



Flights of Imagination: the Migrations exhibition

Article Author:

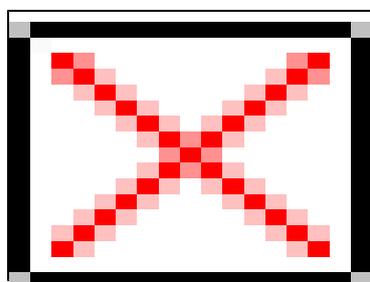
[Pam Dix](#) [1]

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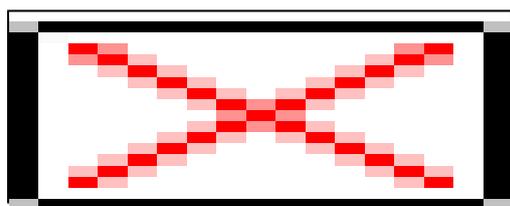
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A guide to the **Migrations** exhibition by **Pam Dix**

In an article for **Books for Keeps** in September 2017, Pam Dix described a special exhibition launched by the team at the **International Centre for the Picture Book in Society** at Worcester University. Illustrators were asked to contribute a postcard with an image of a bird and a message for refugees on the back and she recorded that over 300 arrived from all over the world.



The **Migrations** exhibition was an ambitious project from the outset but it has achieved a reach and impact far greater than ever anticipated. A book of the exhibition has just been published by Otter-Barry Books and is a fitting testimony to this ambition and the quality of the project. **Pam Dix** interviewed **Piet Grobler** and **Tobias Hickey** from Worcester University last month to find out how their ideas took flight.



The genesis of the **Migrations** project was an offer to the Worcester Illustration team to curate an exhibition in the Bibiana Children's Art House, Bratislava, to coincide with the 2017 Biennale. In 2015, the tragic image of the refugee Syrian child Alan Kurdi, dead on a Mediterranean beach at three years old, was in everyone's mind and led the team to discuss ideas of displacement, crossing borders and refugees. From this, as one, they came to the idea of using the metaphor of birds, flight and migration. An open call was sent to children's illustrators around the world via networks, social media and personal contacts, asking for an image of a bird and a message to be sent on a postcard to become part of an exhibition. A very early response from Shaun Tan gave Piet and Tobias confidence in the project and their ideas and gave the exhibition, and subsequently the book, an endorsement and an authenticity.

The postcard is a contained and yet universally known format and one that is often used by art students and colleges. The concept fits particularly well with the theme of migration. Postcards, as objects, cross borders; they are fragile; they are processed and stamped. Political elements in countries where there is distrust of the postal system meant that some postcards were packaged for sending. Some of the contributing artists used envelopes to avoid any risk of detention or damage, though where that happened the envelope and stamps/franking have been retained as part of the exhibition and the book. As objects, postcards are not without challenges, for an exhibition and for a book, but in both cases each

postcard has been showcased as an artefact, giving an authenticity to its message and its journey.

Each postcard has been on a journey and it is wonderful to imagine them flying to Worcester from around the world. The first postcard received was from the Norwegian artist, Stian Hole, and its illustration and message of beauty in migration and of hope, was used for the exhibition poster:

It's that dream that we carry with us/ that something wonderful will happen?

An extract from **Det er den Draumen** by Olav H Hauge, translated by Robert Bly

That early arrival from Shaun Tan (his postcard incorporates stamps as part of his illustration) has a similar message:

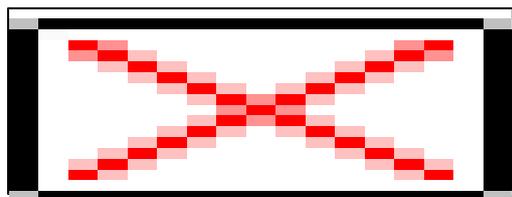
Where there is change/ there is hope.

Where there is hope/ there is life.

