

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The transformative power of wordless picture books in multilingual and multicultural contexts

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‘A BRIDGE OF CHILDREN’S BOOKS’

Building bridges with children’s books through an international network of volunteers is a core tenet of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), an NGO dedicated to bringing books and young people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds together to foster international understanding. IBBY also creates bridges between people in crisis situations, from its beginnings in war-devastated Germany in the aftermath of the National Socialist dictatorship and the Second World War to the ongoing migrant crisis today in Lampedusa, Italy’s southernmost island. What connects these two very different places and times is the desire and determination of individuals to aid and support children who are victims of conflict and upheaval by providing them with the opportunity to have access to books with high literary and artistic standards, exposure to new and different ideas and some respite from trauma. This chapter will focus on the Silent Books project, a transnational initiative involving wordless picturebooks, coordinated by IBBY Italia since 2012, in its response to aiding migrant children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds for whom the Reception Centre on the island of Lampedusa is a temporary home.

To fully appreciate and contextualize the aims and activities of the IBBY children’s Silent Books project on Lampedusa and beyond, we must first briefly cast back to October 1945 when German Jewish writer and journalist Jella Lepman (1891–1970) returned to a defeated and occupied Germany from Britain, where she had been living in exile since 1936. This was at the behest of the American military government, who wished Lepman to act as an advisor on the cultural and educational needs of women and children in the US-occupied zone. Realizing quite quickly that it would be impossible to look after the needs of both, Lepman focused her attention on the desperate plight of Germany’s *Trümmerzeit* children, many of them orphaned, malnourished and with little to distract them from the despair and devastation around them. In *A Bridge of Children’s Books* ([1964] 2002), the translated English title of Lepman’s memoir, she

outlines her experiences and achievements in aiding these young victims of war. Lepman was passionate in her belief that books could transform and improve German children's lives and that after twelve years of National Socialist indoctrination, their minds needed to be opened up to new ideas through the medium of international children's literature. As there were no publishing houses or even enough paper to print books in Germany at that time, she appealed instead to publishers across the world for book donations (Metcalf, 2002: 8). In particular, Lepman requested 'heavily illustrated picturebooks' due to the language barrier for German children reading books in different languages (Lepman, [1964] 2002: 36). Within a few months, twenty countries responded, many of them former enemies of Germany, by initially donating 800 books, and by July 1946 approximately 6,000 books and children's paintings from all over the world were exhibited in an International Youth Literature exhibition in Munich, which then subsequently toured many other cities in Germany (Coghlan, 2017: 72). As outlined in *A Bridge of Children's Books*, this collection of international children's books led to the establishment of the world's first international youth literature library (the IYL) in 1949, and four years later in 1953, in the presence of representatives from fourteen different nations, Lepman founded the International Board on Books for Young People in Zurich. Today, the IYL is the world's biggest international youth literature library, and IBBY has grown to comprise eighty national sections across the world, including Italy. Since its inception, IBBY has been involved in many international children's book projects and has supported children in crisis situations triggered by conflict, natural disasters or civil disorder in different parts of the world. As outlined in the following section, Jella Lepman's achievements regarding the difficult situation for children in post-war Germany directly inspired the decisions and actions of IBBY Italia's vice-president and children's bookshop owner, Deborah Soria, decades later in her own response to the migrant crisis on the island of Lampedusa.

LAMPEDUSA AND THE SILENT BOOKS PROJECT

Lampedusa, the largest of three islands, collectively known as the Pelagie Islands, is located in the Mediterranean Sea between Tunisia and Malta and lies about 170 kilometres south of Sicily. Often described in tourist brochures as a Mediterranean paradise, this tiny island – with an indigenous population of approximately 6,500 people and a mere twenty kilometres square in size – has long been a popular destination for holidaymakers. Due to its close proximity to North Africa, Lampedusa is also regarded as the gateway or door to Europe, and is a primary entry point into the European Union for migrants fleeing conflict, hardship and poverty in the Middle East and Africa. Indeed, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and more recently in the wake of the Arab Spring revolts in 2011, Lampedusa has witnessed the arrival of thousands of people, including many children, often unaccompanied, to its shores and its name is inextricably linked to the current migrant crisis in the Mediterranean (UNICEF, 2017). Many of these migrants are survivors of perilous boat journeys on some of the most precarious sea crossings from nearby Libya and Tunisia, for whom Lampedusa is a safe transit point, before they are transferred by the Italian authorities to other destinations in Italy and further afield in Europe. Tragically, many others never reach the island and perish at sea. One such incident was the infamous Lampedusa boat disaster on 3 October 2013, when over 300 migrants sailing from Libya drowned, within view of one of the island's most popular beaches, making international headlines (BBC News, 2013).

