



## Children in Detention: Juvenile Authors Recollect Refugee Stories

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In the last thirty years or so, one of the most swiftly growing areas in children's literature is fiction and autobiographical writing, dealing with the past and present of young people, who are deprived of their homes and ambivalently caught between cultures.<sup>1</sup> Yet, events such as the creation of dictatorships, the decline of empires, the outbreak of wars and catastrophes, and the consequent waves of mass migration are not at all new to the human species. In fact, world history is full of records based on stories of hope and despair. What is new, however, is the scale of migratory movements and its representation in the media and literature. Indeed, the conditions of migrancy inevitably 'have formed the subject matter of children's fiction', as the critic Pat Pinsent states. Pinsent suggests that 'some of this interest [is] being triggered by the need for newer communities to find their voices, while the acceptability of such narratives for publication for children has been increased' (Pinsent 2005, p.181). The critic Jana Pohl summarises this literary development when she explains the enormous popularity of the topos of mass migration in children's literature:

*Migration has been a prospering topic of children's literature. In accommodating the migration issue children's literature interlinks with aspects of multiculturalism, discrimination, tolerance, and cultural plurality for informational, educational and/or aesthetic purposes. Migration stories, depicting the movement from one place to another, immanently revolve around people, countries, and cultures that differ from the reader's background. Migration has also been referred to as object, i.e. topic, and subject at the same time because it serves as the autobiographical background for the author, thus implying a strong notion of subjectivity. Authors, who migrated as children, tell of their own experiences and memories or fictionalize their ancestors' life stories in children's literature.*  
(Pohl 2005, pp.78-79)

Stories dealing with migration and flight often give accounts of children and adolescents whose entire families have been persecuted, destroyed; and finally forced to leave their home country due to war, economic crisis, oppression and discrimination. By remembering, inventing, and recuperating stories of persecution and flight, told through

the eyes of a juvenile migrant or refugee narrator, authors of children's literature have started taking on issues of social exclusion and discrimination. An example of this 'literary trend' can be found in the short story collection *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers aged 11-20 Years* (Dechian, Millar & Sallis 2004). While I consider the collection as one of the most original literary attempts to date to grapple with the overwhelming number of often untold and nameless refugee stories in Australia, the project's overall idea is even more striking.

As readers learn in the introduction to *Dark Dreams*, all stories in the book 'were collected in 2002 through an unprecedented nationwide schools competition, Australia IS Refugees!' (p.1). In this contest juvenile writers had been asked to get in touch with people who had previously sought refuge in Australia and were willing to share their experiences of persecution, flight and eventually finding refuge in Australia. While some of the young authors decided to record and tell the story of a complete stranger, others narrated the stories of their relatives, their parents, or even themselves. In their transcultural acts of individual and collective recollection,<sup>2</sup> the juvenile storytellers opened up and inscribed new space when they imagined cultural diversity against the backdrop of a common sense of belonging. In doing so the young not only reconstructed but resurrected the past life of their informants. In a way they actively engaged in a process of history making. Following this pattern of thought, it can be argued that *Dark Dreams* invites readers to follow the juvenile writers to re-think and challenge the construction of Australian national identity, belonging and history (See Whitlock 2002, p.163 and Buckridge 1992, pp.112-124).

### Recollecting refugee stories

For the purpose of this essay, I will concentrate on two short texts which cover the war and migration zones of Vietnam and Afghanistan. The two selected life stories<sup>3</sup> are biographical accounts which differ in genre and style. Hai-Van Nguyen's (aged 18) 'Journey to freedom' is a testimony of her family fleeing Vietnam. The second text, 'From a small detention centre, I am now in a bigger detention centre: the story of an Afghan refugee', is recorded and narrated by Zac Darab (aged 14). Darab's report recounts

Riz Wakil's flight from central Afghanistan to Australia as well as his recent life in Australia, where he was released on a temporary protection visa in 2000 and has recently been granted a permanent residency visa.<sup>4</sup>

