



BIBLIOTEKARZ PODLASKI  
2/2020 (XLVII)  
<https://doi.org/10.36770/bp.477>  
ISSN 1640-7806 (druk) ISSN 2544-8900 (online)  
<http://bibliotekarzpodlaski.pl>



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## **Uprooted by war: The child refugee crisis in the wordless book *La Valigia* by Angelo Ruta**

**Abstract:** Humanity is currently facing the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Children find themselves both directly and indirectly affected by this crisis. They are faced with making sense of complex issues and their diverse repercussions. For example, the distinct difference between a refugee whose life is at risk and a migrant seeking to improve their economic situation by moving to another rich country with prospects, is of particular importance for the objective study of the reasons and dimensions of the refugee crisis. In this context, this article explores the wordless book “La Valigia” by Angelo Ruta, where the construction of the meaning is dependent entirely on carefully sequenced images. The book depicts how a child of the war zone remembers and dreams while facing the chaos of having been chased by bombs and guns. This is the story of a sweet dream; dream that, despite the chaotic environment of reality, was kept alive inside a large suitcase. In this ‘silent’ book, which was a finalist of the Gianni De Conno Award

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(Silent Book Contest 2018), the vacuum created by the lack of words strengthens the meaning and allows it to exist in another form. At the same time, this style of book is changing the ways we understand and approach literature.

**Key words:** silent/wordless picture book, refugee, reader-response theory, visual narration.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It probably comes as no surprise that, over the last few years, the ideology of protectionism on the part of parents, educators, etc. intensifies the marginalization of children by limiting their opportunities to face the real weight of reality. In addition, in a memorable phrase, the poet T. S. Eliot<sup>2</sup> reminds us that "*human kind cannot bear very much reality*", and it is precisely this intolerance that is regurgitated by those who are afraid of being offended by children.

As a matter of fact, of the approximately 50 million uprooted children, 28 million have been pushed to leave their homeland because of the constant danger that war entails, inside and outside borders, while another 22 million children who are international migrants have left their homes for other reasons, such as extreme poverty or gang violence. Children are not responsible for bullets and bombs, persecution, crime or low economic opportunities,

<sup>1</sup> "This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project "Strengthening Human Resources Research Potential via Doctorate Research" – 2nd Cycle (MIS-5000432), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY)".



Operational Programme  
Human Resources Development,  
Education and Lifelong Learning  
Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Orlando: Harcourt Brace International, US, 1974 [1941].

but they are the first to be hit by war, conflict and poverty<sup>3</sup>. Those children are affected by migration in at least three ways: some have the 'luck' to travel with their families; others alone - paying a terrible emotional and social cost, sometimes including that of their lives-; or they are left behind in war zones while their parents are seeking a better life for their family<sup>4</sup>.

The interpretation and understanding of the world and the 'other' is undoubtedly an issue that emerges through the reading experience. A story enables the reader to read about different cultural groups, communicates a set of emotions to him/her and, most importantly, it acts as a communication bridge with the unknown. It is very important, therefore, to mention that Children's Literature has, among other things, an ideological function. The way that an image of an 'other' child will be depicted, its characteristics and the development of the plot, reveal ideological assumptions concerning, in particular, in our paper the notion of the refugee<sup>5</sup>. Hopefully, nowadays, it seems that the 'protective pedestal' in children's stories has collapsed. Children do really need readings that provide them with an empathetic reading experience by capturing their stories through the 'lens' of reality. Children ought to be given the opportunity and space to cope with reality, and to dream of an alternative future for the world they live in. We have to argue with Arizpe, Colomer & Martínez-Róldan<sup>6</sup> that, unlike usual books with words and written in one language, wordless books have the strength to overcome the language or culture barrier and in the way they foster encounters among different cultures. These are in fact books that make it easier to work with special groups, as is the case with refugee children, since they depict common scenes of their harsh reality.