Those who do manage to arrive safely are accommodated on a temporary basis in the Lampedusa Reception Centre, their numbers often far surpassing its maximum capacity for 800 people and their stay frequently exceeding the official requirement of four days for processing their entry into Europe, sometimes by months (ANSA, 2020). In the wake of the 2013 Lampedusa boat disaster and under the leadership of the island's former mayor Giuseppina Nicolini (2012–17), who received UNESCO's Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize in 2017 for her management of the migrant crisis, Lampedusa as a community was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, in recognition of the islanders' efforts to rescue and assist migrants 'which has clearly connected the island to the idea of peace' (Melotti, Ruspini and Marra, 2018: 219). It is within this context, when Nicolini was mayor of the island and a predominantly welcoming attitude towards migrants reigned, that Deborah Soria spearheaded the IBBY Italia children's book project on Lampedusa.

Building bridges with children's books, the cornerstone of Lepman's vision, is at the heart of this IBBY Italia project entitled 'Silent Books: From the World to Lampedusa and Back', which was officially launched at the 33rd IBBY World Congress in London in August 2012. Similar to Lepman, Soria circulated an appeal for donations of children's books from international publishers, facilitated through the worldwide network of IBBY national sections. However, whereas Lepman had asked for heavily illustrated children's books for her young Germanophone readership, Soria, conscious that the books she collected would be destined for readers of diverse cultural backgrounds in a multilingual context, specifically asked for *wordless* picturebooks, thereby circumventing the necessity to choose books written or translated in particular languages for readers with varying literacy levels. Instead, as will be discussed in more detail later on, it was envisaged that these beautifully illustrated books that transcend the linguistic boundaries imposed by the written word would engage, delight and encourage agency, empowering young readers of all backgrounds to form their own stories from the visual narrative.

In another initiative reminiscent of Lepman's aims to bring children and books together, Soria established a children's library on Lampedusa to house the first collection of international children's books, comprising 111 wordless picturebooks from twenty-three countries (Soria, 2013). This children's library, the first library on the island, was initially located in a temporary building in 2013 until the transition to its permanent address at 34, via Roma in 2017. Its doors were open to everyone on the island, both for the island's approximately 1,000 children and for the migrant children passing through, residing temporarily at the Reception Centre. Described by Soria as a 'community library that is at the same time international and local; normal and yet extraordinary' (Soria, 2019), it is open twice a week to the public on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. However, it also often hosts guided tours and school workshops in the mornings and, as reported on IBBY's website, 'The number of people present during every opening time is very high' (Soria, 2018). The library is run by volunteers, both local and international, the latter under the auspices of the 'IBBY Camps', which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Once it was established, the library's shelves soon filled with books, initially more than 400 titles in Italian, along with the first Silent Books collection. Since then, there have been three further Silent Books collections, donated from publishers worldwide on a biennial basis, with the latest in 2019 comprising sixty-seven books from sixteen different countries (IBBY, n.d.). A second set of each of these four collections is held in a documentation and research centre in Rome, the *Palazzo della Esposizioni*, to serve as

a resource for researchers, teachers and the general public. Furthermore, a third set of the collection tours the national sections of IBBY to afford young readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds throughout the world the opportunity to engage with and interpret these wordless picturebooks as well as learn about the reason for the Silent Books Project's origins on Lampedusa. Thus, in contrast to the travelling exhibition organized by Lepman in 1946 to various German cities, the Silent Books Exhibition goes far beyond Italy's national boundaries. The exhibition visited Ireland from April to June 2017 and was in the State Library of Queensland, Australia, from January to March 2021. It is also possible for IBBY national sections to purchase their own sets of Silent Books for more sustained engagement with the collections in nationwide workshops. Some of the activities with purchased sets are described in further detail below by Debbie Thomas, children's book author, who has devised and facilitated many Silent Books workshops throughout Ireland since 2017.

