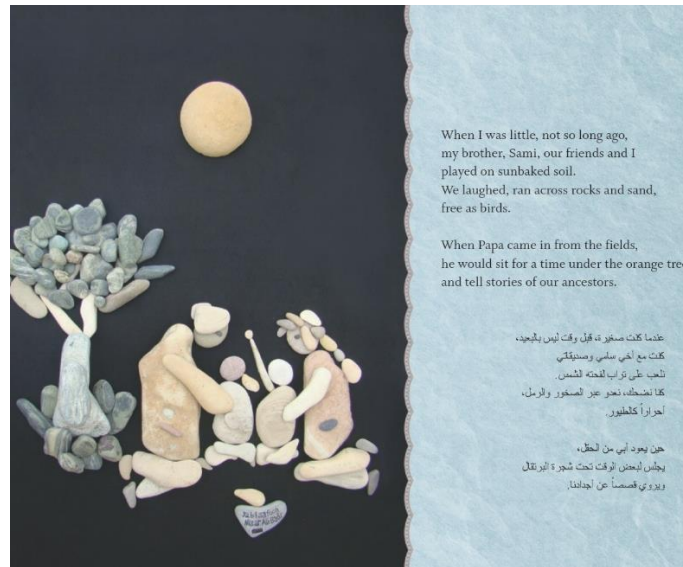
Chapter 2 – Trauma in *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*

Stepping Stones is a picture book published in 2016 by the Canadian author Margriet Ruurs.

Ruurs has collaborated with Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr who has provided for the images of the book. The images are created with pebble stones, telling the journey of a Syrian refugee family from their native country, over sea, to the host country. With help of the theoretical framework of Michelle Balaev an interesting link is drawn between the mentioned narrative strategies and the use of pebble stones, this will be outlined in the rest of this chapter.

2.1 Rama for the People

The very first sentence of *Stepping Stones* the reader is introduced to the protagonist of the book: a girl named Rama. Rama is the narrator of the story, through this first-person narrator feature, Rama's voice is as close as it can be to the ears of the reader/listener. Because the images of the book displays figures made of pebble stones which eliminates faces and thus emotions (fig.1), it also in a sense disables the individualization of Rama as the protagonist. This choice of design makes a lot possible in conveying trauma to the child without crossing any ethic lines. What this also does for Rama is that her voice and the story she tells becomes bigger than herself as an individual, through this way she speaks and thus represents all of the children who had to flee their country due to war. Because the reader can't identify her by means of the images, the few lines in which she does express her own emotions such as "I hid my face in Mama's lap and cried – even though I am a big girl" (Ruurs) do not stand out in the bigger picture of people facing the same destiny.



(Ruurs, Fig.1)

Another aspect that adds to the argument of creating distance between Rama and the reader audience is her use of pronouns and the frequent inclusion of her friends and members of her family. Rama often uses the pronouns “we” and “our”, instead of “I” and “my”. Several examples of the use of pronouns:

“We laughed, ran across rocks and sand,
free as birds.”

“In that not-so-distant memory
we were free.”

“I didn’t know our lives would soon change
forever” (Ruurs).

These examples are frequent in the book, this feature again puts Rama in a different position as a protagonist. A bigger group of people and thus a bigger story is pointed at with the plural form of the pronouns. The following excerpt is a good example of the many people that walk through the story of *Stepping Stones*:

“When I was little, not so long ago,
my brother, Sami, our friends and I

played on sunbaked soil.
 We laughed, ran across rock and sand,
 Free as birds.

When Papa came in from the fields,
 he would sit for a time under the orange tree
 and tell stories of our ancestors” (Ruurs)

A lot of people are around Rama, which again places her in a group rather than in an individual spot. This aspect of a protagonist continuously surrounded by familiar people could be noted as a soothing element especially for the young reader that even though there is a movement taking place, it is a movement of a complete picture of a family.

2.2 Attached/Detached

Balaev considers the use of place in narratives as a contextualizing tool for the traumatic event that is to be represented. In *Stepping Stones* the place component of her framework is used in such way to create a vivid division between the following binaries: home/future-home, war/peace, and danger/free-dom. First off, the “home” is portrayed by creating connections between the land and its people. The first two lines of the book “‘Rama, wake up!’ / the rooster crowed” (Ruurs) displays that Rama is even familiar to the rooster. Then the narrative goes on by telling that Mama prepares breakfast with juicy red tomatoes from their garden. Again a connection is made with the land and everything that belongs to it, such as the rooster, the soil, and thus also Rama and her family. In another excerpt the connection between Rama’s family and natural resources of the land is displayed in the following fashion:

“Back then Jedo, my grandfather, fished.
 Papa worked in the fields.
 Mama sewed silk scarves for me and my dolls [...]” (Ruurs).

The use of fish, fields, and sewing silk ties Rama and her family close to the land and thus their home.

