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Of Murmels and Snigs: detention-centre narratives in Australian literature for children and young adults

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Abstract

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S current policy on cultural diversity, 'Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity', which is due to be revised later in 2006, opens with a foreword by John Howard in which he "reaffirms the government's commitment to promoting diversity, understanding and tolerance in all areas of endeavour". No matter how frequently discourses of tolerance and respect for difference circulate in government policy and elsewhere, however, they continue to be underpinned by an assimilation agenda. Media representations, at least, encourage Australians to demonise individuals according to their race, especially since the global war on terror, and more locally in incidents like the Cronulla riots. The Howard Government's anti-terror laws and policy of mandatory detention uphold these popularly held conceptions, which they can use as leverage to justify treating asylum seekers outside of mainstream legal protocols.

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Of Marmels and Snigs

by Debra Dudek

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Detention-centre narratives in Australian Literature for children and young adults

Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds): From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres (Lonely Planet, \$22, ISBN 1740596684)

Isobel Carmody: Alyzon Whitestarr (Penguin, \$22.95, ISBN 0143002430)

Sonja Dechian, Jenni Devereaux, Heather Millar & Eva Sallis (eds): No Place Like Home: Australian Stories by Young Writers Aged 8-21 Years (Wakefield Press, \$19.95, ISBN 186254686X)

Sonja Dechian, Heather Millar, & Eva Sallis (eds): Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11-20 Years (Wakefield Press, \$19.95, ISBN 1862546290)

Alwyn Evans: Walk in my Shoes (Penguin, \$19.95, ISBN 0143002317)

Anna Fienberg: Number 8 (Penguin, \$17.95, ISBN 0143004042)

Morris Gleitzman: Boy Overboard (Penguin, \$14.95, ISBN 0141308389)

Morris Gleitzman: Girl Underground (Penguin, \$16.95, ISBN 0143300466)

Roseanne Hawke: Soraya the Storyteller (Lothian, \$14.95, ISBN 0734407092)

Jane Jolly: Ali the Bold Heart, ill. Elise Hurst, (Limelight Press, \$26.95, ISBN 0975708082)

Tom Keneally & Rosie Scott (eds): Another Country (Halstead Press, \$27.95, ISBN 1920831282)

David Miller: Refugees (Lothian, \$14.95, ISBN 073440915X)

Martine Murray: The Slightly Bruised Glory of Cedar B. Hartley (Who Can't Help Flying High and Falling in Deep) (Allen & Unwin, \$15.95, ISBN 1741147115)

Narelle Oliver: Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie (Omnibus Books, \$27.95, ISBN 1862915903)

Steve Tolbert: Dreaming Australia (Ginninderra Press, \$20, ISBN 1740272889)

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S current policy on cultural diversity, 'Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity', which is due to be revised later in 2006, opens with a foreword by John Howard in which he "reaffirms the government's commitment to promoting diversity, understanding and tolerance in all areas of endeavour". No matter how frequently discourses of tolerance and respect for difference circulate in government policy and elsewhere, however, they continue to be underpinned by an assimilation agenda. Media representations, at least, encourage Australians to demonise individuals according to their race, especially since the global war on terror, and more locally in incidents like the Cronulla riots. The Howard Government's anti-terror laws and policy of mandatory detention uphold these popularly held conceptions, which they can use as leverage to justify treating asylum seekers outside of mainstream legal protocols.

There is, however, a newly emerging body of Australian literature that addresses these issues and actively dissents against this policy of mandatory detention. This literature is written for and by children, including young adults, who represent the next generation with the ability to reverse these current wrongs. Since 2004, there have been no fewer than ten books published that represent the experiences of asylum seekers, who have been imprisoned in detention centres, and most of these texts represent children as detainees. These books range from picture books to junior and young adult fiction, and include two anthologies of fiction by young writers. I have no doubt that each of these books was produced in order to educate young readers about the experiences of detainees in order to facilitate an acceptance of cultural difference, and most of them explicitly advocate against mandatory detention. Unsurprisingly, however, there are ideological contradictions in most of these books that echo potentially unavoidable problems inherent in multiculturalism in Australia in general; the promotion of cultural diversity and a respect for difference is undermined by a seemingly unshakeable impulse to view the other as the 'same as me'. While emphasising the differences of others too much may undermine the basis of unity and solidarity, I still believe, following Levinas, that it is crucial to approach the other with an acceptance of his or her radical difference in order to resist an ideology of assimilation.