THE IBBY CAMPS IN LAMPEDUSA LIBRARY: ENGAGING WITH WORDLESS PICTUREBOOKS IN A MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

Deborah Soria (2018) describes the library she established as follows: 'The library in Lampedusa in the centre of the Mediterranean is something simple, a room full of books, but at the same time, it is an enormous example of a search for liberty and of creative self-determination, and the success of it can be attributed to this participation of so many people from all over the world.'

Soria's allusion to people from all over the world is in part a reference to the migrant children who visit from the Reception Centre but also to the volunteers who participated in the IBBY camps, which took place for the duration of a week every year in either March or November from 2013 up until 2019. At the time of writing, the last IBBY camp took place in November 2019, and once it is safe to do so again, Soria intended to renew this activity (Soria, 2021). The volunteers who come to this small island from other parts of Italy, as well as from the wider world, comprise librarians, storytellers, teachers and illustrators who engage in Silent Books workshops with children in the library. These workshops, which include storytelling, drama and art workshops, based on the children's responses to the purely visual narratives in the Silent Books, facilitate encounters between the indigenous and transient migrant population. For example, during the third IBBY camp in November 2014, twenty volunteers from all over Italy and Canada engaged with approximately 1,000 children and young adults in the library, both the local islanders and visitors, staying in the Reception Centre. Over forty events and workshops were organized using the Silent Books, including storytelling and illustrating (Soria, 2014). In addition, local teachers and older schoolchildren were trained by some of these volunteers to run the library and to facilitate further workshops after their departure. By 2018, a permanent team of five volunteers were working in the library, facilitating loans, workshops and guided visits (Soria, 2018). Although IBBY Camps with an organized programme of events take place at specific times each year, volunteers are welcome to turn up at other times to work in the library and with the Silent Books collection. For those wishing to volunteer with IBBY and the Silent Books project, but who find the idea of working with wordless picturebooks and with young people who speak different languages challenging, resources are available on the IBBY website. IBBY Italia put together ten tips for reading

silent books in a multilingual context, freely available on the IBBY website (see https://www.ibby.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Tips_for_SB.jpg). Likewise, Swedish drama teacher Rose-Marie Lindfors created a sixteen-page handbook, entitled *Silent Books. A Handbook on Wordless Picture Books Packed with Narrative Power* (Lindfors, 2016), with suggested activities based on a selection of the Silent Books titles chosen by IBBY Sweden, which is also available to download from the IBBY website.

Reports from individuals who participated in the IBBY camps furnish insight into how enriching these collaborative encounters in the library and with the Silent Books workshops can be. Dr Helen Limon, a researcher in the European Literacy Network, a EU-funded project, who participated in an IBBY camp in Lampedusa in November 2016, highlights the benefits of collaborative storytelling workshops based on visual literacy in the library: 'Collaborative story making speaks to the construction of literacy in its widest



FIGURE 18.1 Children of different nationalities engaged in activities in Lampedusa Library © Debbie Thomas 2018.

sense, by including the book and the empathetic potential of stories at a very early stage in the “reading” journey’ (Limon, 2017). English children’s book workshop facilitator Debbie Beeks, a volunteer with the 6th IBBY Camp, March 2018, positively appraised Lampedusa Library for its ‘gentle acts of humanising activism, a renewed definition of what a library is for and what it can do’ (Beeks, 2018) and vividly recalls activity on one particular day during her visit to the library as outlined below:

There is a steady bubble of activity throughout the day then the library bursts into life in the early evening when children arrive for the 4pm to 7pm library sessions... I witness the youngest children organising books and pulling them off the shelves and asking volunteers to read to them... Small groups of primary aged children collect pens and paper to sit together to chat and draw. Talking is everywhere. New people are embraced and people introduce themselves, within minutes books are out and stories are shared. This is what is expected in this space, by the children who use it... Amidst the political and media glare, the unspoken barriers elsewhere, this library offers a place of connection and story for children and families. A vital sanctuary and human right for host and visiting children alike.