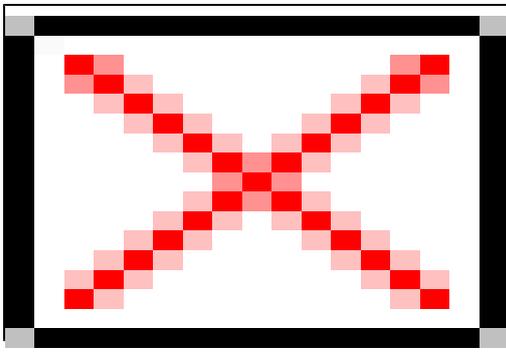
Tan's **The Arrival** is the most perfect and universal of the many refugee narratives that have been produced in recent years, so he was asked to write the forward for the exhibition, reproduced as the introduction to the book. Writing with modesty and eloquence, Tan sums up the project: *All migration is an act of imagination, a flight of imagination. Can small gestures ? a picture, a friendly message ? make a difference?*

By creating, looking, asking questions, confronting despair, we invest back in to an economy far greater than any stock exchange, far nobler than any political system. We help sustain the will to imagine a better world, for adults and especially children, for whom the positive inspiration of art and story can never be overestimated.?

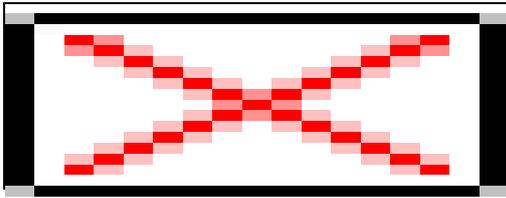
Many of the contributors themselves are migrants. Maja Stanic from Bosnia & Herzegovina, now based in the UK, describes arriving as refugee from war in 1933 and writes: 'In my suitcase I had eleven paintbrushes. I thought they would help me survive in my new life?'. Axel Scheffler from the UK makes a more contemporary comment 'Borders ? not what they used to be?'.



The book is full of so many individual items of beauty, of beauty in words and images, that it is impossible to single out favourites. It is organized into four sections: Departures, Long Journeys, Arrivals, Hope for the Future. Each is an exploration that provokes an emotional response. Only a selection of just over 50 postcards, from the over 300 received to date for the exhibition, is included. Each postcard is reproduced with the illustration on the right side of a double page and its message with the back of the postcard, including address, stamps and franking, on the left. The text of each postcard is also reproduced typographically and translated into English where necessary. Many of the illustrators have written their own messages, others have selected poems or quotes to reinforce their message. Jackie Morris worked with Robert Macfarlane to submit a joint card, a striking image of a Peregrine Falcon with Macfarlane's accompanying poem. This is used to make beautiful endpapers. There is a brief biography of each illustrator at the end of the book.



For the first **Migrations** exhibition in Bratislava, the postcards were contained in see-through sleeves and hung on a network of wires crisscrossing the exhibition space, so that they could be seen from both sides and the visitor could walk through them. Each vibrated on being touched. Subsequent installations, in South Africa, Nami Island in South Korea, and in Worcester have adapted the display to the local environment. The framework structure used in South Korea reflected a sense of a cage or imprisonment.



For Piet, for Tobias, for the whole Worcester Team, the exhibition has had a powerful emotional resonance, due to the idea of postcards / illustrations taking flight and making their way to them from across the world. They are proud of the variety of postcards received and the range of responses. One of the remits of the **ICPBS** is to showcase work from outside the Anglophone community, and by having artists such as Isol and Roger Mello in the book (both of them recipients of global prizes but not published in the UK) the work has gone some way to achieving that. The **Migrations** book too is a source of pride, beautiful to hold and a showcase for the work of illustrators. As Piet says, each entry reflects the way illustrators think and see the world and demonstrates that illustration is not passive. Illustrators are passionate and dynamic, have political and economic responses to contemporary situations and care about the world. The book stands as demonstration of this and as a legacy for the collaborative work of the team. And also to the editorial and design teams at Otter-Barry.

Submissions for the exhibition from illustrators are still open and the project is ongoing. The [Migrations website](#) [3] is being redeveloped. It will contain a map plotting all the submissions, showing both the journeys made and the regions not yet involved. We can only hope for its ongoing success and for this to lead to a second book.

Proceeds from the sales of the book will be divided between **Amnesty International**, where the postcard format resonates with their campaigning, and **IBBY (International Board of Books for Young People)** whose networks have promoted the call to illustrators around the world.

Pam Dix is a former librarian and chair of **Ibby UK**.

Migrations Open Hearts Open Borders, ed. the International Centre for the Picture Book in Society, Otter-Barry Books, 9781910959800, £9.99hbk

If you'd like to get involved, postcards can be sent to:

MIGRATIONS, The University of Worcester, City Campus, Castle Street, Worcester, WR1 3AS

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Links:

- [1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/pam-dix>
- [2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/236>
- [3] <http://www.picturebooksociety.org>