Insofar as all literature is both a product of and impacts upon the culture in which it is produced and consumed, children's literature, in particular, represents an important area in which ideologies are affirmed and contested, in part because it is understood to be actively engaged in the process of socialising children. In 'Always Facing the Issues - Preoccupations in Australian Children's Literature', John Stephens, one of the foremost authorities on children's literature in Australia, claims that:

Children's literature is a crucial site on which to examine the processes of cultural production, in that it characteristically seeks to mediate social change. In Australia, that mediation is, broadly, from within an ideology of liberal conformism. It acts as a point of resistance to certain social tendencies... it seeks constructive responses to others... and it promotes (socially hegemonic) forms of social development, such as multiculturalism or redefinitions of gender.

All three of these tendencies are apparent in detention-centre narratives in literature for children: all these books resist a social tendency to demonise racialised (predominantly Afghan) others; most books posit constructive responses to mandatory detention; and, in doing so, they promote and engage critically with multiculturalism.

One way to engage critically with multiculturalism is to acknowledge that there are material restrictions that limit the agency, including publishing possibilities, of refugees and asylum seekers, and then to create a space in which their stories can exist. Such stories can be found in four anthologies facilitated by prominent Australian activists. *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres* (2003), includes a section that focuses on writing by children. Similarly, in *Another Country* (2004), two pages of 14-year-old Mina's diary succinctly express her agony of waiting to hear if temporary protection will be granted to her and to other detainees she sees suffering around her. Detention-centre narratives by young writers are more fully expressed in *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11-20 Years* (2004) and *No Place Like Home: Australian Stories by Young Writers Aged 8-21 Years* (2005), anthologies in which young people were invited either to write about their own experiences or to interview someone and then to reconstruct the interview into either a story or an essay.

These final two anthologies are the result of nationwide schools competitions run in 2002 and 2004 by Australians Against Racism Inc., "a creative grassroots human rights and social justice organisation" established by Eva Sallis and Mariana Hardwick. Each anthology contains ten stories that include detention-centre experiences, and most of them follow a linear narrative structure that moves from the so-called 'push factors' (the conditions that led to fleeing one's home), through the journey to Australia, to an acknowledgement and description of detention-centre experiences. These stories powerfully attest to the horrific conditions under which people lived in their home countries, the harrowing journeys they barely survived, and then the deflating experience of being imprisoned rather than liberated once they reached Australia.

Furthermore, these narratives function as pleas to Australians to be compassionate and accepting of asylum seekers. Contesting John Howard's infamous statement in relation to the manufactured 'children overboard' situation, in which he said, "I don't want people like that in Australia", these stories highlight the strength of character of refugees. Indeed, many of these narratives conclude with a brief testimonial that summarises what each refugee will do in order to be a 'good' Australian, and it is in these testimonials that the influence of the Howard Government's ideology of assimilation is most apparent. That many narratives close with a description of or a promise to work or study – rather than with an acknowledgement of how their cultural differences have been welcomed, for instance – reveals the extent to which assimilation is understood as a way to achieve acceptance (which in many cases means permanent residency).

This narrative strategy of outlining the push factors, journey, and detention of asylum seekers is portrayed more extensively in several recent novels for children, including the widely read *Boy Overboard* (2002) and its sequel *Girl Underground* (2004) by Morris Gleitzman. Three other novels published in 2004 – *Walk in my Shoes*, *Soraya the Storyteller*, and *Dreaming Australia* – follow similar narrative structures to *Boy Overboard*

in that they are all focalised through Afghan children, who flee their homeland in order to seek asylum in Australia, only to find themselves in detention centres instead. This technique of focalising means that the narrative is structured around usually one character's point of view in a way that positions the reader in the place of this main character, or as one title makes clear, in the main character's shoes.

This metaphor of walking in someone else's shoes in order to understand another person's experience may be seen as a strategy to imagine and to advocate for social justice, as a tired cliché, as an ethical position, and/or as a slippery proposition (due to its very impossibility). At a recent rally held on 26 August 2006 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Tampa incident, over four hundred people – representing the 433 asylum seekers who were turned away from Australian shores – participated in a 'human installation'. Participants performed an alternative welcome by walking with colourful flags and by hanging banners that read, "Let them land" and "Let them stay". They also symbolically became the asylum seekers when they walked onto the Sandridge Bridge – as though walking onto a boat – and walked off singing, "Walk a mile in my shoes, walk a mile in my shoes. Before you throw the stones of judgement, walk a mile in my shoes". This performance placed the protesters in the position of both activist and asylum seeker, and the books I discuss above perform a similar manoeuvre.