Whenever Rama and her family have to leave their home, this tie between home and land is also broken as is expressed in the following line: “Sami and I said goodbye to the flowers in our yard, to our goat, to the soil we called home” (Ruurs). The connection between flower, soil, and home also returns whenever Rama and her family arrive on land after they have crossed the water by boat. Rama says:

“When we arrive on land once again,
Mama and Papa planted seeds to grow flowers
to remember those who did not
reach freedom” (Ruurs).

In this example, the planting of seeds and returning to soil for those who have not reached freedom and thus a new safe home, again ties a connection between soil and home.

Another form in which place is used in this story is the outlook for a new home. This new home is never mentioned by country name and continuously addressed in a similar pattern:

“Mothers, fathers, children,
seeking a better place, a better life”
“A river of people in search of peace.”
“Papa told me we were walking toward
a bright new future” (Ruurs).

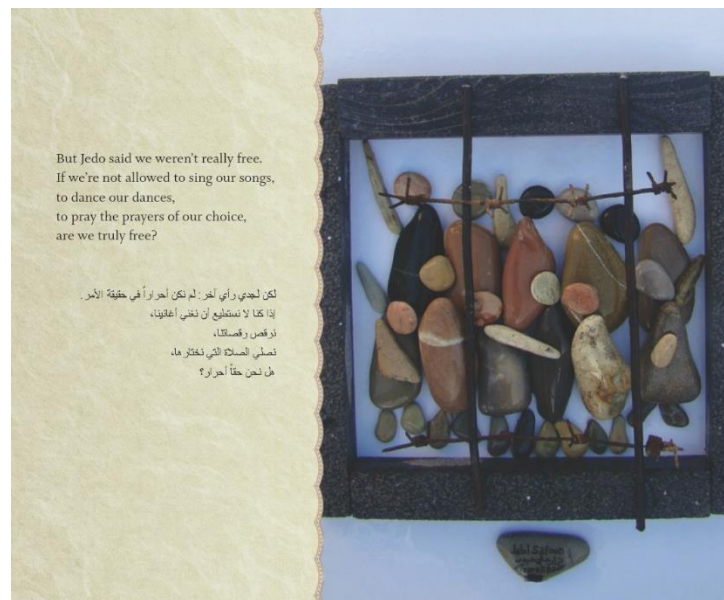
The use of words to address the future with phrases such as “a better life” and “a bright new future” emphasizes the search for freedom and peace more than anything else, which in turn also highlights the lack of freedom and peace in their native country.

2.3 (Gradually) Covering Trauma

Rama begins telling her story by first letting the reader enter her life before the war in her country happened. She talks about the usual routine such as playing outside and going to school. Then she cuts this picture by stating, “But this was then. And this is now” (Ruurs). The question the reader asks him/herself is “What is now?” This question is not immediately answered, because Rama

continues to tell about the past over again, yet this time about her grandfather and her mother. In this fashion the truth about the experience that leads her to be a refugee comes to the front gradually. This pattern again occurs when Rama says “I didn’t know our lives would soon change forever” (Ruurs) where the reader agains asks him/herself what might be the change. Yet this is followed up by her grandfather telling her that the freedom they live in their native country could not really be called freedom because they cannot “sing [their] songs” and “pray their prayers of choice” (Ruurs). The reader again is given space to fill in the gap themselves. As Balaev mentions in her work, the unspeakable in this fashion can be regarded as a narrative strategy to convey the difficulty of vocalizing a horrific event: a trauma. In this way, Ruurs gives the reader and listener space to both prepare themselves for the reality of a sad truth and coming up with the truth themselves before it is told to them by Rama. Finally, after the freedom in the country is criticized the notion of outbreak of a war is finally mentioned.

Here it is important to display the image that occurs before the war is even mentioned (fig.2).

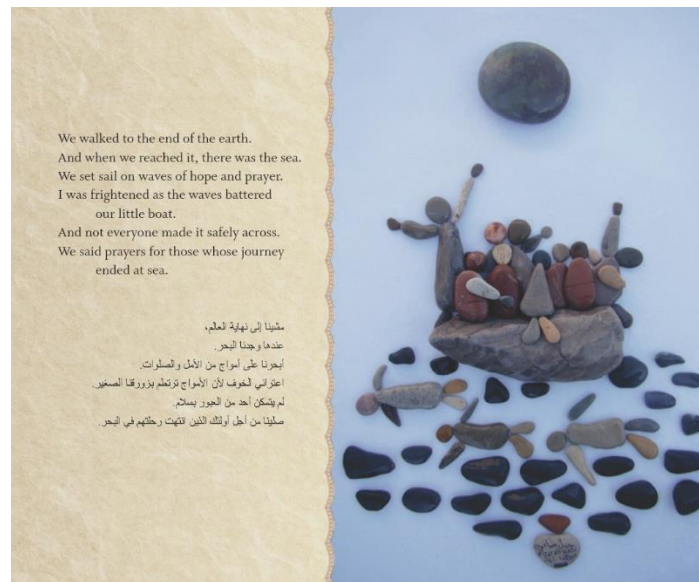


(Ruurs, Fig.2)

What is significant about this image is that it gives the reader the idea that the home environment is not that pleasant at all due to the prison-like standards of living. When this is combined with Rama gradually mentioning the war, the fact that they eventually have to leave their homes is in a

sense “reassuring”. The violence of war can never be justified, especially not to a kid, but presenting an image of a prison, gives an “acceptable” meaning to eventually having to leave the homeland. As mentioned before in the paragraph about place, the future continuously is addressed in light of peace and freedom. Through this way, a starting and finish point is outlined for the reader in which the migration starts with the notion of escaping a prison-like life and ends with entering the host-country which houses peace and freedom.