(Beeks, 2018)

PICTUREBOOKS AND WORDLESS PICTUREBOOKS

Research to date on wordless picturebooks has been quite limited, as remarked upon by Missiou and Anagnostopoulou (2016), notwithstanding their growing popularity, particularly since the late 1990s when ‘there was a marked surge in the number of wordless picturebooks being produced’ (Beckett, 2012: 83). Most picturebook research tends to focus on interactions between text and image in multimodal picturebooks as well as on reader response to these interactions, often for educational studies on literacy (Evans, 2009, 2015; Hamer, Nodelman and Reimer, 2017; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006; Nodelman, 1988). The consensus emerging from research dedicated to wordless picturebooks is that they challenge readers used to relying on the written word to gain an understanding of images. Yet, they also contribute a democratic dimension to reading books which breaks down borders between language, cultural backgrounds, age and literacy levels (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, 2014; Beckett, 2012; Houlihan, 2015; Missiou and Agnastopoulou, 2016; McGillicuddy, 2018), where ‘[t]he dynamic between child and picturebook is fluid and subject to change’ (Styles and Noble, 2009: 120). Reading wordless picturebooks, therefore, is both challenging and empowering for the reader: challenging because these books lack textual clues; instead, the reader is obliged to follow visual clues and really *look at* (not just see) the pictures. Readers have to read and re-read the images and reflect upon them, as the narrative can be very open-ended. However, this very fluidity of meaning-making stimulates readers to be active agents in creating their individual narratives in their own language to accompany the images in these books, and ‘[a]lthough the reader’s agency is fundamental in reading any type of picturebook, it is the degree to which the reader is expected to actively engage that marks the difference between picturebooks with or without words’ (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, 2014: 36). This more active engagement can be encouraging for young readers, particularly for those who find themselves in an unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment.

French literary theorist Roland Barthes categorizes texts as either ‘readerly’ (*texte lisible*) or ‘writerly’ (*texte scriptible*) (Barthes, [1970] 1974). Readerly texts, *pace* Barthes, are didactic in nature, imposing the author’s intended meaning on the reader, who is intended to passively read or ‘consume’ the text, rather than provide any additional or alternative interpretation of their own. By contrast, writerly texts invite the reader to become active co-authors or producers, drawing on their own life experiences and imagination to interpret or ‘write’ their own narrative, thereby using the original text to fill in gaps or act as a springboard for generating plurality of meaning and multiple stories. ‘The goal of literary work... is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce, which the literary institution maintains... between its author and its reader’ (Barthes, [1970] 1974: 4). Although wordless picturebooks were not the genre of writerly texts Barthes had in mind for his thesis, his theory is clearly of relevance here in interpreting reader engagement with such polysemous texts, as argued also more recently by Sylvia Pantaleo in her examination of Australian author/illustrator Shaun Tan’s (almost) wordless picturebook *The Red Tree* published in 2003 (Pantaleo, 2015: 226–7).

Shaun Tan is also the author/illustrator of one of the best-known wordless picturebooks *The Arrival* (2006), which features in the 2013 Silent Books collection. Dealing with themes of migration, displacement, alienation and cultural adaptation in an evocative and surreal fashion, it is one of the most complex and challenging wordless picturebooks in the collection and has attracted much interest and debate. Indeed, the only academic book to date to focus exclusively on wordless picturebooks is based on a study of *The Arrival* and its reception in educational settings in four countries (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, 2014). Commenting on his preference for creating wordless picturebooks, Tan highlights how ‘[w]ords have a remarkable magnetic pull on our attention and how we interpret attendant images: in their absence an image can often have more conceptual space around it, and invite more lingering attention from a reader’ (Tan, n.d.). In line with Barthes’ theory, Tan emphasizes too ‘the reader’s role as co-creator who needs to invest meaning’ in wordless picturebooks.