This simultaneous positioning of the reader as both activist and asylum seeker is complicated because the reader as asylum seeker asks for compassion from the reader as a (primarily) young Australian. To occupy both these positions is to negotiate between an ethics of compassion, which is based on an ideology of homogeneity, and an ethics of responsibility, which is based on an ideology of difference. On the one hand, the reader is positioned to feel compassion for the 'other' because they share basic human needs, such as a right to safety and protection, and on the other hand, the reader is positioned to feel responsible for the wellbeing of an 'other' and to welcome the 'other' as radically different. This dynamic of seemingly contradictory ideological positions is the basis for much of the debate about the merits of multiculturalism in general.

Another way in which texts for young readers deal with multiculturalism is to make it incidental to the main plot or to normalise multiculturalism as part of everyday life. All the books I have spoken about so far take the experiences of asylum seekers, who have been detained once reaching Australia, as the primary focus of their narratives. In the past year, however, three well-known authors have published novels that represent the experiences of asylum seekers and detention as a subplot to the main narrative. In Isobelle Carmody's *Alyzon Whitestarr* (2005), Martine Murray's *The Slightly Bruised Glory of Cedar B. Hartley (Who Can't Help Flying High and Falling in Deep)* (2005), and Anna Fienberg's *Number 8* (2006), the narrative is focalised through an Anglo-Australian protagonist, who befriends, or whose life is affected by, the experiences of an asylum seeker.

As with Gleitzman's *Girl Underground*, these novels shift the focus of the narrative from the refugee to the Australian. These narratives examine how subjectivity or identity is formed in relation to an other, while subordinating themes of migration and culture to themes of personal development, which is a narrative strategy examined by critics in relation to earlier periods of Australian children's literature. Overall, the four novels listed

above examine the opposition between a citizenry who welcomes refugees and opposes mandatory detention and a government whose policy of mandatory detention seeks to deter refugees from seeking asylum in Australia. It is the form of this welcome, however, that again enacts the ideological tensions between welcoming the other as the same as me and welcoming the other as different from me. In general, the refugee against whom the protagonist's subjectivity is formed is constructed as either absent and therefore unknowable, as vulnerable and therefore requiring assistance, or as knowable because of the commonalities between them.

Another feature these books share is that each of them represents a particular form of activism. In *Girl Underground*, the two main characters sneak into a parliamentary sitting and ask the Prime Minister to release the detainees and when that does not succeed, they dig a tunnel beneath the razor wire in an attempt to free the detainees themselves. *Alyzon Whitestarr* examines the effectiveness of non-violent protest as a way of achieving social justice. When letter-writing campaigns to politicians and newspapers and demonstrations outside detention centres do not work, Alyzon's sister, the doubly named Sybl-Serenity, who is "in mourning for the world", attempts self-immolation as a response to the Australian government's policy of mandatory detention. In *The Slightly Bruised Glory of Cedar B. Hartley*, Cedar volunteers at the Fitzroy Learning Network in Melbourne, and *Number 8* uses secondary characters to enact a debate about immigration policy: on one side, Jackson's best friend Asim and his father, who live in Australia on Temporary Protection Visas, are reticent to say anything against the state; and on the other side Jackson's mother, an Australian citizen, speaks with vitriol against the Howard Government.

Seemingly paradoxically, some of the most complex representations of refugees in Australian literature for children are taking place not in novels but in picture books, such as: David Miller's *Refugees* (2004), Narelle Oliver's *Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie* (2005) and Jane Jolly's *Ali the Bold Heart* (2006). Unlike the novels and short pieces I discuss above, *Refugees* and *Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie* provide metaphoric representations of refugee and detention-centre experiences. Perhaps because these books provide (at least) a dual reading experience, their depiction of refugees opens to more nuanced analyses. Readings of picture books include an analysis of the words, the images, and the way words and images work together and/or contradict each other.