While Balaev has stated that “the unspeakable” is an element which has to do with language, I would like apply this theory to the design of the picture book since images in these books also contain meaning if not conveyed in words. The use of pebble stones is a very feature that fits in the unspeakable notion, because it hides faces and thereby also a piece of truth. The perfect example to show the “strength” of this art form in conveying traumatic events can be found in the following image (fig.3).



(Ruurs, Fig.3)

The image displays the tragic death of people while crossing the sea in plastic boats to reach a better future. The images of the drowning people would have been too vivid for young readers if these were given a face and an expression. The way it is done in *Stepping Stones* there is not given a clear difference in display between the people who are in the boat and the people

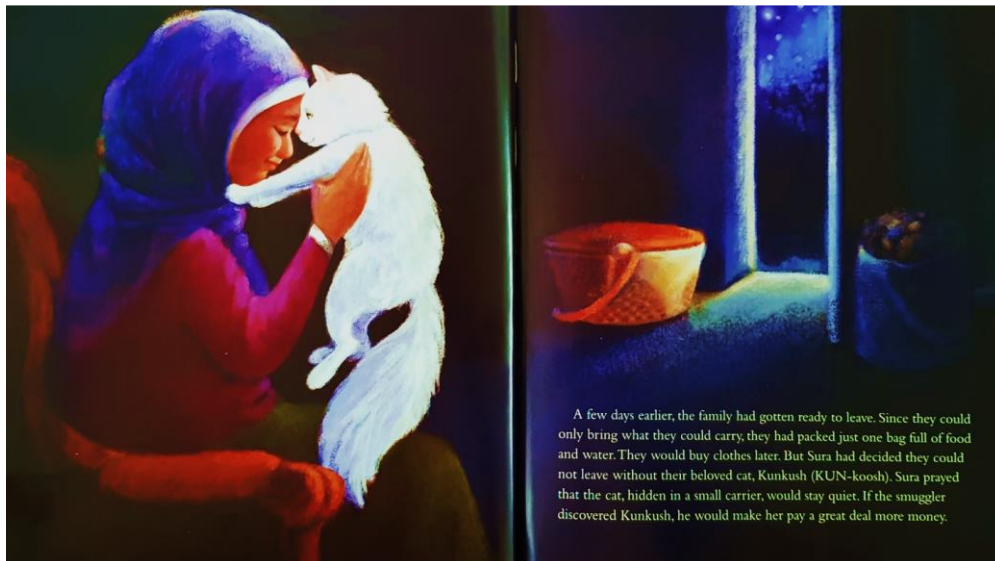
drowning outside the boat. In this way death is not given a face while and the traumatic truth is still displayed for the readers in a “bearable” fashion.

Chapter 3: Trauma in *Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush's Incredible Journey*

Lost and Found Cat is a picture book written by Doug Kuntz and Amy Shrodes and illustrated by Sue Cornelison. The story is based on a real life event where the authors of the book are the people who eventually find the lost cat Kunkush and help him get back to his family again. In the book we see an Iraqi family that leaves their home due to war atrocities in their homeland, along their journey they lose their cat Kunkush whereby the focus of the book turns to finding and bringing home the cat. Besides the story, real life pictures are included of all the people mentioned in the book. Also, a map can be found in the back of the book displaying the journey Kunkush and his family made from Mosul to Norway, their host country.

