
REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS — IN CHILDREN'S FICTION —

New Books to Build Understanding Across Borders



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Abstract: With immigrant youth an important presence in Texas schools, reading new books for children and adolescents about their experiences can help to grow understanding and empathy for refugees and other immigrants. This article highlights five new books by Latina, Latino, and Latin American authors with characters who migrate to the United States from Central American countries. The recommended books are written and illustrated by René Colato Laínez with Laura Lacamara, Jairo Buitrago with Rafael Yockteng, René Saldaña, Jr., Alexandra Diaz, and Maria E. Andreu. Teachers provide students with cross-cultural experience through contemporary literature.

Keywords: borders, literacy, children's literature, Latino/a literature, immigration, refugees

Why Read About Immigration?

Young readers need to experience not only books that provide mirrors of their own experiences but also books that provide windows into the lives of others (Sims Bishop, 1990). To help prepare students for a wider world beyond their own lives, curriculum and school materials should represent a wide range of experiences. Diverse voices are still “routinely left out of classrooms” (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014, p. 28). Scholars Christina Tschida, Caitlin Ryan, & Anne Swenson Ticknor demonstrate that children’s literature can disrupt what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) identifies as the “danger of a single story.” Using text groupings, or “thematic text sets” (Bersh, 2013, p. 47), can help with moving beyond a “single story” about historical events or cultural narratives on topics such as immigration (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014, p. 29). Reading and discussing multiple books portraying immigrants and refugees can convey heterogeneity and diversity rather than expecting one text to be representative.

In 2013, the economic conditions and violence in Central American countries caused a surge of refugees and unaccompanied minors

into south Texas. The problems they fled remain unsolved. An anthology reflecting on efforts to assist the youth and families is *Lost: Children of the River* (Sanchez & Chavarria, 2016). Brenda Riojas writes about our “humanitarian challenge” (p. xiii) and describes how aid workers with Catholic Charities welcome and applaud the refugees who survive to walk through the doors seeking asylum. This current issue affects children and adolescents across Texas. Students need access to culturally specific narratives appropriate for their age level that humanize children and teens with immigrant backgrounds and open up conversations.

Education and Immigration

People residing in the United States have a right to free, public education from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Whether or not a child is undocumented, that person still holds educational rights guaranteed by the Supreme Court decision in 1982, *Plyler v. Doe*. The result of this case that originated in Texas was that minors residing in the USA have a right to public education, regardless of the documentation or immigration status of themselves or their parents. Recently, in 2015, the National Council of Teachers of English issued a position statement that teachers should “respect the dignity of and advocate for the equitable schooling of undocumented youth.”

Scholars Roberto Gonzales, Luisa Heredia, and Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales (2015) analyze undocumented students’ experiences in the K-12 education system. Schools have both academic and social functions to “act as integrators, as constructors of citizenship, and as facilitators of public and community engagement” (p. 320). Schools provide undocumented students “with a sense of community and purpose, integrating them into peer networks and classes” (p. 324) and creating a place for relationships with teachers and counselors. A problem is that underfunded, overworked schools and employees in Texas have inadequate resources for student learning and well-being. Thus, an undocumented student’s opportunity “to receive quality academic and civic opportunities is often undercut by larger structural conditions” (Gonzales, Heredia, & Negrón-Gonzales 2015, p. 321). Schools need to provide more support for English language learners at the primary and secondary levels. Many Texas schools lack adequate resources to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Schools and teachers can respect children’s rights while expanding awareness of what children have experienced or are still enduring. Picture books on immigration are an accepted part of curriculum (Bersh, 2013). And for secondary students, “controversial” topics can “provide an excellent forum for teaching critical literacy skills” (Matson, 2014, p. 27). Contemporary issues merit discussion in ways that respect student privacy and do not close off divergent viewpoints.

