



Migrants

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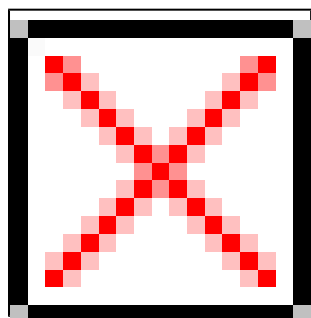
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5



This hauntingly beautiful picturebook depicts a group of creatures making a difficult journey across an almost featureless landscape. The dark background throws their jewel-bright presence into sharp relief, putting them centre-stage and focusing our attention on their predicament. There is no text to tell us who they are or where they're going, although we immediately start wondering. But answers on these dreamlike pages shift and change, intriguing us by their ambiguity.

The diversity of the group is striking. More than thirty species of animals and birds from different habitats and continents are depicted. Every creature walks upright, each is dressed in distinctive items of human clothing and all are portrayed with dignity and respect. Children are cared for by adults who cannot be their parents, and a sense of mutual attention and support is obvious.

Carrying pots, babies and bundles, the travellers stop only to share food in a forest of bare-boned trees, or sleep in a clearing marked by strange red saplings. Trailing them comes Death, in the form of a childlike skeleton swathed in a floral cloak. Looking small and oddly vulnerable, Death is accompanied by a large blue ibis, but the pair remain peripheral until the travellers board a boat which capsizes in rough seas. A rabbit is washed up, lifeless, on the beach, and is cradled by Death and the ibis in a powerful image that speaks of care and peace, as well as loss.

We bring our own experiences to this book, and some readers may find this image challenging. But many children welcome opportunities to talk about things that matter, and do so with unexpected insight. As one young reader recently

observed, 'Death is kind to the rabbit, because it stops it suffering.'

The rabbit is not the only creature missing from the final spreads. The migrants have arrived, but where, and at what cost? The nature of this place is uncertain, and only their children are eager to embrace its possibilities. There is hope within this book, but it has been hard won through courage, determination and compassion, and must be nurtured if it is to grow.

Peruvian-born Issa Watanabe creates her artwork slowly, avoiding digital interventions and becoming deeply involved with her projects, and this intensity of connection is communicated in her work. There's a timeless sense of significance about these otherworldly spreads. Packed with emotion and reminding us of things once known and half-remembered, they resemble frames from a film whose complex whole we cannot see. They do not tell us what to think, or promote a political viewpoint - but they do urge us to feel, imagine and respond. This book has many meanings and every reader's experience will be different. But its fundamental message may be that we are all connected, and every individual counts.

'I think this book is about empathy' said Watanabe in a recent interview for **Gecko Press**. 'Being moved by a character in the story helps us empathise with human beings who are going through such a challenging experience.' Watanabe and her family have their own stories of migration, but the direct stimulus for this picturebook came from Magnus Wennman's photographs of Syrian children sleeping in a forest. 'The looks on those children's faces' moved me deeply,' Watanabe said. 'I did the only thing I could do: draw.' As her poet father, Jose Watanabe, wrote: 'When faced with horror, all I can do is allow myself this silent poem.' And a silent picturebook can be more eloquent than words.

Migrants demands and deserves our attention, and readers of all ages will be moved by its beauty, emotional impact and relevance.

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