3.1 Kunkush the Cat

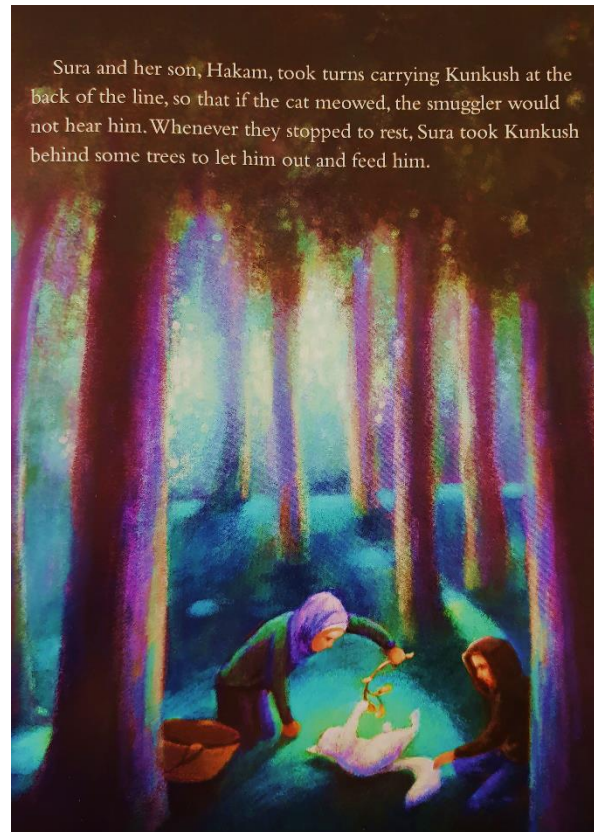
As can already be made out by the title, the protagonist of this book is a cat named Kunkush. The focus on the cat does not eliminate the hardships the family in the book has to go through during their journey, such as travelling illegally with a smuggler and the dangerous travel by plastic boats from the shore of Turkey. In each of these scenes, however, Kunkush the cat draws the attention (fig.4 and 5).



(Kuntz and Shrodes, Fig. 4)

Here the reader is informed that the family has got to leave their home soon, which can be a traumatic event on its own, yet the focus of concern here is that “the cat, hidden in a small carrier,

would stay quiet. If the smuggler discovered Kunkush, he would make her pay a great deal more money” (Kuntz and Shrodes). This piece also gives an idea about the limited time and space that goes with the preparations of refugees when they leave their house behind. Among the various limitations that go with their movement, however, the focus here is not on the material limitations, since the only space for baggage is used for water and food, but on the spiritual needs of the family: their bond with Kunkush the cat.



(Kuntz and Shrodes, Fig.5)

This scene (fig.5) shows a fragment of the journey Sura, the mother of the family, and her kids are making, following the smuggler. It is a three-day journey which they have to walk through mountains and woods. Yet again, it is not the exhausting and perhaps also dangerous trip that is emphasized but again Kunkush the cat. It says, “Sura and her son, Hakam, took turns carrying Kunkush at the back of the line, so that if the cat meowed, the smuggler would not hear him” (Kuntz and Shrodes). This pattern continues even when the family is crossing the sea on a plastic boat. While it is acknowledged that the ride is scary, another big concern is getting the carrier of

the cat on shore without getting Kunkush wet. Through this way, each time hardship is exposed the attention shifts to the main goal of this journey: carrying Kunkush to the host land. It could be noted that this is an efficient strategy to ease the subject of immigration.

While Kunkush is the hero of the story, he in no sense is given a personality as is often the case in picture books of which the head characters are animals. It could be noted that the authors of the books also make use of Kunkush metaphorically. The immigration phenomenon is not hidden from the audience at all, there even are vivid images of plastic boats packed with people crossing the sea. The following example (fig.6), however, points at a reality refugees face in their migration journey which is discrimination and hostility.



(Kuntz and Shrodes, Fig. 6)

In this scene Kunkush has lost his family and thus does not have a home as of the moment. Kunkush's "fur was filthy and matted. He looked like he was starving. The local cats seemed to know he was a stranger. They hissed and spat and chased him away" (Kuntz and Shrodes). The description of how Kunkush looks could be a metaphor for how refugees might be observed by citizens of the countries they have to travel through. Since refugees can only carry with them as much as fits in a backpack it is quite understandable that if a journey takes days or weeks it is hard to also worry about your hygiene and your looks. People who do not understand or do not

sympathize can respond negatively to refugees who already endure a difficult time. The use of this scene to symbolize this reality could also be seen as an aspect of the “unspeakable” in which the trauma is not narrated through the exact event but through use of metaphors, in this case cats who chase away Kunkush who is considered a stranger to them.

3.2 The Unspeakable Pre-Migration

As can be made out by the book’s sub-title, *The True Story of Kunkush’s Incredible Journey*, this book tells the story of a journey from A to B: from native country to host country, the setting for the trans-migration stage. Little to no information can be found, however, about what has led the family to flee their country. The only place where pre-migration elements are mentioned are the first four pages of the book. In the first two pages a car is displayed leaving the city of Mosul by night. The car is riding through what seems a quiet street, yet in the distance a pack of smoke is displayed hiding half of the starry night. The smoke is rising from a house that must have collapsed not long ago. The display goes paired with the text “Their father had recently died. Sura, the mother, had paid the smugglers to help her family flee the country. Mosul had become too dangerous” (Kuntz and Shrodes). Nothing about a war or combat is mentioned, yet the fact that the children’s father has died recently combined with fleeing the country because Mosul has become a dangerous place makes clear that the family is escaping a threatening situation. Their home is not safe anymore and even escaping their home has to be done in the dark through illegal ways which creates an atmosphere of continuing danger.