Besides this generic difference, both texts get close to the young storytellers' lives and succeed in illuminating facets of multicultural Australia that all too often remain unpublished. *Dark Dreams* offers representational alternatives to the routinely-constructed stereotypical image of the refugee in Australian public discourse. This stereotypical conception is rooted in the ill, though common, assumption that there is a refugee crisis in the world in general and in Australia in particular. Glenn Nicholls summarizes the Australian situation in the following way:

*Australia has historically received very few applications for asylum. Its isolation is one obvious impediment to such applications [...] Because of negligible numbers of applicants, Australia did not establish an asylum determination system until 1978. However, between the 1980s and 1990s the number of applications per annum in Australia increased from hundreds to thousands [...] Although still small by international standards, these numbers were large by domestic reckoning. The backlog of applications grew to nearly three times the size of the annual humanitarian intake, throwing immigration planning into disarray. Legislators resorted to the language of unforeseen calamities, referring to an 'avalanche' of applications constituting a 'crisis'.*

(Nicholls 1998, p.62)

In a recent study on media discourses surrounding asylum seekers and refugees in Australian Press based on empirical data retrieved from the *Brisbane Courier Mail* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, the sociologist Sharon Pickering argues that in these media discourses 'Not only do refugees and asylum seekers represent a significant "problem", they are a "deviant" problem' (Pickering 2001, p.169). Seen in this light, Australia's public discourse is actively propelling a process of 'othering', in the sense of circumscribing the limits of an imagined Australian identity. L.H. Malikki comes to a similar conclusion and states that media-spread

stereotypes often depict refugees as 'speechless' (Malikki 1996, p.377). Furthermore, according to Kumar Rajaram, they are represented as the epitome of 'helplessness and loss' (Kumar Rajaram 2002, p.247). This representation strategy deprives refugees of their individuality and personality and consequently reduces displaced persons 'to a mute and faceless physical mass [who] are denied the right to present narratives that are of consequence institutionally and politically' (Kumar Rajaram 2002, p.247). Following a similar chain of thought Graham Huggan states that the representation of asylum seekers in Australia's mainstream print and visual media 'has remained at best unnuanced and, at worst, unremittingly negative, stressing the drain on national resources that refugees produce and the strain they place on the nation's collective goodwill' (Huggan 2007, p.128). Fazal Rizvi came to a similar hypothesis, when he criticised Australia's perception of Asians in Australia. According to him, Australia is deeply enmeshed in colonial thought which is expressed in racist assumptions of cultural dominance and superiority: 'In [a] sense, the ideology of racism was central of Australian nationalism, which was based on the assumption that only white people could be acceptable members of the Australian "nation" because it was only they who had the inclination and capacity for self-government by constitutional means' (Rizvi 1996, p.173). Some critics point to the gradual though not less pervasive change of perception of Southeast Asians in Australia during the last ten years or so and stress how the multicultural and multi-ethnic images of Australianness is constantly gaining importance (see Jensen 2002, p.134). Nonetheless, I share Huggan's concern that 'unreflected nationalistic representations' might all too easily 'confirm the status of refugees/asylum seekers as collective objects of finite public generosity, rather than as individual subjects with their own life-stories and their own, not necessarily convincing reasons for seeking protection from a foreign state' (Huggan 2007, p.128).

Against this rather eclectic mind mapping, it becomes clear why the project 'Australia IS Refugees!' and the stories published in *Dark Dreams* are so important. Stories as represented in *Dark Dreams* offer the potential to new interpretations of Australia's past and present when they bring together the broad context of identity-formation

in an increasingly globalised world and the respectively local refugee experiences in Australia. Such accounts of persecution, flight, and finding refuge Down Under not only add further dimensions to a plural reading of an Australian immigration history, but at the same time allow deep insights into the modern psyche of strangers and hosts alike when they represent to mainstream readers new images of displaced people.<sup>5</sup>

