



# Migrants

Give children the chance to address an important subject at their own pace with Issa Watanabe's wordless picturebook

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**M**igrants is a hauntingly beautiful picturebook about a challenging journey through a dark landscape. Across its pages walk more than 30 species of animals and birds, each dressed in distinctive items of clothing and standing upright. Children are cared for by adults who cannot be their parents, and a sense of mutual attention and support is obvious. Every traveller is portrayed with dignity and respect.

Following them is a childlike skeleton swathed in a floral cloak, and a large blue ibis. Looking oddly vulnerable, Death does little more than observe the scene until the migrants board a boat. When it capsizes, a rabbit is washed up on the beach, and Death and the ibis cradle her in a powerful image that speaks of care and peace, as well as loss. The travellers have arrived, but where? And at what cost?

In *Migrants*, Peruvian artist Issa

Watanabe addresses troubling contemporary issues by placing them somewhere timeless, far beyond our world. There's a sense of dreamlike dislocation throughout. Much is left unshown, and the wordless format allows readers to process ideas at their own pace and according to their own experiences. Our instinct to protect can be strong, but many children welcome opportunities to talk about things that matter, and may do so with unexpected insight and maturity.



## How to share the book

There's an overarching narrative to be discovered in *Migrants*, but reading for the story isn't the only way of taking meaning from this book. Every illustration creates its own little world in a freeze-frame that really does repay close looking, so you may want to spend more time than usual on each spread. And where there's a 'gap' between one illustration and the next, exploratory activities and discussion will help children generate ideas about what's going on.

However you approach this book, you'll want to make sure everyone can see the pictures clearly. Try using a visualizer to project the pages onto a wall, or group children around helpers with extra copies. By looking closely and exploring the ideas generated, children will interrogate possibilities, express opinions, consider other points of view and increase their vocabulary. These experiences often lead to richer writing outcomes.

## Practical activities

### Five senses

As a class, look at the first double page spread. Imagine you're finding the suitcase alongside Death and the Ibis. Ask pupils to describe what they see, hear, smell, taste and touch. How are they feeling? Can they see anything now they're *inside* the book that readers can't? What will they say to Death and the bird? How will they reply? What's going to happen next? Create a shared wordbank by listing words and phrases used by pupils on a flipchart or large sheet of paper.

### Speed-writing challenge

Give children one minute to write a descriptive sentence inspired by the image. Repeat until everyone has written several sentences. Review and amend, then share and discuss with partners. Which sentences are most interesting? Why?



Could they be improved? How? Review again, then share 'best sentences'.

What have pupils chosen to write about? Are there common themes or approaches? Could you use these sentences to create a piece of descriptive writing? What needs adding, and why? This stand-alone activity also makes a good warm-up for a longer independent writing session.

### Many questions

As a class, generate as many questions as you can about this image. Help children by talking about open versus closed questions, lateral thinking and 'no right answers'. Write each question on a sticky note and display around your wordbank. Here are sample questions to get you started:

- Who does the suitcase belong to? What's inside? Why's it been abandoned?
- Where is this place? Is it warm or cold? What's the weather like?
- Why is Death holding the bird's leg?
- Can Death and the bird hear anything?

What can Death and the bird see that we can't?

- How is Death feeling? How can we tell?
- Where have Death and the bird come from? Why are they here?

Work in groups, allocating each a share of sticky notes. Allow time to generate many possible answers. Ask groups to choose their favourite answers, then discuss as a class. After, ask children to write reports summarising arguments and different points of view. Here are some sample questions to prompt discussion:

- What interests you about these ideas? What surprises you?
- What do they remind you of?
- What new questions do they raise?
- What's the point of asking questions if there are no right answers?
- Should books always tell you everything? Is there a place for books to ask questions and let you interpret things?
- Will what you've discussed change the

## Take it further → → →

### WHAT'S IN THE CASE?

Put some intriguing items in a suitcase and leave it in a safe outdoor location for children to find. How and why could this case have been abandoned? Who could it belong to? Back in class, draw and write about its imaginary owner.

Look at the bags depicted in this book. Who do they belong to? What could they contain? What else do

pupils notice about them? Draw a collection of bags and cases from life, and describe them. If children had to pack one suitcase to take on a journey to a new life, what items would they select? Ask them to draw and write about their choices.