In contrast to the attention given to pre-migration atrocities in *Stepping Stones* it could be stated that Kuntz and Shrodes have chosen a different perspective to tell the story of the refugee experience. This difference is also visible in the titles of the books, where the one tells Kunkush’s *Incredible Journey*, the other narrates a *Refugee Family’s Journey*. Where the one is about losing and finding a cat, the other is about losing and finding safe land. Thus it could be stated that the unspeakable pre-migration in *Lost and Found Cat* is a narrative strategy to avoid the traumatic element of that stage and focus rather on the hope-giving element of unifying a family. Not to mention, the reader is reassured even before the story is told, since the title gives away that the cat will be found.

Chapter 4 – Trauma in *My Beautiful Birds*

My Beautiful Birds is a picture book written by Suzanne Del Rizzo which is inspired by an article she read about a Syrian boy living in Jordan in the Zaatari refugee camp who tamed birds. The book tells the story of a young boy named Sami who flees his home which is destroyed in the Syrian Civil War. Due to the sudden departure from his hometown he worries about the pigeons whom he fed and cared for and eventually had to leave behind. In the refugee camp where he has to stay for the greater part of the story, Sami has difficulty with participating in daily activities that take place in the camp, because he cannot let go of the thought of his lost pigeons. Once new pigeons enter his life whom he starts to care for just like his old pigeons he starts the process of letting go of the past and healing from his loss.

4.1 The Protagonist: Sami

Just like *Stepping Stones* the refugee experience in *My Beautiful Birds* is told through a first-person narrator which is also the protagonist of the story, namely Sami. The clear difference is that in this book we do get to identify Sami through imagery, giving him a face next to his voice. This aspect eases the process of familiarizing with Sami as a child figure which in turn makes this book a story of an individual trauma rather than a collective trauma as was the case for Rama who continually was speaking of the “we” instead of the “I” voice. When considering all three picture books it could be stated that *Stepping Stones* is the book that shifts the attention of the collective refugee experience to an individual experience in the least sense, whereas *Lost and Found Cat* and *My Beautiful Birds* both are focused on an individual subject. In *My Beautiful Birds* there are two concerns, one is Sami and him being upset and the other are the birds that color his sadness in most of the pages. In one sense the birds resemble Kunkush the cat because the animal element brings a different dimension to the refugee experience. The difference here, however, is that Sami is still the protagonist of the story and the birds function as a trope for his healing process from the traumatic event he faces as a young kid. The pigeons are not the main concern of the story as was the case with Kunkush the cat.

4.2 Longing for the Birds

It is important to elaborate further on the narrative point of views that are put to use differently in all three books. It can be stated that all three books are stories of real events, but because *Lost and Found Cat* and *My Beautiful Birds* are focused on a specific refugee experience that took place in real life I want to contrast these two books on how it is narrated and what this does to the “unspeakability” of certain traumatic aspects of the migration.

In contrast to *My Beautiful Birds*, *Lost and Found Cat* has a third-person narrative point of view which creates a certain distance with the story that is told and the audience to which it is conveyed. This could be a deliberately chosen strategy to balance the fact that the story is one that has actually taken place with characters that exists in real life who also go by the same names used in the book. Creating a distance through this fashion could make it easier to confront the reality that is narrated. Suzanne Del Rizzo, as stated, has chosen the first-person point of view to narrate the story. This narrative style is more direct in confronting the audience with the emotions and feelings of Sami. While fleeing from his hometown, we hear him say “The ground rumbles beneath my slippers as I walk. Father squeezes my hand. ‘It will be okay, Sami. Your birds escaped too,’ he repeats” (Del Rizzo). Through this point of view the reader gets a better chance in understanding Sami which also puts more emphasis on his inner world and how he perceives his experiences. Due to this emphasis, in a certain sense a distance is created with the atrocities he faces during the pre-migration stage.

For the biggest part of the book the story takes place in a refugee camp, this means that the overall focus of the refugee experience is on the trans-migration stage. As stated in the section about the migration stages, the trans-migration stage is important in the sense that the tragic reality the refugees have carried into the camp now are stationed in an environment which is both a place of safety but also a place of uncertainty. The camp could be both a space where hope is lost and where hope is found, the latter being the case for Sami. He, however, does have to endure moments of distress before getting there. Through the use of the first-person narrative we are continuously made aware of how much he longs for his birds, consider the following lines:

“Sometimes the dry wind wafts soft music
through the camp. I shiver, remembering
the songs I would hum to my birds.

I wish they were here” (Del Rizzo).

“At the top of a dune I stop in my tracks. ‘Is this my sky from home?’

The same rooftop clouds billow and swirl.

My sky waits like a loyal friend for me to remember.

I ask my sky to watch over my pigeons, wherever they are,
to hide them in cloudy safety” (Del Rizzo).