In their attempts to describe the shattered and traumatised lives of their 'informants', the young authors recover unrecorded pasts. The stories enrich both the juvenile storytellers' and the readers' knowledge of global war zones and at the same time teach them about Australian society and immigration measures. In this process, truths are heard and acknowledged while storytellers and writers might become aware that factual and fictional realms are so intertwined in the representation of memory and history that it is at times hard to distinguish between them (see Eakin 1999, and in particular his chapter 'Storied selves: identity through self-narration'). One major challenge for all these (auto)biographical projects can be seen in their endeavours to make sense of historical facts, fragmented memory, and imagination. It is in this act of storytelling and recording that memories are exchanged and translated into words, sentences, and stories. Such an *exchange of memories*, to use Ricoeur's term (Ricoeur 1995), and the ability to share dreadful pasts are crucial for peaceful interpersonal relationships that are significant to all processes of reconciliation. By remembering, inventing, and recuperating stories of persecution and flight, authors confront pain, narrate trauma, and bring the pressing issues of social exclusion and discrimination into the view of Australian readers.

Much more could be said on the connection between life writing, this particular project, and the *exchange of memories*, but against the backdrop of my selected texts I will restrict myself to introducing two key themes: Firstly, the image of the refugee beyond stereotypical representations and secondly, the recognition of refugees' personal histories within the framework of Australian historiography.

### The image of the refugee

When Zac Darab opens his report with the simple but at the same time highly complex question: 'What is a refugee?', he does so to address numerous stereotypical images readers might have in mind when they imagine or talk about refugees. Generally, the term 'refugee' alludes to the 1951 UN Convention (extended in the 1967 Protocol).<sup>6</sup> In this document three central features appear dominant in characterising the status of refugees: firstly, a refugee is a displaced person outside his or her country of nationality. Accordingly, people who remain within the national borders of their country do not fall under the ambit of those requiring protection and assistance. Secondly, a refugee cannot return home because he or she faces the reality or the risk of persecution. And thirdly, the persecution a refugee faces is due to political reasons, race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group.

In Darab's story, all of these characteristics are mirrored in the lives of the young protagonist and his family. Riz Wakil's family faced severe persecution and discrimination on the basis of their ethnic minority status: "*We, the Hazara, are the third minority group and we have been badly treated for centuries.*" His community was excluded from the social goods like education and the access to medical resources, Riz said, because they were not of the highest socio-economic status, and they were seen as inferior to the ruling party, the Pashtu' (p.63). In an investigative journalistic manner, the narrative draws extensively on meticulous information by providing a record of social and historical details, so readers learn not only about the difficulties and dangers Wakil faced in Afghanistan but also what it means for him to be a teenager and a refugee in Australia in the year 2002.

Not surprisingly, experiences of exclusion and discrimination become central motifs throughout the text. After having arrived in Australia in a 'leaky boat', Wakil's experience of being 'not wanted' is once more confirmed by Australia's immigration measures:

*In Broome, Riz was told that his application would be processed within forty-five days. He was then escorted to Curtin Detention Centre where he received a basic health check and was searched*

*to ensure that he was not bringing anything illegal into the country. Riz was then taken into detention where he remained for nine months [...] After his extended period of incarceration, Riz was ecstatic to hear that he was allowed into the community. He was issued a temporary visa, which is valid for thirty-six months. The sense of freedom he experienced when learning of his release faded somewhat when Riz learned what a temporary visa meant for him. 'I found out that from a small detention centre, I am now in bigger detention centre. I cannot meet one of my family members. I cannot go out of Australia if I ever want to re-enter [...] For me this is an imprisonment as well'.*  
(p.64)

The narrator's task takes willpower and courage in order for Darab repeatedly to put himself in the scene in order to write Wakil's story. When Darab's report finally closes on an almost romantic notion of the stranger, which represents refugees as assets to Australia, readers enjoy the author's juvenile activism:

*Riz continues to strive for freedom but his visa is now limited to four months. He has proved himself to be hard working in improving his job skills. Perfecting his English and spending his time helping other refugees. Riz would be an asset to our country. I would appeal to the Australian people to lobby for Riz and other refugees who have fled war-torn countries. In a war against terrorism, Riz is a victim and needs our support.*  
(p.67)