### EXPLORING PATTERS

How many fabrics are depicted in this book? Look at their patterns and





way you view this book?

## Character connection

Look carefully at the characters. Ask pupils to use their bodies to explore characters' postures and expressions. How would they move? Freeze-frame a spread, then use 'touch and tell' to discover thoughts and feelings, or bring each scene to life through mime.

What is each character wearing? What are they doing? What kind of bird or animal are they? What tasks are being performed? Which animals are doing them? Is it possible to identify family groups? What's your reasoning? (Walking together; the same species, etc).

List the characters, noting what is known about each. Add invented details if you wish. Make a set of character cards, one for every traveller. Use these to group children for discussions and roleplays. For example, draw two random cards and ask children to roleplay a campfire conversation between these two characters. What surprises

them about their companion and/or the conversation? What have they got in common? How does talking to each other make them feel? In character, ask children to write a monologue about their previous life, their experiences on this journey, and what they hope to gain by travelling.

## Personal stories

Where were children in your class born? Where were their family members born? Add locations to a map. What kind of journeys have your children made, and why? (Holidays, moving house, visiting relatives). Ask children to interview a family member about their memories of a significant journey. What impact did this journey have? Present this information verbally, then write illustrated reports and use them to create a class book.

## Own identity

Read the below quote by the book's author:

*"More than anything, I wanted each character to have their own identity defined by each detail: the care I gave to clothes, the choice of colours, and the characters' expressions."*

How does Issa Watanabe ensure her characters are individuals who can be recognised? (Clothing, posture, bags, blankets, etc). Share insights as a class. Working with a partner, ask pupils to find three ways in which they're similar, and three differences. Feed back. Discuss, then write about what you did and what you learnt.

How would Issa Watanabe have illustrated your pupils? Draw self-portraits, including details that identify pupils as individuals. Why have they chosen these attributes or objects? Read the below statement by the book's author:

*"The first thing that happens with migrants is that they are turned into numbers, or morph into a faceless human mass, which we cannot identify with."*

What does this statement mean?

## Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan
- ❖ *My Name is Not Refugee* by Kate Milner
- ❖ *The Day War Came* by Nicola Davies and Rebecca Cobb
- ❖ *On the Move: Poems about Migration* by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake

Do pupils agree? Does it matter if we think about people this way? How does this statement affect the way we read and respond to *Migrants*? Although every traveller in this book is an individual, they survive because they look out for each other, rather than thinking only of themselves. Talk about community, and how everyone's attitudes and actions have an impact.

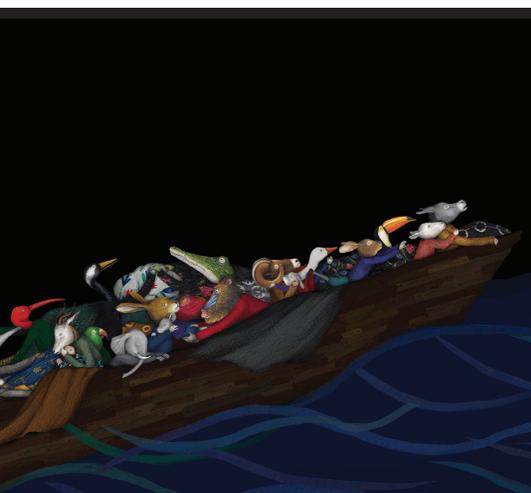
## Silent and Dark

What does 'darkness' mean to pupils? Find other ways of describing darkness. Why do the children think there's no daylight in this book? Spend a minute with your eyes closed. What can pupils hear? How does it feel? Create wordbanks to describe silence and darkness, then use these for imaginative writing. **TP**



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colours. How are they being used?

Explore a collection of plain and patterned fabrics. Ask children to describe the colours, textures, patterns and weave. What do they feel like? Use a length of fabric to carry something fragile or heavy. What else can pupils do with it?

Draw a piece of patterned fabric in a variety of mediums such as oil pastels, crayons and coloured inks. Which works best? Create a new fabric pattern inspired by this book. Make fabric bags to store your *Migrants* project work in.

## MIGRATION RESEARCH

What should children know about migration, and how can we prepare them to make a positive difference as they grow up? Help your class discuss the issue. Why do people have to leave their homes? Who is working to help migrants and refugees? Ask children to share what they've learnt via presentations, displays and written reports. Could your school do something practical to help?