Likewise, American illustrator and three times Caldecott medallist David Wiesner, whose beautifully illustrated *Flotsam* (2006) is also part of the 2013 Silent Books Collection, states that for him, ‘the reader is an integral part of the storytelling process’ (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, 2014: 35). Furthermore, he maintains that ‘it is the reader’s own voice that interprets and recounts the narrative. Readers bring their own personal responses to the book, and they guide themselves through it. Readers are made more active participants in the story’ (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, 2014: 35). In his acceptance speech for the 2007 Caldecott Medal, Wiesner describes the inspiration for *Flotsam* as ‘images, ideas, and memories floating through time and space’ (Wiesner, 2007) just like the maritime debris depicted in his book, such as the camera – a central object in the story – that floats through the seas to be washed up on different beaches throughout time. Clearly, this is a story that may have resonance with migrant readers whose associations with the sea may not be particularly positive and need to be treated in a sensitive manner. On the other hand, it may provide an opportunity to express emotions and memories about the sea in a therapeutic manner and generate alternative narratives. In this richly illustrated book, the reader is confronted with a mix of real and surreal images and unfamiliar spaces underwater. All inspire wonder

and some amusement, such as an octopus's living room complete with armchairs and reading lamps.

This story also depicts a visual timeline of children from around the world each holding a photo of the child who used the camera before them right back to the boy who used the camera in the first place. This travel back in time is indicated by the switch from colour photos to black and white, but also by the dress and hairstyles of different eras. This suggests a connection between children from different times and places, created through the medium of the photographic image. Each photo is taken of a child on a beach in the same stance using the same camera, suggesting a sharing of similar experiences and promoting universal, intercultural understanding.

As a final example, Irish illustrator Brian Fitzgerald's *Bounce Bounce* (2014), which is listed in the 2015 Silent Books Collection and winner of the 2014 International Silent Book competition at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, merits attention. This colourful and playful narrative, like the aforementioned works, is centred on the theme of a journey and connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Unlike *The Arrival* and *Flotsam*, the protagonist here is not human but a rather nervous-looking alien who, forced to leave his planet, lands in a protective bubble on a rather idyllic-looking planet, not unlike Earth, except there are no humans to be seen, only (mostly) friendly looking animals. Nonetheless, it is not until the very end of the story that the protagonist discards the bubble and truly engages with his new environment and discovers that it is full of beauty and wonder, as is evident from the delighted expression on his face. Clear parallels to the experiences of the young migrants passing through Lampedusa Library can be extrapolated here, as in the previously discussed picturebooks. Fitzgerald's use of an alien as protagonist, however, provides an aesthetic distance to safely explore and respond to the themes in his picturebook.

In the following section, children's author Debbie Thomas describes her engagement with more wordless picturebooks from the Silent Books collections in her workshops with children of many different backgrounds in various locations around Ireland.



FIGURE 18.2 Illustration from *Bounce Bounce* by Brian Fitzgerald © Carthusia Edizioni 2014. Reproduced with the permission of Carthusia Edizioni.

SILENT BOOK WORKSHOPS IN IRELAND – A PRACTITIONER’S EXPERIENCES

In 1945, Jella Lepman wrote to American diplomats from war-ravaged Germany proposing that an exhibition of children’s books should be accompanied by drawings and paintings by children from countries around Europe, saying, ‘The pictures will speak an international language and will cheer children everywhere’ (Lepman, [1964] 2002: 36). Seventy-six years later, IBBY’s Silent Books Collection reaffirms the power of pictures to speak beyond words. Using the (mostly) wordless picturebooks in workshops around Ireland, I have seen how they inspire creativity and empathy while building confidence, communication and, paradoxically, language skills. It is remarkable how the absence of words on a page can muster them in the mouth, through conversations, storytelling and well-disguised English lessons. The workshops have engaged diverse groups: recently arrived refugees and those who have lived longer in Ireland; multinational and predominately Irish school classes, and specialized groups such as young people with intellectual disabilities and vulnerable youths at risk of dropping out of school.

