

Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young are giving "a voice to the voiceless" and, in England, Year 4 tries to put themselves in other children's shoes after reading

The Refugee Diaries

Many people have an opinion on immigration. Few have any direct knowledge of either the conditions which drive asylum seekers or of the experiences of refugee immigrants. Stories emerge in newspapers which jolt us into the realisation that immigrant children can be subjected to horrific treatment here, in our name, but such coverage is submerged in more strident tales of 'swamping' and 'scrounging'. Who will speak for these children? Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young have done just that by producing four books about four real children from dangerous places. The books follow the journeys undertaken by Gervelie, escaping from the war in the Republic of Congo, Hamzat who stepped on a landmine in Chechnya, Mohammed, an Iraqi Kurd who saw his parents beaten and Meltem, from Eastern Turkey, whose fearful experiences are compounded by her treatment in Yarl's Wood Detention Centre. If this suggests that these books are depressing, that is not the effect they have, essentially because the subjects of these stories have such spirit and hope. These four children have earned the respect of young readers in this country.

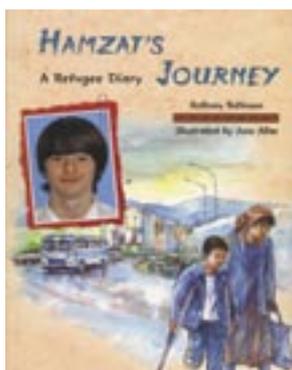
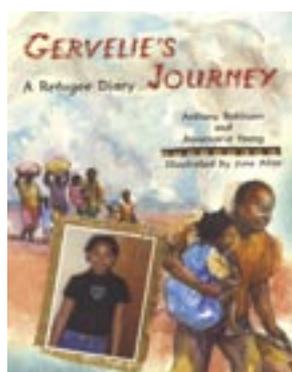
It is clear that the children have been treated with great skill by Anthony Robinson. His aim is "to give a voice to the voiceless", speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. He explains that he wanted the books to be non-fiction: true stories about real children, every fact checked, in the hope that they help our children to 'filter' the information about immigrants that they will be exposed to later. He wants them to be able to question and challenge careless assumptions. "These children," he says, "are just children," and he has worked to give us the child's real voice, supported by real photos and sensitive illustrations.

Asked to explain the process by which he obtains these stories, he demonstrates that the books come at the end of a long, intensive and delicate interaction. Annemarie contacted the Refugee Council, the Red Cross and a school in east London. The Red Cross put them in touch with Gervelie and her father, a family who wished to tell their story. Anthony had prepared a list of questions and he at once perceived that Gervelie was very articulate. Her father was a measured, cultured man and Anthony indicated his admiration for the relaxed way the father handled the powerful feelings which inevitably still affected the relationship. For all the stories, care had to be taken about what could be made public and he had to choose what was important. "You can't just

walk into people's lives," he says. Trust must be established as many of the refugees still live in fear. Mohammed, only eight, was traumatized by the events he had witnessed and Anthony had to gently draw him out. Meltem's story contains details that could not be part of the book. Anthony believes children can take tough facts but he is writing for younger children (upper primary and lower secondary) so he takes that into account.

Such work must carry an emotional burden and Anthony says it does affect him but he is able to respond as a professional writer. In a paper for IBBY, the success of the 'voice' which emerges is partly explained when he describes how he interviews and re-interviews, recording his sessions. The recordings are transcribed and he works on the "essence of their stories" distilled from the thousands of words, "using the rhythm of their voices, their idiosyncratic phrases and words. I carefully checked the first draft against the recordings and the draft was then checked by the child, to ensure that I had got the facts right and that they were happy I had captured their unique voices." Thus the books give us an authentic picture of the child's experiences.

Annemarie organises workshops which directly confront children in this country with the situation of child refugees. She likes to have half a day during which she will introduce the books and use a role play adapted from Amnesty International, called *Time to Flee*. The children are put in groups and offered a scenario and some information. *The uncle and the father have been threatened. The road blocks are going up. The military are beginning to search the street. They have ten minutes.* The question is put to them: what would you do if your family were in danger? Now the problem is theirs. They must leave home, make their escape and gain admittance to a safe country. In one session, Annemarie says two of the groups took things like guns. Only one group thought to take photographs and the crucial letter, proving where they had lived and the threats which had prompted their flight. The members of the workshop class are personally brought face to face with the problems when Annemarie or a teacher then becomes the Immigration Officer. Asked to prove what happened to them, they are dismayed when it becomes clear that, despite what has happened to them, the authorities are only interested in proof. She recalls a real situation when Gervelie described how shocked she was when the Immigration Officer called her father a liar. They then discuss what has just happened,



how they felt when they had put themselves into the shoes of an asylum seeker. They finally return to the books, only this time they have the insights gained from the role play.