By standing up for Riz Wakil, Darab calls upon the humanist idea of hospitality in general, and the importance of the UN Convention of human rights in particular. To him, Wakil's actions demonstrate the young man's will to become a fully-integrated member of Australian society. In this respect, Darab's narrative questions the stereotypical image of a refugee as the 'other' to Australian national identity, belonging, and history. Yet, Darab's warm welcoming gesture, which suggests seeing the other as a full part of an imagined Australian community (Anderson 1983), might also be read as a 'simple' call for assimilation.<sup>7</sup>

### Life stories as a means of sketching history

In 'Journey to Freedom', Hai-Van Nguyen seeks to trace her family history from Vietnam to Australia. In her attempt to reconstruct the past and its terrifying moments of persecution and flight, the narrator comes face to face with her own family history. Yet, and this is a merit of Nguyen's text, the story always projects the universal dimensions of a refugee's life. If pain and desperation are universal experiences, so are hope and the love for humankind. It is this shift in and combination of narrative perspectives that give the short story its vigour. By referring in an ostensibly objective manner to the number of refugees arriving in Australia, the narrator points to the ultimately inhumane conditions all refugees have to endure during their gruesome journey in search for a more secure and better life:

*Society is obsessed with numbers. Long after the human atrocities have occurred, all we remember are the numbers. We remember there were six million victims of the Holocaust and one million casualties during Vietnam War. More recently, we hear about the '765 people' who are 'unauthorised boat arrivals' and the '228 detainees' currently in 'detention' in Woomera. We're hearing politicians justify their actions with phrases like 'Australia is accepting an ample number of refugees for an industrialised country.' As usual issues involving human lives become overshadowed by numbers that relegate people to the status of mere statistics. We remember the numbers but we forget the faces behind them.*

(pp.198-199)

Against this background, the juvenile author highlights the importance of storytelling in the process of identity formation. Furthermore, Nguyen suggests that one should perceive storytelling as a means for writing a comprehensive and more precise version of history: '*Human experiences are real; human suffering is real, and so are the stories that capture them. We need stories to restore the human face to such atrocities. Stories, in capturing the triumphs and sorrows of each individual's experience, will serve a wider purpose of giving a collective voice to all humanity*' (p.199). Nguyen attempts to recollect her and her family's past in order to create her own Vietnamese Australian home

and history which was for so long denied to her family. In other words, her testimony generates an alternative his/story representative of many refugees, in which contemporary, autobiographical, historical, and biographical realms are conflated. The emerging story becomes a site of remembrance and forgiveness both on an individual and collective level and hence moves beyond an ossified cultural memory and towards a possible process of reconciliation (See Nünning & Erll 2005).

In fact, the story can be seen as a crucial part of Australian history in the making. The French philosopher Pierre Nora refers to this process of history-making in the following way:

*The passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history. The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian. The demand for history has thus largely overflowed the circle of professional historians. Those who have long been marginalized in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity.*

(Nora 1989, 15).<sup>8</sup>

Following Nora's suggestion that writers make and produce history, Nguyen's testimony can be seen as an attempt to open up a space for a social and political acceptance of individual histories of flight and of seeking and finding refuge as dimensions of an 'authoritatively' Australian past: 'Having told their story [the story of her parents], they have embedded themselves in history, and if not official history, then certainly personal history. They are no longer part of a statistic, but a personal legacy that I will pass onto my children. The refugees that have recently arrived on the shores of Australia still continue to be numbers, to be statistics, to be overlooked' (p. 204). Reading Nguyen's testimony as a biographical account, written in freedom and from memory, it becomes clear that the narrative challenges an Australian historiography that is concerned with a mainly white Australia. To her, a personal story represents not just

the past and the present but also the future of a refugee. Only if stories of suffering and expulsion are told and reported, can the misery and tragedy of many refugees become considered part of Australian history.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is right when he states that reading, reciting, and finally discussing stories give people a sense of belonging, belonging to a particular group of people, a distinct imaginary horizon, and at times even a national literary space:

*People tell stories and discuss them in every culture, and we know they have done so back as far as the record goes. The Iliad and the Odyssey, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Tale of Genji [...] weren't just read or recited: they were discussed, evaluated, referred to in everyday life. We wouldn't recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination.*

(Appiah 2006, p.29)

Seen from this angle, the juvenile authors have already fulfilled part of a tremendous task. They have helped to excavate unknown historical traces. And by working life into fiction they have given back stories to people who seldom have a chance to tell their stories. From my point of view, Appiah's and Ricoeur's storytelling and history-making agenda can be found at the heart of the project 'Australia Is Refugees!' and the book *Dark Dreams*.