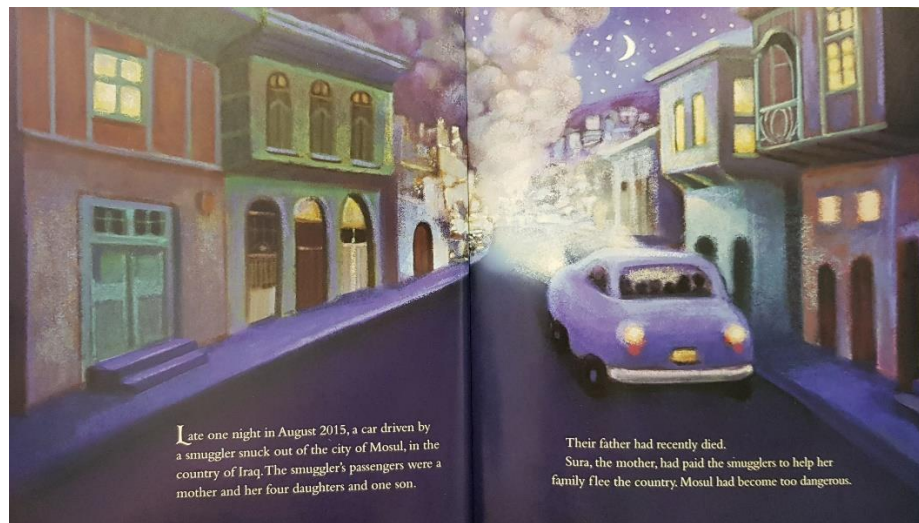
Due to the strong vocalization of his longing for his birds, what is left unspoken is the life that is lead in the refugee camp. The question of what life will be like in camp, however, is asked when Sami and his family enter the camp: “All I have left are questions. What will we do? How long will we be here?” (Del Rizzo). This strategy of asking a question and not given any answer forms a gap for the reader and as mentioned earlier in the outline of the theoretical framework this is a narrative strategy of the author to express the horror of trauma. In this case the traumatic event is Sami finding himself in a complete strange place where he is looking out to uncertainty. Eventually this gap, “the unspeakable”, is answered with lines that express Sami’s longing for his birds. The element of trauma in this way moves around the birds and outside of that it does not play a role in the way life in a camp situation is represented.

4.3 Placing Pre-Migration

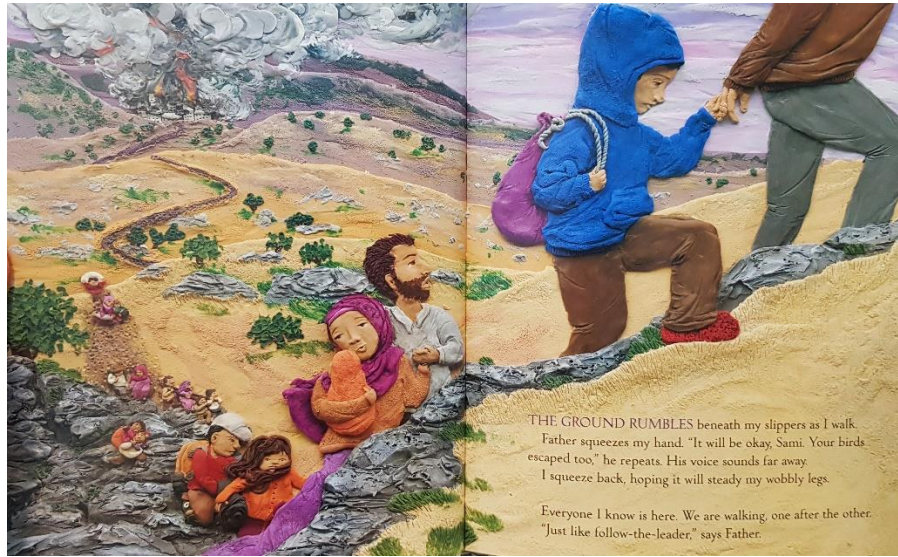
In this section I compare the use of place in representing pre-migration trauma in *My Beautiful Birds* and *Lost and Found Cat* due to the similar entrance the authors have used for their stories. Looking at the first two pages of *My Beautiful Birds* certain similarities and differences with *Lost and Found Cat* catch the eye. As was displayed in *Lost and Found Cat*, in this book we also see a family leaving their hometown behind. This scene provides the only image of the place that is called home for Sami. In the distance a town can be seen out of which heavy smoke is rising into the air, yet it is displayed in such fashion that it draws more attention than is the case in *Lost and Found Cat* (fig.7 and 8). This can be due to the brighter colors that are used for this scene, since in *Lost and Found Cat* the smoke could easily be mistaken for clouds as a part of the starry night because of the similar colors (blue and gray) that were used for the whole page. In *My Beautiful*

Birds the smoke and its destructing character is easier to identify due to the flames it is drawn in combination with.