Fiction: Recommended New Releases

Presented in this article by ascending age range for readership, five recently released books by Latinx (Latino/a) and Latin American

authors address immigration into the United States from Latin American countries. These recommended books portray a range of situations connected with migrations. These narratives enable students to see perspectives of immigrants as well as refugees, undocumented youth, and Unaccompanied Minor Children. This article offers concise reviews with description of significant textual features so that educators can identify useful materials for their own readership, classrooms, and libraries.

Recommended Picture Books

Mamá the Alien is a bilingual picture book for grades K-2, written by René Colato Laínez and illustrated by Laura Lacámara (2016a). Protagonist Sofia sees her mother’s outdated “Resident Alien” card and assumes that her mother is an extraterrestrial from outer space. Sofia’s father explains that he was born in the United States but Sofia’s mother was not born there. Sofia’s imagination runs wild. She researches beings from outer space in books at her school library and wonders, “Did Mamá know three languages: English, Spanish, and Alien?” Ultimately, Sofia realizes that “alien is one of those words that has more than one meaning in English.” The book culminates with Mamá’s citizenship ceremony, and refers to speeches, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the United States flag.

Bright illustrations by Laura Lacámara make this book pop. With many creative, colorful images of beings from outer space, pictures bring Sofia’s imagination to life. The light-hearted and humorous approach differs from most books about immigration. Lacámara’s artwork also shows Sofia’s home life in a single-family dwelling, with a kitchen of healthy vegetables and fruit and a gray tabby cat for a pet. Sofia plays basketball, and her father goes to the gym to work out.

Mamá the Alien links with discussion of immigration history. The “Author’s Note” at the end of the book describes the changing form of the “green card,” which began in 1946 as the Alien Registration Receipt. Colato Laínez mentions his own background of coming from El Salvador to the United States in 1985. He emphasizes that “We are all citizens of planet Earth.” In a blog entry, Colato Laínez (2016b) discusses that his family was undocumented when they fled from El Salvador: “In my country only people who had money were able to get papers to come to the United States. Poor people like my family did not have the privilege to get these documents. I did not understand why it was illegal to escape a civil war to look for a better life and opportunities in a country that was safe from war.” Colato Laínez thanks an amnesty program for enabling his family to get the “Resident Alien” card in 1989 so they could live and work in the United States. This distinctive pink card with blue lettering sparks Sofia’s creativity in *Mamá the Alien*.

The next illustrated book, *Two White Rabbits*, directly portrays the refugee experience (See Figure 1). Aimed at grades K-3 with an interest level through secondary, Jairo Buitrago’s book is told from a young girl’s perspective as she travels to the United States border with her father. *Two White Rabbits* shows moments sometimes involved in migration northward to the United

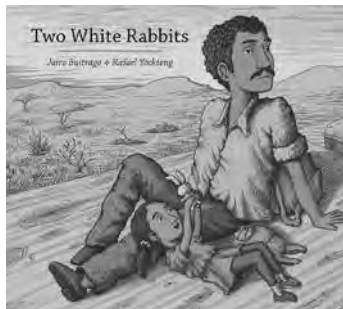


Figure 1: The cover image of *Two White Rabbits* by Jairo Buitrago.

States, including riding atop a train, riding a raft across a river, and working to earn money for the journey. The unnamed protagonist counts items around her to seek comfort. An orange dog looks and behaves like a coyote who moves people across borders for a price, but he is not villainous as in the allegorical migration tale *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*

(Tonatiuh, 2013). Rafael Yockteng's precisely drawn illustrations convey the love between father and daughter and her youthful view of the journey.

Much remains ambiguous about the family's journey in *Two White Rabbits*. The characters' refugee status is suggested through people with guns in words and images. The exact reasons for migration are not stated, and the characters are nameless. The originating country is not stated, but the illustrations on the end papers are Guatemalan worry dolls. The protagonist carries a stuffed rabbit, and one of the people she meets gives her two white rabbits. These bunnies, symbolic of the father and daughter, scamper near the border wall on the last illustrated page.