However, these stories and the project do even more. While it is a sound principle that stories and the power of storytelling and the exchange of memories are at the basis of all human interactions, Ricoeur points to the importance of a *plural reading* of historical events:

*Recounting differently is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honored by the diversity of stories which are made out of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise. This ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories.*

(Ricoeur 1995, p.7-8)

There is much more to be said for approaches to history that work towards what Ricoeur has called *plural reading*,

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a perception of history that always considers multiple stories and sites. For Ricoeur and others, such a reading presupposes an understanding of history that goes beyond the common practices of historiography and master narratives (see also Nora 1989). Such a multi-sited reading, however, may play a crucial part in a society's reconciliation processes, as with each remembering and new interpretation of the past, a different history emerges.

### Conclusion

In the process of exchanging memories, storytellers, writers, and readers participate and contribute in a life-shaping act that includes the sharing of trauma and guilt. In this way *Dark Dreams* opens a door for new reflections upon the self in Australian history. The emerging representations of refugees offer alternatives to stereotypical conceptions of refugees as the ultimate 'other' to Australia and its society. It is important to confront and write through conceptions which still echo or revivify a longstanding tradition in which Australian identity and history is mainly understood in terms of an imagined 'White Nation' (Hage 1998). In this context, autobiographical, biographical, or fictional accounts of persecution, flight, and finding refuge in a host country not only add further dimensions to such a reading of history, but allow deep insights into the psyche of arriving refugees and the mental map of host societies. The project 'Australia IS Refugees!' and the short story collection *Dark Dreams* contribute to a critical engagement with Australian history. While the project might have left its imprints on the young writers' memories, the book still continues to stimulate its adult and juvenile readers to engage critically with Australian national identity, questions of belonging, and Australian history making.



### NOTES

1. For a good overview of the representation of migration and flight in mostly European children's literature, see Michael Fritsche's critical anthology *Kinder auf der Flucht: Kinder- und Jugendliteratur zu einem globalen Thema im 20. Jahrhundert* [Children on Flight:

Literature for Children and Young Adults on a Global Theme in the 20th Century] (Odenburg: bis, 2001).

2. Cultural and collective memory, remembering, and recollecting have been a subject of rigorous debates in cultural and critical theory for the past twenty years (Döring 1998). Rituals of memory differ from culture to culture and from continent to continent, so in the present context I set out to address 'recollection' in the Australian literary and social context, albeit with a difference. I do not focus merely on Australian regional or continental memories but on transnational processes of recapturing the fragmented pasts of refugees in Australia.
3. In speaking of life writing I mean to be as expansive and inclusive as possible. In addition to various forms of print media, I include other media of self-representation such as film and digital film. For a detailed discussion of auto/biographical writing by refugees see Helff (2008a) and for an analysis of recent representations of refugees in film and digital media see Helff (2008b).
4. For more information on Wakil's case, see Patty (2006) and Maley (2004).
5. In her article 'Of murmels and snigs: detention-centre narratives in Australian literature for children and young adults' (2006), Debra Dudek points to the important role of children's literature in the process of socialising children.
6. For a detailed guide to the Convention's history and international law pertaining to refugees see G. S. Goodwin-Gill (ed) (1996) *The Refugee in International Law*. Oxford, Oxford UP.
7. For a discussion of the anthology in light of multiculturalism and assimilation see Dudek (2006).
8. See also Paul Ricoeur (2002) 'Zwischen Gedächtnis und Geschichte', [Between Memory and History], *Transit* 22: 3-17.



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