Humanity is currently facing the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Children find themselves in a particular situation: they may be personally caught up in the crisis, may develop friendships with children who have been affected by it, and may be confronted with news of the crisis and

<sup>3</sup> From Unicef's Records.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> M. A. Wham, J. Barnhart & G. Cook, *Enhancing multicultural awareness through storybook reading experience*, "Journal of Research and Development in Education", 30 (1), 1996, pp. 1-9.

<sup>6</sup> E. Arizpe, T. Colomer, & C. Martínez-Roldán, *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives*, London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

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need to therefore somehow make sense of it. In all cases, children are required to face the challenge of making sense of difficult social issues. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the visual representation of the child refugee crisis in the wordless book *La Valigia* by Angelo Ruta. The content, characters, images and presentation of the book are analysed sequentially to reveal the various ways that the reader may interpret images based on their personal experience. Doing so mirrors the experience and process of a child as they would 'read' a wordless book. The proposed impact and result of this study is therefore to explore the wordless book as a means of expression and communication that exposes children to difficult topics. The wordless book may also serve as a means to equip children with tools to understand and to face these challenges.

### **What is a wordless picture book?**

The use of words is often considered as a requirement for a 'voice' and therefore the telling of a story. But what precisely is a book without words? A wordless book (silent book) tells a story in a sequence of images. It belongs to the wider space of the illustrated children's book and is a special category of books that have their own independence and their own dynamics. Wordless books rely primarily on visual language, sometimes including a few words, where images "speak", and the reader narrates what he/she understands by interpreting them. As such, the whole process of information acquisition takes place through the process of viewing and decoding images. That is why it has been proposed, from time to time, to replace the term reader with that of observer ("beholder")<sup>7</sup>. The above distinction may be justified since the reader's notion is more closely related to the verbal text and implies knowledge of the verbal codes, while the observer's notion indicates in turn the knowledge of decoding the visual images<sup>8</sup>. Because images in a book have a narrative function – which is by no means inferior to their aesthetic function – the "observer" gains an active position as they are called on to discover "deeper meanings" and link them together.

<sup>7</sup> J. Doonan, *Looking at pictures in picture books*, Stroud–Gloucester: Thimble Press, 1993, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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Until recently, the reading of a visual narrative had been established in the consciousness of the world as a simple and unambiguous process, since it was usually argued that reading an image is nothing more than a mere process of recognizing objects, and therefore we all see the same things when we look at images, without the need for some specialized knowledge to understand them<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, Nodelman<sup>10</sup>, in his book *Words about Pictures*, argues that images are no more specific and less abstract than words. Although the image, at first glance, is realistic and plausible, it actually contains deduction elements and belongs to a code system acquired by learning visual conventions. Images, like words, require learning their "language" so that the reader can read them and derive meaning<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, images, in a similar way to words, are symbolic representations. Their decoding and their meaning presupposes specific skills, experiences, and reading strategies which the implied reader<sup>12</sup> is called upon to have conquered. The viewer in possession of this knowledge will be able to better understand the image and at the same time its obscure sides, because "*illustrators of wordless books depend on the ability of the images to suggest information that they do not actually offer*"<sup>13</sup>.

### **A Social-Semiotic perspective of the book *La Valigia***

In our inquiry we understand visual literacy as "*a way of deepening understanding and critical appreciation through the viewer's active engagement in the interpretative process*"<sup>14</sup>. Kress & Van Leeuwen<sup>15</sup> argue that any visual image, like language, can be considered as a point system. Their approach serves as a useful framework for understanding visual literacy. Every image

<sup>9</sup> P. Nodelman, *Words about pictures: The narrative art of children's picture books*, Athens–London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988, pp. 29-30; S. Oikonomidou, *The child behind words. The implied reader of children's books* (in Greek), Athens: Gutenberg, 2016, p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> P. Nodelman, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> M. Nikolajeva, & C. Scott, *How Picturebooks Work*, New York–London: Garland Publishing, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> W. Iser, *The implied reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, MD, 1974.