Beautiful to look at, emotionally uplifting and intellectually absorbing, the Silent Books can benefit people of many ages and levels of literacy, as demonstrated in workshops with two groups of Syrian refugees. The first group of ten children, aged between six and eleven, had arrived in Ireland about a year before the workshop, which took place in a village library in rural County Clare in October 2018. A parent accompanied each child. The children had attended school since their arrival, while their parents were less integrated; despite a warm welcome from locals, an understandable mixture of culture shock, shyness and trauma from the war set them apart.

The parents sat on chairs arranged in a circle around a scattering of Silent Books on the floor. I invited the children to choose a book and take it back to ‘read’ with their mother or father. Some of the children had to translate the instruction, which was deliberately vague; I wanted to see how each pair would respond to the word ‘read’. The mother of a younger child talked through the book in Arabic, pointing to each page and asking questions, like any parent reading a bedtime story. In contrast, some of the older children took the lead, guiding their parents through the book in a mixture of Arabic and English and teaching words along the way. This role reversal – the children teaching adults – was clearly empowering for the youngsters, who had picked up English much more quickly because of their age and school immersion (the adults had English lessons twice a week).

The second group, eight Syrian children aged between six and ten, had been in Ireland for three years and spoke English more fluently. They came to the workshop, also in October 2018, with a teacher from their primary school. Again each child chose a book. After looking through it alone, they paired up, an older child with a younger one. Each told the story in English to his or her partner, the older children sometimes helping the younger ones with language. Once every book had been shared, the children took it in turns to sit on a ‘magic’ mat and tell their story to the whole group. Their confidence and enthusiasm was wonderful; some had to be warmly encouraged to finish! They then drew or wrote something prompted by their book. Some copied pictures, some (with our help) wrote sentences about what might happen after the end of the story, and some drew one of the characters with a speech bubble and wrote what they might say. Besides improving language and literacy skills, such engagement inspired pride, ownership and confidence in the children.



FIGURE 18.3 Syrian children draw inspiration from the Silent Books © Debbie Thomas 2018.

This creative engagement is, for me, one of the greatest strengths of the Silent Books, both for mainstream education and for non-formal groups who may find reading, writing and speaking especially challenging. By inviting the ‘reader’ to convert the pictures into words – oral or written – and by asking questions and speculating, the focus is on fun and invention. The technical skills of reading and writing are practised under the radar, bypassing fear and self-doubt.

This came across in a series of workshops in the summer of 2018 with the children of asylum seekers living in direct provision, the Irish system in which people applying for refugee status are housed in accommodation centres. Widely criticized and inefficient, the process can take years; two eleven-year-old participants in my workshops were born in direct provision. Some of the children, aged between six and twelve, struggled with reading and writing because of their parents’ unfamiliarity with English and the difficult living conditions (whole families often share a room). Attending local primary schools, these children felt ashamed of their lower-than-average literacy. The Silent Books proved to be powerful tools for building skills without patronizing or showing them up. Books that celebrated different cultures, either through their content or the author’s nationality, helped us to affirm the participants’ diverse backgrounds. An excellent example was *Mirror* by Jeannie Baker, which follows a day in the life of two boys, one living in Morocco and one in Australia. While our workshop participants came from neither part of the world (their families were Nigerian, Zimbabwean and Congolese), the book paved the way for conversations about traditions and daily life in their families’ countries (often informed by their parents, as most of the children did not remember, or had never visited).

Another group that benefited from such literacy building by stealth comprised teenagers at risk of early school-leaving during a series of workshops in the spring of 2018. They connected well with *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. Both visually complex and surreal, the book honoured the participants’ intellectual and emotional maturity, which exceeded their reading age. It prompted fascinating conversations about loneliness and alienation, conditions familiar to many teenagers.

While improved literacy is a valuable fruit of the Silent Books, even more wonderful is the pure joy they can bring. This shone in a workshop with young people with intellectual disabilities in October 2018. Participants browsed a pile of Silent Books and chose one to look through. I asked each person to tell the group why they had chosen that book, which page they really liked and why. One participant had a striking response to *Journey* by Aaron Becker. In this magnificent wordless story, a lonely girl uses a red pen to draw objects that take her on a wild journey to friendship. The participant was struck by the girl's sadness when her parents are too busy to play with her. He loved the page where she draws and rides in a red hot-air balloon. And at the end he took his own red crayon and drew a collection of his favourite objects.