Another reason for the focus is the track which the people fleeing their homes are following: the picture closest to the point of which the scene is drawn is that of Sami holding his father's hand, leading the people that are walking behind them on the track. The absence of the information of where these people are walking to leads the eyes to the point from where these people actually began their journey: the burning town. In *Lost and Found Cat* it is not identifiable if the car in which the family is leaving the city is riding through their street or even their neighborhood which distances the negative memory of a "falling" home. Whereas in *My Beautiful Birds* the use of place contextualizes trauma differently in the sense that it puts more emphasis on the past – mainly constituted by Sami losing his birds – which then also continuously occurs in the story as a memory that haunts Sami.



(Kuntz and Shrodes, Fig.7)



(Del Rizzo, Fig. 8)

Further in the story, when Sami is in camp and he is watching the sky the clouds are used as an element to change the setting and place where Sami finds himself mentally.

"Is this my sky from home?" he says, "The same rooftop clouds billow and swirl. My sky waits like a royal friend for me to remember. I ask my sky to watch over my pigeons, wherever they are, to hide them in cloudy safety."

He continues, "Now, when the smoky nightmares boom, I watch the clouds. Sometimes, fluffy cloud-pigeons take shape. Spiraling. Soaring. Sharing the sky" (Del Rizzo)

As Sami described, in these pages the sky is displayed in which shapes of birds can be noticed if looked a bit carefully. This scene could be viewed as start of his healing process from his memory of a traumatic pre-migration. The sky and the clouds until this page have served as a canvas catching the smoke of a deleted past – his hometown – and here it serves as something familiar and comforting. His birds in this sense can be viewed as a metaphor for his losses: it all disappeared unexpectedly and it probably will never be exactly the way it used to be, yet the memory of all which he loved and was familiar with will continue to exist in his mind and heart. The trauma of losing his birds is turning into a memory, a past with which he actually can cope.

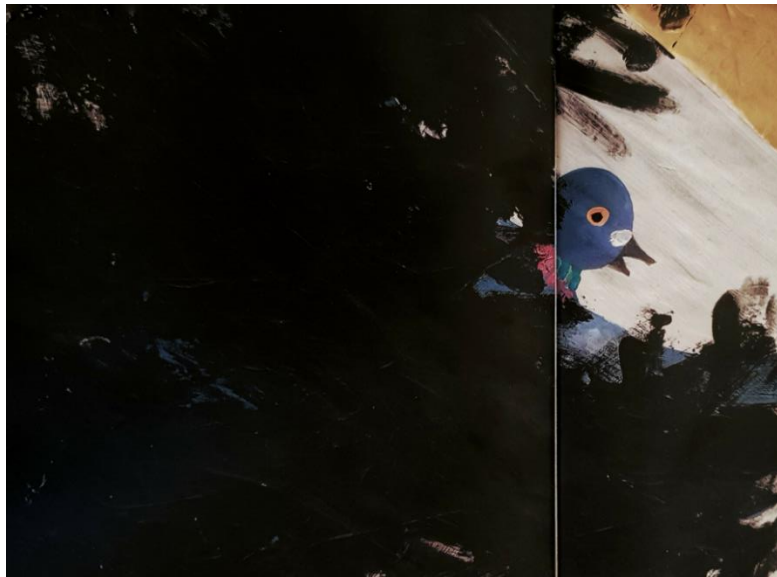
The cloud of his pre-migration experiences is finally clearing up and making place for Sami to actually live in the moment and move forward.

4.4 The Unspeakable Black Paint

During one of the activities at the school at camp the children are given the task of painting. In the book four children are displayed sitting around a table and painting. Sami is painting his bird. He says, “I try to paint my beautiful birds, knowing each wispy feather by heart” (Del Rizzo). However his painting gets a sad turn because he – what seems - by accident uses black paint and his bird disappears under the black stains. “But the wisps turn black,” he says,

“Smoky black smears from edge to edge, swallowing everything underneath. I tear my painting piece by piece. Black paint stains my hands and my clothes. My stained heart is torn to pieces too” (Del Rizzo).

With this a picture of his birds is displayed of which we only see the head, the rest of his art is covered in black paint (fig.8).



(Del Rizzo, Fig. 8)

The intensity of the color black that is used for this page could be analyzed as the unspeakable trope of Balaev. The audience to the book is left with a page in which there is almost nothing to

see, yet exactly this fact gives the audience the space to feel the intensity of sadness that is living in Sami. It also works as a reminder of the traumatic scene where his hometown is covered in smoke and birds are escaping.

Conclusion

Referring back to the research question, the aim of this thesis was to research the different ways in which picture books written as a response on the recent refugee crisis reflect pre- and trans-migration trauma. This was done through a method of close reading and usage of the theoretical framework of Balaev, mainly focusing on the contextualizing aspects of the protagonist, the concept of place and the element of “the unspeakable”. These tools proved to be useful in recognizing the narrative strategies the authors used in covering the theme of trauma. Since we are talking about picture books and thus a young audience, it is obvious that these books will never fully replicate the intensity of trauma through words and images, which also was not the case for my case studies.