<sup>13</sup> P. Nodelman, op. cit., pp. 67-72.

<sup>14</sup> E. Arizpe, T. Colomer, & C. Martínez-Roldán, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> G. Kress, & T. Van Leeuwen, *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*, London: Routledge, 1996.

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fulfills three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. At the first level, the visual mode depicts how viewers perceive "*the world around and inside them*"<sup>16</sup>. The second concerns the type of relationship that is created between the viewer and the depicted objects and/or persons. Dimensions such as the presence/absence of eye-contact, distance and viewing angle of the scene indicate the intended social attitude of the viewer toward the subject. The third relates to the way in which the compositional arrangements of visual elements (color, lines, etc.) are able to form "*a meaningful whole*"<sup>17</sup>.

I have chosen one wordless book to highlight how the literature discusses the factors that lead to migration, as well the implication for those who migrate out of necessity. The choice of the above book was not accidental. *La Valigia* is a special case of a book which manages 'exiled' memories through a narrative carried entirely by images. The author-illustrator, Angelo Ruta, in this powerful portrayal of loss -or maybe, for others, survival, has gathered together a strong frame in order to reach our destination.

First of all, the size of the book is believed to be among the fundamental elements that define the reader's relationship between his/her own space and the plastic space of the image. In our case, the reader, scrolling through half a meter and above-wide images, feels that he/she is in front of the events, while the large size of the book allows him/her to observe the details with much attention.

In our book, though wordless, we find textual sources of information on the last pages, which concern the essence of the book without words and the biographical note of the author. Furthermore, on the back cover there are two rows of written text concerning the theme of the book, and on the front cover the name of the author, the logo of the publisher and the title. As Beckett suggests, the title "*may provide the only key to unlocking the story, while in less ambiguous narratives, it may merely corroborate the reader's interpretations of the pictures*"<sup>18</sup>. As a result, particularly in a wordless book where the textual information is in a way absent, the meaning of the title may influence the process of meaning con-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> S. Beckett, *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 117.

struction<sup>19</sup>. Regarding the title of the book, we can say that it 'guides' the reader from the very start. *La Valigia*, in English *The suitcase*, expresses the symbol of collective memory of its family; more precisely, it acts as a metaphor for the 'exiled' memory. At the same time, looking at the front cover, we observe a suitcase surrounded by rose petals; our first hypothesis can be that the image implies a metaphorical carriage, probably emotional. Also, an image of a suitcase expresses what Georg Lukács<sup>20</sup> called "*transcendental homelessness*", a philosophical term described as "*the urge to be at home everywhere*".

The story opens with one image in which we can see a half-opened suitcase on a pile of rocks. Then, by turning the page, we observe two double-spreads that feature two images which present a sequence. In the first, the suitcase is depicted a little more open, from where we can see the figure of a child looking tentatively out, and in the second, it is shown that the child has come out of the suitcase and is pulling it towards him. Initially, what prevents the reader's gaze from identifying with the character is the round frame of the picture. The circle places a boundary around the refugee child and encompasses the reader's eyes to peek out at the scene.

Within this process there is a basic element that we cannot ignore; the image of the main character. The question of the study of literary characters is compelling as they "*activate identification mechanisms, represent patterns to imitate or avoid, talk about human nature, build emotional bonds with the reader, and some of them continue to be a reference point for readers in their later adult life*"<sup>21</sup>. In particular, the characters of silent books have an intrinsic value: they are open constructions that are subject to the reader's ability to give them specific characteristics. Therefore, it is suggested to the reader to use what is depicted for them in the text, and thus to construct them by connecting them with his/her pre-existing knowledge of the concept of the individual. It is very important to mention that in books without words great emphasis is given

<sup>19</sup> I would also like to mention that the same function may also have a dedication. In our book we can read: "*To who goes to bed, at night, under sheets of water and wind. And after all can dream*".