Last year, Gervelie, Hamzat and Mohammed met for the first time and were recorded for a Woman's Hour interview. Listening to them, one understands why Anthony and Annemarie are so impressed with what they have made of their lives. They are confident, hopeful and energetic. They sound like typical teenagers, mildly embarrassed by the publicity – but glad others can read their stories. As one of them says, "It gives the person a different point of view about refugees."

The authors do not ask for anything more. Anthony's next book is about street children in Guatemala, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Romania and Annemarie is helping to organise a book festival for Palestinian children which will bring together children's authors and teachers. The refugee series has been a "profound experience" for them but it is not over. They hope to go on giving a "voice to the voiceless".

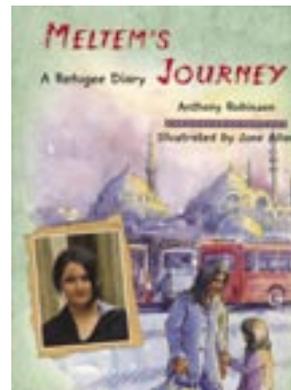
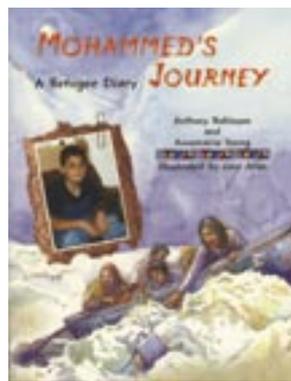
Pat and Susanna Thomson

These powerful books are intended for children so how do they work in the classroom?

How do you encourage children to realise they are 'global citizens'? How do you safely show them that there are children who have faced and survived peril? How do you show children that there are powerful reasons, not necessarily economic ones, why people leave their homes and countries and settle instead in Britain, where they may not speak the language and introductions are often hostile?

Using the *Journey* books with my class of 8 and 9 year olds was fascinating. I was impressed by the children's empathy with the children in the books. We read *Hamzat's Journey*, *Gervelie's Journey* and *Muhammed's Journey*, initially in small groups with an adult to lead the discussion. Each small group then shared a book and posed questions of their own.

When we came together as a class to share responses to the books, more than one group said that they were shocked at what happened to the children because "it was real" and they "didn't usually read books where bad things happened" particularly in picture books. One boy who spends a lot of time playing computer war games couldn't fully understand that Hamzat had been injured by the landmine. I remember asking him, in surprise, what he thought bombs did, and then realised that he had no real idea of the implication. There was a genuine appreciation from the class for



their own area and the relative safety that they live in compared to where the children in the books had come from.

The children were very taken with the illustrations – again reality seemed important to them, particularly appreciating the inclusion of photographs. One group wondered why the whole book wasn't illustrated by photos and there was quite a heated discussion about how the refugees couldn't be expected to photograph themselves running away from soldiers so the illustrator had to interpret the story. The maps also fascinated the pupils and they were amazed at how far the children had travelled, and under such awful circumstances.

The books engendered genuine discussion, questioning and research, but at each child's own level. After meeting Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young, I adapted an exercise Annemarie does with school groups, and gave the children five minutes to make a list of things to pack before we 'fled our homes'. Of course pets and toys were on most lists but when the children then worked

in groups to finalise a list there was much discussion about the problem of batteries running down and electrical adapters being needed in different countries. I was interested at how many took warm clothes, money and passports with them. "We can change money when we get to the new country," one boy explained. "It makes us look serious." "We need passports to prove who we are," said another.

I felt that they had realised that what Gervelie, Muhammed and Hamzat had gone through was not a fictional adventure but a serious, frightening, life-changing event, but the class had been able to experience this in a safe, thought-provoking way. An eleven year old who also read *Gervelie's Journey* commented: "Very sad how she loses her family and moves away from her Mum, but it has a happy ending."

Those happy endings are a testimony to the strength and determination of Muhammed, Hamzat and Gervelie, and also allow younger readers to access very real and frightening situations in a way that allows them to think, and perhaps, in the future, voice their support for children who have no say in their world.

Susanna Thomson

The Refugee Diaries are published by Frances Lincoln, written by Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young and illustrated by June Allan.

Gervelie's Journey ISBN: 978-1847800046 hb £11.99

Hamzat's Journey ISBN: 978-1847800305 hb £11.99

Mohammed's Journey ISBN: 978-1847802095 pb £6.99

Meltem's Journey ISBN: 978-1847800312 pb £6.99

[If you are interested in a workshop for your school, contact Annemarie Young at annemarie.young@ntlworld.com, Tel: 01223 565955. She runs workshops from a minimum of one hour up to half a day, for classes from Year 4 to Year 8.]