Firstly, the use of the protagonist in *Stepping Stones* proved to be the most distant than all three books. This was due to the use of pebble stones in creating images, which is a smart tool to disable individualizing the protagonist of the story. Also, Rama use of the pronouns “we” and “our” created a story of a collective rather than a individual trauma/memory. In *Lost and Found Cat*, the authors have chosen to use a cat as the protagonist, which shifts the focus of the traumatic elements of the migration to the cat and his story instead. This is also strategy to create distance with the reality of trauma underneath the migration stages. Lastly, of all three subjects, the protagonist Sami in *My Beautiful Birds* was a door to a more detailed description of trauma due to frequent use of his longing for his birds and the impact this had on the mood of the story.

Second, the usage of place in *Stepping Stones* contextualized the attachment and detachment to home due to references such as saying goodbye to the flowers back home and planting seeds to grow flowers for the people lost at sea. In *Lost and Found Cat* and *My Beautiful Birds* a different approach to the pre-migration trauma can be observed especially in the entrance of the books. In this case, the latter book provides the most vivid depiction of what the atrocities looked like. Place also has a different use in *My Beautiful Birds*: it serves as a metaphor of letting go of past traumas and moving into bright futures.

Lastly: “the unspeakable”. It can be concluded that the usage of pebble stones in *Stepping Stones* was the most effective use of the unspeakable trope. These stones disables individualizing of the protagonist and most significantly, it makes it possible to convey a traumatic event such as drowning in sea without making it too vivid for the eye. Both in *Lost and Found Cat* and *My*

Beautiful Birds the big role animals are given in the stories serve as the element of the unspeakable because they shift the attention of the migration to concerns regarding the animals.

In light of the criteria Baer mentions in the article “A New Algorithm in Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World” I lastly want to reflect on the three picture books. The main point of her two criteria is that the book firstly must grapple directly with the evil and secondly not provide simplistic explanations to the “evil”. It could be stated that this is done most effectively in the book *Stepping Stones* in the sense that this book has stated the presence of war more often and with that it has also mentioned and even depicted bombs and a life without actual freedom: the image of the prison. Also, again, the usage of pebble stones has allowed this book to be most accurate about the traumatic events during the migration, yet at the same time it achieved positioning itself the most distant to these events.

In *Lost and Found Cat* (pre-migration stage) nothing about a war or combat is mentioned, the “evil” in this case is not given a face, yet the fact that the children’s father has died recently combined with fleeing the country and Mosul being mentioned as having become a dangerous place makes clear that the family is escaping a dangerous situation. It can be noted, however, that the evil in a sense is given a name. This, however, likely will differ for refugee children and children who have not gone through refugee circumstances. For the former, the display of smoke and fire and its link with war and terrorism will be evident, but for the latter creating this link is not an obvious matter. While it might not be clearly displayed, in the first page the image of a house surrounded by smoke can be seen. The danger that the family is fleeing from could be linked to this house, but the author does not go far enough to explain the link between the smoke and war, it can only be linked with some sort of danger.

In *My Beautiful Birds*, a similar image is found which confronts the evil at stake yet it is displayed in such fashion that it draws more attention than the previous picture book through use of brighter colors, imagery of fire, and image perspective. Again nothing of a war or terrorism is mentioned. Important to add is the dramatic turn that overcomes Sami’s painting he made of a bird and the link he makes with smoke. Also in one of the flash-backs that disturb him he hears loud booming and he mentions that he is scared. The idea that he is traumatized by being a witness of war atrocities back at home is again not clearly set, it still could be named “danger” rather than war or terrorism. As said, for refugee children who have memory of the same war atrocities displayed in the picture books, the name of the evil can “easily” be detected. Baer’s

second criteria was to provide a historical context to the “evil” which has turned the lives of these family’s upside down. This context is absent in its whole.

A suggestion for further research would be combining this literary criticism with reader responses. Timewise it is difficult for this thesis project to get in the field, but what is more important is that I do not have the necessary background in pedagogy which could lead to miscommunication with the children who would participate in this research. Ethically seen it is better to leave that part of the research up to researchers or teachers who are experienced in approaching children who evidently are a vulnerable focus group. The most recent work I found on this topic is researched and written by Julia Hope, she has researched responses to children’s literature about refugees in the primary classroom and her work was published as a book in spring 2017: *A Well-Founded fear*. The following is a summary of the research she has done: “Using a variety of qualitative methods, I present data suggesting that pupils in five classes gained valuable insight into a complicated and controversial issue. However viewing children through a refugee/non-refugee binary was reductive, not recognizing the multi-layered nuances of meaning which were constructed at all ages. Furthermore, while the primary curriculum in England does not promote reading for socio-political understanding, but focuses on literacy rather than literature goals, teachers played a powerful role in mediating the texts when sharing them in the classroom, and devised a selection of stimulating resources to aid with planning for reader response and some ‘critical literacy’” (Hope, 4). I believe Hope’s research is valuable and I see it as a second step that could be followed in the future as an addition to this thesis.

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