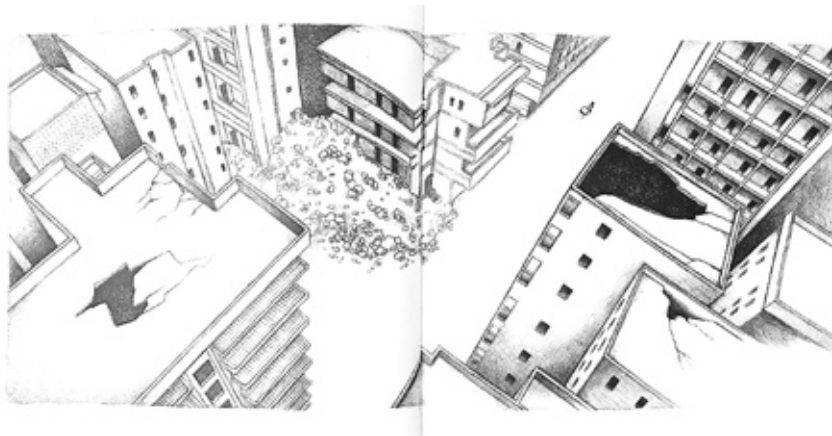
<sup>20</sup> G. Lukács, *The theory of the novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, translated by A. Bostock, Cambridge: MIT Press, Mass., United States, 1984 [1920], pp. 29, 41.

<sup>21</sup> S. Gavriilidou, *The Difficult Profession of the Classical Hero* (in Greek), Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2008, p. 9.

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to the interpretive process of the reader. His/Her responsibility for the narrative result is great, that is, how he/she will 'translate' the present characters and what name he/she will give them. Readers' names, if the characters are anonymous, become important because they have been chosen by readers, as they function in some way as co-authors of the story. This means that the reader is being asked to enrich the personality of the character by him/herself, drawing the necessary information from the images. In concluding the above ideas, I consider that the anonymity of the character and his/her appearance provide a crossroad of meanings, including the universal idea of the child, and allow readers, especially refugee children, to identify with them.

In the next two spreads, the perspective is omniscient, from above. The reader, as if they were a bird ("*bird's eye view*"), is placed by the illustrator in order to get a deeper insight into the surroundings of the story. So far we can only assume that the child is in an almost completely destroyed house; we notice that the floor has fallen in. As we turn the page, we can see a panoramic view of a destroyed town, and in the top right-hand corner the small size of a figure that is leaving the town. The small size of the character defines his small status and power in the book; he is all alone in this big destroyed city. In a similar way, the large size of the suitcase, as opposed to that of the character's, indicates the weight that he is forced to lift upon leaving.



On the next pages we become eyewitnesses of the child's journey with the suitcase. No man is in sight, only images of destruction. Theoretically, the reader still makes assumptions about what happened. Given the absence of words, the reader becomes a participant in the creation of meaning. Each individual in-



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interprets the narrative with his/her own voice. One can assume that this book is about an earthquake, or that is about the destructive consequences of war. The reader's questions will be answered in the next double-page spread, where the child is depicted behind a shot up car in order not to be seen by the soldiers. In this scene, Ruta has not changed the perspective of his image; we see the scene as external observers, and the story is presented to us from a safe distance. There is war, and as we turn the page we are faced with the image of the child lying on the suitcase, and over it a flock of ravens which are threateningly approaching him. The raven is a symbol of ancient times. Many people, mainly in Western societies, associate the image of the raven with the underworld and death. This interpretation is in part related to the fact that the raven eats carcasses. But even more, the raven 'smells' death, and a flock of them gathers near a creature that is about to die. Another reason why people perceive them as harboring superstition is that their dark color has often been associated with funerals. Black is definitely the color of mourning and loss. Furthermore, in fairytales and movies we are presented with bad characters that can be easily recognized by their black appearance, for example black-dressed witches or the black big bad wolf. More specifically, Gombrich<sup>22</sup> notes that: "*what we see is not just given, but is the product of past experience and future expectations*". With the dynamic metaphor of the notion of the raven in our 'cultural baggage', we may assume that the child is dead. But our assumptions will be reversed, as on the following pages we see that the child is still alive. It is raining. In the sky there are many war planes. Below, the child is trying to protect himself by placing his suitcase over his head.