A Colombian author, Buitrago currently lives in Mexico; his collaborator Rafael Yockteng lives in Colombia. *Two White Rabbits* is available in Spanish and in a separate edition translated into English by Elisa Amado. Placed on many annual book lists, *Two White Rabbits* was named one of the *School Library Journal* Best Picture Books of the Year, *Kirkus* Best Picture Books of the Year, *USBBY* Outstanding International Books, and *Notable Books for a Global Society*. It was a *Commended Book for the Américas Award*. A letter to readers from the *IBBY* President Patricia Aldana closes the book with a note about refugees and

the rhetorical question "What do those of us who have safe comfortable lives owe to people who do not?"

Recommended for Elementary Readers

A Mystery Bigger than Big, a *Mickey Rangel Mystery* is the fourth book in a popular detective series by René Saldaña, Jr. (2016; see Figure 2). The map of Central America on the front cover connects perfectly with the story's content and reminds readers about geography. Mickey Rangel, a fifth grade detective in small town

Peñitas in the Rio Grande Valley, senses a mystery about Natalia, the quiet, new classmate who keeps to herself. Seeing through the rumors floating about Natalia, Mickey realizes that she is one of the Unaccompanied Minor Children he had heard about on the television news and discussed with his father. Mickey hears Natalia talking with the teacher about how she left Guatemala with two cousins but becomes separated from them and is now alone. Mickey does not reveal the status or background of Natalia despite the inquiries of other classmates. Instead, as a fan of UFO stories, Mickey spins a tale that she had been abducted by aliens. Like Colato Lainez's book, this novel plays on the word "alien" without perpetuating stereotypes.

Mickey puts his classmate's well-being above his reputation as a private eye. He perceives that "Natalia had suffered so much already" and "the suffering wasn't going to stop any time soon" (p. 35). Mickey quells his curiosity and pride so he does not hurt someone who has already had a painful life. Dr. Saldaña includes an important scene where the teacher, Mrs. Garza, does a read-aloud for the class of René Colato Lainez's picture book *My Shoes and I* (2010), about a boy and his father traveling from their home in El Salvador to join the mother in the United States. The read-aloud prompts a class discussion with sharing from classmates about their own views and building empathy with the fictional characters. Natalia's experience is validated by this intertextual reference.

Author René Saldaña, Jr. has Mexican American heritage and grew up in the Rio Grande Valley. This fourth book in his Mickey Rangel mystery series, targeted to ages 8 through 12, continues to hone the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that have been part of this series since 2009. The English and Spanish translations are on opposite sides of the flip book, with the same seven, full-page illustrations by Mora Des!gn Group in each translation. While this book stands alone without background knowledge of previous books in the series, characterization deepens of Mickey's classmates. Bucho talks about his grandfather's immigrant heritage and implores Mickey to respect Natalia's privacy. The hidden identity of Mickey's "Angel," a person who sends helpful notes in riddle form, remains a fun secret. This book does not share the thoughts of the unaccompanied minor but instead provides the perspective of a classmate. *A Mystery Bigger Than Big* has emotional impact for students who relate to Mickey, Natalia, or Bucho.

Recommended Middle Grade and Young Adult Books

The Only Road (2016) by Alexandra Diaz portrays Jaime and Ángela, cousins fleeing gang violence and drug cartels in Guatemala. After the murder of Miguel, Jaime's cousin and best friend, his family knows that in order to have a chance of survival, the children must leave Guatemala. Only this desperation could induce the family to separate. Jaime, age 12, and Ángela, age 15, take the treacherous journey of crossing national borders to get from Guatemala to the United States. Their trip includes travel in cars, buses, and trains. Dangers beset them at every turn.



Figure 2: The cover image is used with permission from the publisher of *A Mystery Bigger Than Big*, a *Mickey Rangel Mystery* by René Saldaña, Jr. (© 2016 Arte Público Press – University of Houston).

