

Teacher's Notes

Title: A True Person

Author: Gabiann Marin

Illustrator: Jacqui Grantford

1. Synopsis

After fleeing with her mother from their homeland, seven-year-old Zallah arrives in Australia. Once there she and her mother are put in mandatory detention where Zallah tries to adjust to guards and fences, and people from all over the world. Zallah makes new friends and finally learns what it means to be a true person, accepted and welcomed in her new country.

2. Author/Illustrator style or medium

Gabiann Marin's short, poetically simple writing style captures the impressions of a child as she encounters her new home, avoiding any political or social commentary. Focussing on getting the feel of the experience from a child's perspective, the narration is deceptively simple, yet conveys the depth and complexities of this through the eyes of a young, innocent child.

The illustrations for A True Person are painted in oil on canvas paper, a medium which Jacqui felt suited the subject matter because of the depth it could create with rich and vibrant colours.

In order to convey the narrative as powerfully as possible, Jacqui chose to paint this story in a realistic, almost cinematic style. The gradual revealing of Zallah's face is a good example of this. The illustrations throughout focus on Zallah's perceptions and dreams, presenting the reader with a view through the eyes of a child.

Jacqui used models as reference for Zallah and her mother, and the process of choosing them was quite involved. She wanted the characters to look like refugees, yet still connect to children reading the book in Australia and other countries. The models eventually chosen are in fact mother and daughter - which made their job of posing so much easier. They had a natural ease when they were in front of the camera and the love they feel for each other is easily

apparent. Capturing the depth of this relationship was one of the highlights for Jacqui when she was painting the illustrations.

3. Author/Illustrator Motivation

A True Person is obviously a response to the current detention centre debate in Australia. However the actual idea for the book came through a conversation between the author and a recent detainee. When describing his experiences the ex-detainee of a NSW Detention centre mentioned the fact that he was treated better in detention because he was a “True Person”. When the author questioned the meaning of this phrase she was profoundly moved by the explanation – that being a true person means you have your papers and can prove who you are so therefore seen as a person and not just a faceless number. The importance of being a true person rather than an undocumented refugee clearly made the difference about how your rights were respected as much as how long you were detained, The poetry of his term, a true person, stayed with Gabiann and eventually evolved into the basis of Zallah’s story. The character of Mwalo in the book is based on this ex-detainee.

4. Author/Illustrator Background Information

Gabiann Marin was born in Brisbane, Australia in 1972 only 20 minutes after her twin sister, Rose. She grew up all over the east coast of Australia and this early travelling left her in good stead for travelling throughout Africa, Borneo, South East Asia and Europe as an adult. As well as writing children’s books, Gabiann writes scripts for film and television and spent many years writing and reporting for Amnesty International and Medicines Sans Frontieres, two non-government agencies which advocate worldwide human rights.

Jacqui Grantford has illustrated numerous books. Last year Jacqui was crowned the Grand Dragon at the Dromkeen Museum of Children’s Literature. Each year Dromkeen picks an illustrator or author for this role who then works with a group of children called the Dragoners throughout the year.

She was officially crowned last July with a Dragon Crown, sceptre and a real tail! She has developed a lovely association with Dromkeen, often doing workshops there, and last year had the honour of having one of her illustrations from Shoes News acquired for their permanent collection. Jacqui lives in Melbourne with her husband and two children.

5. Educational Applicability

There are many themes in this book which can be explored further and applied to an educational curriculum.

The most important theme of “A True Person” is acceptance.

Acceptance of difference, of everyone’s humanity and right to be treated like a real person no matter where they come from, where you are or how they got here.

There are also themes of Diversity (which is a version of acceptance – as in accepting and embracing difference without fear.), Mother/Daughter relationships and the strength of children to overcome difficult situations if given love and support.

There are a number of discussions that can be facilitated by this book:

Discussion topics

Before reading the book

1. Ask the students what the word refugee means to them?
2. Discuss where each child or child’s family originally came from before being in Australia.
3. Get children to get into pairs or small groups and determine something which differs them from the other people in their group, hair colour, eye colour, skin colour, gender etc. Get each child to note what differences they like about the others in their group and why it is nice to have differences.

After Reading the book

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think a true person is?
2. How would you like to make a huge journey like Zallah and her mother did?
3. How can we show people that “hearts love them and eyes see them” in everyday situations?
4. Do you think Zallah was happy at the beginning of the book?
5. Do you think Zallah was happy at the end of the book?
6. Why do you think Zallah and her Mother may have needed to leave their homeland and start a new life in Australia?
7. Discuss the benefits of acceptance.

Activities

Make a poster

Get each child to draw a poster of Mwalo in his village in Africa. What might it have looked like?

Alternative

Have children choose to draw either Zallah and her Mother or Mwalo in their original homelands.

Art, Craft & Design

The children can make simplified versions of the beaded doll in A True Person.

You will need:

1 cardboard roll per child

1 small black balloon (optional alternative small Styrofoam ball or paper ball to be painted black)

assorted coloured markers or crayons (red, green, yellow, blue)

Optional alternatives:

Sequins

Coloured playdough

Coloured beads

Step 1.

Give each child an empty toilet roll or cardboard pipe for the doll's body and a small black balloon for the doll's head.

Step 2.

Get the children to blow up the balloon until it is a small ball. Sticky tape this on the top of the cardboard roll to create the doll's body and head.

Step3.

Using a dotting technique create the beaded look by dotting different coloured markers or crayons in patterns over the roll.

Tip

If you want to be more creative you can use glue and sequins or "beads" made out of small rolled circles of coloured playdough which can stick to the roll.

Further Research

1. Each student could pick a country or region and find out more about the culture or history of the people from there. They could talk to the class about a specific cultural trait, dress or food.
2. Students could host a cultural "show and tell" where they each present an item from another culture (like the beaded doll from a true person), They can discuss where it comes from, what it is for, why they picked it.

8. Marketing & Selling Points

- Gabiann Marin is a well known author and scriptwriter.
- Refugees and detention continue to be matters of great debate and interest in Australia and this book presents this issue in a simplified and non-political way.
- The book highlights the importance of acceptance and generosity towards all people.
- A True Person sends a message about refugees, acceptance and human rights in a low key manner and at an early age.

7. How the book is to be promoted

Review copies to Magpies, Reading time, metropolitan and regional dailies and various online forums.

Radio interviews

A True Person will be launched at Gleebooks on the 8th February 2007.

Marrickville Council and Marrickville Library have agreed to support the book and promote community readings and events.

Gabiann is available to make regular visits to schools and community libraries and is involved in several literary festivals.

The book can also be promoted at various cultural and multi-cultural events.