La barca de Hanielle
Author:
Emilia L. Arias Domínguez
Reader:
Miranda France

La Barca de Hanielle is a highly innovative and beautifully designed book for children of about six or seven, although it would appeal to any age group. The content portrays two journeys. One is taken by a blonde little girl and her mother on a ship, with dinners and dancing. Pictures show the little girl preparing to leave her house, waving goodbye to her grandmother, remembering her friends back home eating dinner and going to sleep in a comfortable bed. The other journey is undertaken by Hanielle, an African girl, with her mother and other refugees on a makeshift and crowded boat. Hanielle's story is the one told in words, while the other girl's story is the one we see in the pictures. So on an initial reading there is a disconcerting mismatch between the text, telling one story and the images, which tell another. For example, the text "Days and nights went by. They had no food or water left", is accompanied by a picture of the blonde little girl being served exotic fruits by a waiter, and "Some people began to cry because they were frightened" appears on a page that shows people dancing happily to a band on the ship's deck. The confusion doesn't last long as we realise that the images for Hanielle's story, the ones that match the text, are also present on every page but remain invisible until the pages are viewed through a colour-filtering red lens, provided in a pocket at the front of the book. Only then does the other story, picked out in blue, come to the fore: we see the African child leaving her village, enduring rough seas on a makeshift boat, being comforted by her mother and so on. The two stories converge when the ship's lights find the migrants' boat and rescuers intervene. At that point the refugees' story becomes fully visible, although the red lens still reveals an extra layer of movement. We see a doctor attending to Hanielle and her mother. On the last page we see Hanielle, who has worried "Will anyone want to play with me here?", smiling and being offered a teddy bear.

Hanielle's Boat pulls off an admirable feat - it's a simple story that conveys the plight of refugees and their literal invisibility without admonishing or depressing young readers.By involving children in the detective work — the lens is like a magnifying glass — of discovering the hidden story, the authors give them an active role in uncovering injustice and 'seeing' the real story for themselves. That makes this a really positive reading experience compared to other recent books that have tended to offer very depressing messages about the state of the world. The approach is highly original and the message gently hits home. Cintia Martín's illustrations are beautiful, the limited palette giving the pictures a retro, 1950s feel. The pictures of Hanielle's story look clear through the lens and the book is very pleasing to handle.The novelty of including a red viewing lens gives the book an extra appeal.

This text offers no difficulty in translation and the subject matter is certainly as relevant in Britain as it is in Spain. A book like this could be very popular in the UK market. I heartily recommend it.