The third person narrative perspective focuses on Jaime's view of this journey. Jaime's grieving for Miguel, his skill in sketching pictures, and his ingenuity make him a strong, relatable protagonist. A serious book, *The Only Road* tackles the transborder journey with depth and specificity. Diaz devotes attention to details of Jaime's trip, such as prices, currency exchanges, food, bathrooms, and types of border enforcement. Jaime and Ángela make friends with other refugee youth and save the life of a dog they name Vida, despite knowing that every day brings risks and possibly death. In the final chapter, Jaime and Ángela climb the border wall in Ciudad Juárez and then are driven to a safe house in El Paso, where a cousin picks them up and takes them to New Mexico.

The Only Road ends with an author's note, a 15-page glossary of Spanish words and phrases, and bibliographies of further resources and recommended reading. Alexandra Diaz describes how her parents fled Cuba in 1960 and became residents then later citizens of the United States. Diaz notes that *The Only Road* was inspired by the wave of refugees from Central America, many of whom are fleeing drug cartels, gang violence, and gang recruitment. *The Only Road* is also available in a Spanish edition, *El único destino*.

Comparable in content with *Enrique's Journey* (Nazario, 2013), which was based on true incidents, Diaz's *The Only Road* is a composite story and a work of fiction. Diaz authentically depicts the difficult transborder journey that some books do not get right. For example, Patricia Reilly Giff's *Until I Find Julian* (2015) is emotionally engaging but inaccurate due to implying ease in crossing national borders.

What is it like to live every day in the United States with undocumented status hanging over you? Some people deal with this every day. The rest of us can read about it in books like *The Secret Side of Empty* (2014). This semi-autobiographical young adult novel by Maria E. Andreu portrays the struggles of Monserrat Thalia (M.T.) in her senior year of high school. Author Maria Andreu, born in Spain, lived in Argentina before coming to the United States at age eight and later obtaining citizenship due to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. In *The Secret Side of Empty*, which originated as memoir, M.T. is brought from Argentina to New Jersey as an infant by her parents. M.T. goes through many experiences Andreu endured, including depression and contemplation of suicide.

M.T.'s senior year of high school is a turning point more crucial for her than for many seniors. M.T. has had to keep her undocumented status a secret from even her closest friends, who do not understand why she cannot get a driver's license or apply to colleges. Becoming estranged from her peer group of academically talented senior girls at a Catholic school, M.T. is depressed and stops doing school work. M.T.'s despair brings down her academic standing from being a top student in line for valedictorian, and the vice president of National Honor Society, to being a marginal student removed from National Honor Society membership. M.T. wonders, "What will all these books and theories and equations

matter when I am scrubbing toilets or when I am deported to Argentina?" (p. 171). She does not know that she can apply to college and thinks her life is hopeless. M.T. becomes so depressed that friends report her as at risk of harming herself.

Living in poverty and constant fear of deportation has led M.T.'s family to a limited and insecure existence. The family of four subsists on her father's small income from restaurant employment and M.T.'s peer tutoring work. But then her father loses his job and treats his family even worse. M.T.'s younger brother José, although a citizen, has an unstable life. As children share the risks of other family members, the situation that sociologist Laura Enriquez (2015) terms "multigenerational punishment" means that the effects of living in a mixed-status home "spill over to negatively affect people who are not targeted by the law," so citizen children suffer along with their non-citizen family members (p. 941). Both M.T. and her mother grow and change to empower themselves. M.T. even gets help from friends in gaining admission to college. In the closing chapter, M.T. hears President Obama's 2012 speech about the executive Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a program allowing certain people to apply for a work permit and authorization to reside in the United States.