Miller represents the refugees of his book's title as two brown ducks, who are forced to find a new home after the swamp in which they live is demolished by bulldozers. The first third of the book outlines the destruction of their home, the second part follows the ducks on their journey, and in the final section the ducks are imprisoned and relocated to a new home. I shall focus my discussion on the book's final pages, the point at which the ducks find a new place to live. The words inform the reader that the ducks flew and flew until they "found another swamp", which they are not allowed to occupy because "Hidden hunters fired cruel guns". (Note how it is not the hunters who are cruel.) The ducks hide in some reeds, but are discovered, "pushed into a dark box and jolted around [on the back of a flatbed truck] for a long time", before being set free on a lake. What I have found, generally speaking, is that the reader's impulse is to differentiate the hunters, who fire from reedy borders and prevent the refugees from landing, from the rescuers, who force the ducks into a dark box with bars and find the refugees a new home.

The images, however, lend credence to a reading that merges hunter, jailer, and rescuer. The landscape from which the hidden hunters fire their cruel guns is a border of dense reeds. The image on the following page shows the profile of a duck's head poking out from similar reeds, and on the next page, the reeds are parted to reveal the head and shoulders of a yellow labrador retriever (a dog developed and bred as a hunting dog). The reeds and the hunting dog thus form a continuous signifier or symbol linking hunter and jailer, who also becomes rescuer, a point reinforced by the truck's license plate, which reads "RESCUE 1". The image on the final page of the book shows the ducks swimming on a lake bordered by dense reeds, in which nestles their prison box. While I am greatly disturbed by the final third of this book particularly, I have had many conversations with people who read this picture book as a narrative that helps readers to understand the push factors that result in people leaving their homes and to sympathise with the refugees throughout their journey. For certain, the structure follows that of many detention-centre narratives but where it differs is that it follows this structure uncritically, and therefore reads as a book that rehearses and supports border protection and mandatory detention as the necessary means to a positive end.

Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie, which represents the experiences of refugees and detention by highlighting the irrationality of detention centres and the mutual benefits that can emerge when different cultures coexist, is to my mind a much-needed antidote to *Refugees*. The story outlines the journey of three murmels, colourful slug-like creatures, who accidentally fall asleep in an arkel (boat) and wake up to find themselves in Grand Snigdom, a land of snigs, who are neutral-toned creatures as pointy and spiked as the murmels are smooth and rounded. Upon arriving on Grand Snigdom's shores, the murmels are captured and imprisoned while their boat is being fixed. In the middle of the night, a young white snig releases the murmels from prison and takes them to the forest where she feeds them sea-slug soup. The murmels find waterwoppers to eat instead and share them with the young snig. After eating the waterwoppers, they go back to prison, until the following night. This routine continues for three evenings, until they fall asleep rather than going back to the prison, which is how the Boss Snig finds them. The young snig shows her father, the Boss Snig, that she has learned the boom-cha-cha-boogie and shares a waterwopper with him. The book ends with the murmels staying in Grand Snigdom, "And Grand Snigdom has never been quite the same. It took the Boss Snig five weeks and three days to learn the boom-cha-cha-boogie. And he makes a very tasty waterwopper pie."

On one hand, this book reinforces a kind of 'boutique multiculturalism', in which different cultures share food and dance and therefore live happily ever after in peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, this book challenges an ideology of 'united in diversity' because, in a radical departure from an ideology of assimilation, the so-called host culture is the one that changes: the snigs become more like the murmels. The final image of the book shows how the snigs have changed to become the same skin tones as the murmels, presumably from eating waterwopper pie. The landscape itself resembles the opening image of *Murmella*, a verdant island on which murmels fish, have picnics, play music, grow corn, and frolic. The barren, cacti landscape of Grand Snigdom is now fertile, and the detention centre has been renovated into a playground.

At a time and in a place in which many people see multiculturalism as a failed project, Australian literature for children may be seen as a source from which dissident voices emerge. The texts I discuss above represent and criticise a multicultural Australia that does not welcome radical difference, that provides razor wire instead of asylum. In these narratives, young readers learn about the terror of the Taliban, the trauma of journeys in overcrowded boats, and the agonising experience of detention. While some of these books may not entirely succeed in offering ways in which a respect for radical difference might be achieved, the fact that they portray children criticising the Prime Minister face-to-face and detention centres transforming into playgrounds, for example, offers at least a vague hope that future generations of Australians will be more open to welcoming and learning from refugees than the current government.

Debra Dudek is a Research Fellow at Deakin University, where she works collaboratively on an ARC-funded project entitled 'Building Cultural Citizenship: Multiculturalism and Children's Literature'.

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