Besides delighting specialized groups, the Silent Books have built empathy and understanding in mainstream classes. Pupils have responded to the story behind the library on Lampedusa with compassion and creativity. In a series of workshops entitled Nation Creation during the summer of 2017, primary pupils stepped into refugees' shoes and imagined what kind of country they would want to arrive in after fleeing their own. This led to groups creating their 'dream' countries, complete with laws, flags, languages and many other features (national anthems, holidays etc.). More recently, during COVID-19 lockdowns in which Irish schools closed, I have developed these ideas in video workshops around prejudice and journeys (both physical and as metaphors for stories).

While the Silent Books have inspired children across Ireland to think, talk and write creatively, I think their greatest gift of all is... silence. This sang through a session given by Deborah Soria to primary-school children on a visit to Ireland in February 2020. She sat in front of a class of primary pupils and held up *The Farmer and the Clown* by Marla Frazee. Asking for silence, she told them to put up their hands when they were ready for her to turn the page. Despite initial giggles, the children settled quickly. She took them through the book without a sound, allowing them to think and feel the story. It was profoundly moving to watch, and I am so glad I cannot explain why. The silent transfer of connected images to minds and hearts is beautiful and mysterious.

Returning to Germany six months after Hitler's death, Jella Lepman was moved by images beyond words. This breathtakingly brave Jewish woman was drawn back to the country she had fled, to help not adults but children. 'The word "Re-education" rang hollow in my ears as far as adults were concerned. But children... were not Germany's children just as innocent as children all over the world, helpless victims of monstrous events?' (Lepman, [1964] 2002: 14). She recalled driving through the country catching glimpses of children: silent snapshots that directed the rest of her life. 'Their thin, half-savage faces showed their hunger... it was easy enough to understand them without words' (Lepman, [1964] 2002: 29). Amid the rubble of a Frankfurt street, a girl waved. 'She was sitting on a stairway that was half bombed out and in her hand – wonder of wonders – she held an autumn flower' (Lepman, [1964] 2002: 17).

CONCLUSION

Although access to the library was limited due to COVID-19 between March 2020 and June 2021, it was fully open again to the public during the summer of 2021 and currently holds 300 wordless picturebooks. Nonetheless, as Deborah Soria informed the authors in an email exchange, children on the island still had constant access to books through the local schoolteachers who normally volunteer in the library (Soria, 2021). Furthermore, the library's activities have expanded to include a new wordless picturebook

project coordinated by Soria. 'Books on Board' began on 1 October 2020, destined for shipwrecked refugees, rescued at sea by three humanitarian rescue vessels belonging to *Sea Watch*, *Open Arms* and *Mediterranea*. As Soria puts it, 'Now silent books are on the ships that travel the Mediterranean' (Soria, 2021). The project provides a library kit with twenty-two wordless picturebooks and other necessary items for a shared reading experience, including coloured crayons and drawing paper in waterproof, bright-red suitcases, which are delivered to these NGO ships (Soria, 2021). Staff on the ship receive online training on how to facilitate the Silent Books workshops. However, due to the pandemic and more stringent quarantine measures introduced by the Italian government to curb the spread of the coronavirus, as of summer 2021 *Open Arms* was the only NGO rescue ship operating along the central Mediterranean route but continues to work with 'Books on Board'.

Thus, the Silent Books project continues to evolve and respond to the migrant crisis. The travelling exhibition raises further awareness about the project in its travels around the world, facilitating thought-provoking, creative encounters with otherness and acting as a springboard for discussion on migration. These wordless, beautifully illustrated books from all over the world can act as mirrors reflecting the reader's experiences, including those of conflict, displacement and exile. They can also serve as windows into other, unfamiliar worlds, fostering empathy and a sense of wonder, providing a safe haven to escape to, and taking their readers on journeys that merge reality and fantasy. Directly inspired by Lepman's initiatives in post-war Germany, Soria has continued her legacy in addressing the needs of a new generation of young people caught up in a crisis situation by building an international bridge of children's books to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

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