The Secret Side of Empty is among the best books for high school readership in personalizing the hardships of living with "the nine-digit problem" of lacking a valid social security number. Despite the fact that undocumented high school students often have high rates of extracurricular activities, civic engagement, and academic excellence, even students with strong academic records often lower their aspirations and drop out of school (Pérez, 2012). Students deserve support for achieving their potential. The ending of Andreu's novel is optimistic yet plausible. Andreu does not pose a magical intervention that solves all problems but does show the protagonist attending university. Poignant and enjoyable, *The Secret Side of Empty* earned critical acclaim as a winner of the National Indie Excellence Award, a Junior Library Guild selection, a selection for the School Library Journal Top Ten Latino Books of the year, and a finalist for the International Latino Book Award in the category of Best Young Adult Fiction.

The Power of Books

Books expressing an empathetic perspective to immigrant children play a valuable role in countering discourse that treats newcomers as outsiders or threats. Most children's books currently being published on this topic show understanding and kindness to immigrant youth. These books will help students learn about other experiences and people. Peer understanding of the importance of privacy can be fostered by inhabiting the perspective of a fictional character who is vulnerable. Seeing from others' perspectives can help reduce bullying. And for students who have family members and friends who have gone through some of these experiences, it legitimizes them to see the topic in literature.

A rising trend in today's publishing world, children's and young adult literature portraying immigrant youth and teens has an important social function to raise awareness and understanding

of these important issues. Books about immigrant youth appear from a range of publishers, showing increasing attention to this much-needed topic for young readers, while even more stories remain to be told.

Scholars Patricia Sánchez and Maité Landa (2016) interpret prominent topics in the experiences of Latino/a immigrant children represented in children's books, including "the hardships of leaving home and the difficulties in crossing the border," "serving as a language broker for your family," and "the bravery and resiliency of undocumented or mixed-status families" (p. 74). Sánchez and Landa point out the importance of teaching immigrant narratives in ways that are "reflective of local immigrant/ transnational/ transborder communities" (p. 72) and attentive to the real challenges immigrant students face. Teachers selecting books need to ask themselves whether people in their communities would "see themselves" (p. 72) in the texts.

Meritorious children's and YA books that portray immigration topics deserve readership and inclusion in schools. Authors, illustrators, and publishers have responded to the need for new books. For instance, excellent new picture books emphasize peer relationships and peer support of language acquisition for newcomer Americans of various backgrounds (Kim, 2014; Kobald, 2015; O'Brien, 2015). While this article focused on our state's southern border, Texas schools have diverse student populations. Teachers and librarians can find books that resonate for their particular communities and their students.

Readers gain from having choices among multiple books. Adding these recommended books into school and classroom libraries makes them available to individuals who wish to select the books for their own reading. Having students discuss books about immigration makes curriculum more inclusive. Students can discuss refugee issues and the factors that push people to leave their homes. Read-alouds may be useful in all grade levels. Sánchez and Landa (2016) suggest inviting students to compare two different books about immigrant characters and to bring them into conversation with each other through activities such as having fictional characters writing letters to each other (p. 82). Other ways of connecting readers with books include creating graphic responses after reading the books, writing creatively from the perspective of a character in the book, and mapping characters' home countries and journeys. Classroom guests who speak about their immigration experiences humanize and personalize the subject of immigration.

My teaching experience in south Texas has shown me that learners of all ages appreciate reading and discussing books about immigrant families. Whether or not students' own opinions and experiences are mirrored in the books, they value dialogue about immigration rather than attempts to ignore it. Reading narratives on immigration and refugee issues and relating to diverse characters in the books has an empowering effect. Students appreciate when authors from various backgrounds write about their own families' migration experiences. Also popular are novels with young protagonists residing in a mixed-status family

in which the young person is born in the United States while an adult caregiver is not a documented resident (e.g., Cervantes, 2013). Seeing realistic immigration scenarios in fiction holds resonance and value for students. Since there is no "single story" (Adichie, 2009), reading and hearing multiple stories can build empathy with unaccompanied minors and other refugee and immigrant youth.

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