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## Book Review

Refugee, by Alan Gratz, New York City, Scholastic Press, 2017, 338 pp., $16.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-545-88083-1

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The novel, *Refugee,* reminds the reader that humans have unique and contradictory psychology. We are predisposed to seek both power and virtue (Wrangham, 2019). This dichotomy is often synonymous with inequality. Efforts to eliminate the inequalities within the educational arena have been established and have roots in both multiculturalism and interculturalism (Coulby, 2006; Maniatis, 2012). While these fields serve as foundational pillars for making high-quality education accessible for all children, many aspects of today's society are linked in a global fashion dictating that we shift our focus to globalism (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

The global economy, immigration, global climate, refugees, global peace, and sustainability are all factors suggesting an unavoidable reevaluation of education and its role in global connectedness. They dictate incorporating our current school curriculum with a global education component that melds virtue and economics, values and politics, fairness and sustainability. However, schools are not preparing students to see this shifting reality.

This, this evolving global paradigm is not lost on Alan Gratz, whose historical fiction novel *Refugee* (2017) is middle school literature at its best. Gratz's novel is a trio of stories written from the viewpoints of three early adolescent refugees. It connects the refugee experience of the past with the experience of present-day refugees. The characters are linked through their humanity, their common experiences as refugees as well as a cleverly crafted concluding chapter which intertwines the narratives across time and place. The novel, which is both engaging and horrifying, helps children realize that despite differences we all want the same things, safety, dignity**,** and respect (Johnson, 2018).

To begin this review of Gratz's novel, I briefly summarize the poignant narrative. Next, I consider some limitations of Gratz's otherwise thoughtful book. I conclude by highlighting how this novel can serve as a vehicle to teach empathy, to empower, and most of all to *see* humanity.

> *The people chose not to see them. On the train, Josef and his family sat in a compartment labeled J, for Jew, so no "real" Germans would sit there by accident (p. 9).*

Josef is a thirteen-year old boy about to celebrate his transition to manhood; his story begins "The Night of the Broken Glass" - Germany, 1938. Josef's father, a Jewish attorney, is beaten and taken to Dachau concentration camp. Six months later, he is released, a frenzied, broken man. Desperate to escape the Nazis, to regain dignity, the family sails to Cuba on the *MS St. Louis.* Yet, after crossing the Atlantic Ocean, they are told by the Cuban government

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that asylum for Jewish refugees is no longer allowed. When Josef's father, learns that they must return to Europe, he is overcome with hysteria and leaps overboard. A Cuban policeman, assigned to guard the border, rescues him, but Josef, his mother, and sister are not allowed to go ashore. Helpless to control their own destiny, they are returned to Europe where France grudgingly accepts them. There Josef's mother becomes a laundress, his sister Ruthie attends kindergarten, and Josef, who does not speak French, is placed in first grade. As the family tries to make a new life, the Nazis invade France. The family escapes Paris, but are soon taken into custody by German soldiers who allow Josef's mother to trade her earrings for the freedom of one of her children. Josef, the man of the family, speaks up and tells the soldiers to spare Ruthie. The reader no longer *sees* Josef.

> *I see it now, Chabela. All of it. The past, the present, the future. All my life, I kept waiting for things to get better. For the bright promise of manana. But a funny thing happened while I was waiting for the world to change, Chabela: It did not. Because I didn't change it (p.277).*

Isabel's story takes place in 1994 after Cuban President Fidel Castro announced that Cubans wishing to leave the island could do so. Faced with hunger and oppression, Isabel's family decides the water is safer than the land. Despite indescribable perils, they determine to crowd into a raft crafted from rusty street signs and oil barrels and sail ninety miles across the Straits of Florida. Diverted from course by a violent storm, the family's journey is accentuated with death, premature birth of a child, and heartfelt sacrifice. As the family's little boat approaches the coastline, the U.S. Coast Guard bears down on them, intent on stopping the refugees' entry to the United States. Isabel's grandfather, a retired Cuban policeman, *sees* how he can make a change, make things better for his family. He jumps off the metal raft distracting the Coast Guard, abandoning his opportunity for freedom so that his family may *see* a better life.

> *They only see us when we do something they do not want us to do, Mahmoud realized...When they stayed where they were supposed to be - in the ruins of Aleppo or behind the fences of a refugee camp - people could forget about them (p. 214).*

Mahmoud's story takes place in 2015 during the Syrian civil war. When Russian missiles shatter the outside wall of Mahmoud's apartment building, his family is forced to flee the city of Aleppo, to run for the border. As the family makes their way to Germany, the miles they must travel mean more than their journey; the passage is laced with soldiers, rebels, robbers, and detention centers. It is impregnated with hunger, exhaustion, insults, abuse, and loss. Fifteen days into their journey, the family attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea in a dinghy. When the dinghy smashes into rocks, the family is thrown into the dark water. Unable to keep both himself and his baby sister afloat, Mahmoud convinces a passenger on another dingy to take his sister. Neither the family nor the reader *sees* baby Hana again. When the family finally reaches Germany, they are given refuge with an elderly German couple, Saul and Ruthie Rosenburg.

While approved for readers as young as 9, the violence and emotion conveyed in *Refugee* is more appropriate for older readers. Additionally, older students will have more knowledge of the historical events depicted. However, at times, it is apparent that Gratz drafted the novel with a readability level appropriate for younger children. While this may have enhanced the range of ages to which this novel could be marketed, it does, at times, have the effect of being too easy of a read for the students whom the content best serves. This comment

is not meant to distract us from the message of Gratz's novel: recognizing differences yet honoring the commonalities of humanity.

Gratz's writing is believable and engaging; it forces readers to empathize with the characters to *see* the characters' humanity. Teaching empathy is a central component of global education, particularly when viewed from a cosmopolitan perspective (Ortloff,2011). Students who develop empathy become less afraid of differences, more open to tolerance, and better able to interact with others (McKee & Schor, 1994). They more easily appreciate the perspectives of others and are more likely to understand violations of justice and fairness (Hollingsworth, Didelot & Smith, 2003).

This type of empathic concern and perspective-taking can be fostered through a variety of activities. After reading *The Refugee*, students can make text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world connections. For example, they can explore their identities by writing their own background stories and comparing their stories with those of their classmates or the characters in the book. Refugee art, photography, and poetry can be analyzed; and can serve as a thoughtful segway for deliberations and debates regarding how other countries should respond to refugee crises. Students can also predict what will happen to the families after Gratz's narrative ends. How will the families make a life for themselves in their new countries? These are gripping and realistic concerns in today's ever-increasingly connected world (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), and the activities not only allow, but force students to *see* others. Helping students *see* others is one way we, as educators, can help students learn to be better citizens of the world.

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