<sup>22</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, Edinburgh: Phaidon, 1972, pp. 28-29.

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On the last double-spread the circle frame is used again. We see him touching his back on the suitcase; there is nothing and no one to stand beside him. In the next image, the perspective has been totally changed. The illustrator uses an over-the-shoulder-shot, as the character has decided to open the suitcase. Angelo Ruta has positioned us as if we are the eyes of the child; at this glimpse of time we become one with the 'other'. We see from his eyes the contents of his suitcase. Inside the suitcase there are no clothes, no objects, only memories from a happy life. His suitcase stands for past events; it is filled with delightful memories of his home, before the war. Now we understand the burden of pressure that he had chosen to put on his shoulders during his departure. The child chooses to dive into his dreamy past. It is time to quit and live only as a lived past; there is no place for him outside the suitcase. He gets in, and the suitcase closes forever.



Ruta's final image of the 'closed suitcase' reveals much about the author's ideological stance toward the main theme of the book, the refugee child. The ending of the story is open to many interpretations; there is no monopoly on truth. Some may see the end as a new start. On the back cover we can read this: *"Even when everything seems to collapse and crush, in a sweet dream you can find the hope that saves"*, so the suitcase can be the medium that helps him survive, while others can perceive the ending as a portrayal of cruel reality; there is nowhere to go, he is helpless, he will be lost forever with his memories.

One last aspect of the visual language of the text that we have not yet discussed is the choice of color. Both the absence and presence of color contribute to the composition of the book's atmosphere<sup>23</sup>. The black and white design -often linked with cartoon illustrations- of *La Valigia* is shown suitable for carrying the detailed descriptions of the character's feelings and the destructive scene of the action. On the one hand, "*Black is nothing without potential. A dead end after the death of the sun, an eternal silence, without even the hope of a future*", noted the famous artist Vasily Kandinsky<sup>24</sup>. But on the other hand, when the white color prevails over the black, it symbolizes the purity of the soul, supreme faith, hope and transparency.

As we can conclude, in a wordless book we may find infinite possibilities for image representation. For this reason, it is up to the reader to interpret each sign. It is certain, however, that the reader takes on a co-author role and that the overall reading process requires his/her intellectual activity, previous experiences from life, cultural knowledge, among others, that help him/her construct the meaning of the story.

### Final thoughts

Children of the 21st century face new challenges due to ongoing social change. So do their books. The role of Children's Literature is not, of course, to 'wrap them up in cotton wool', but rather to introduce them to real life situations and provide them with the necessary 'tools' in order to be encouraged to develop their social awareness. Angelo Ruta has succeeded with his masterful pen to depict with social sensitivity what it means to be a refugee. To this end, he constructed a small literary hero to help his readers understand the phenomenon of forced displacement. The way in which the reality of the refugee problem is transmitted through the dense meaning of its images undoubtedly promotes a number of issues around human rights. We realize then that our smallest, and, at the same time, our greatest task is to narrate to our children stories about other children, to enable them to think critically about refugees as an ongoing issue that affects every person on this planet. As our detailed interpretation of *La Valigia* has shown, its images have a lot to say even if they

<sup>23</sup> P. Nodelman, op. cit., pp. 67-72.

<sup>24</sup> V. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, Canada: Dover Publications, 1977 [1914].

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are silent. As Yannicopoulou<sup>25</sup> aptly comments: "*In a culture where the word "see" has become synonymous with the word "understand" [...] of particular interest is no longer the answer to the question "Who sees?" but "Who understands the Other?"*".

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<sup>25</sup> A. Yannicopoulou, *Direct and Indirect Ideological Messages within the Intercultural Illustrated Book* (in Greek), "Keimena", 9: 2009, p. 8.

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