

# Donkeys can't fly on planes: Learning about migration through the stories of children from a South Sudanese background

By Anna Dollard, Margaret Robson Kett and Mary Tomsic

## Snapshot

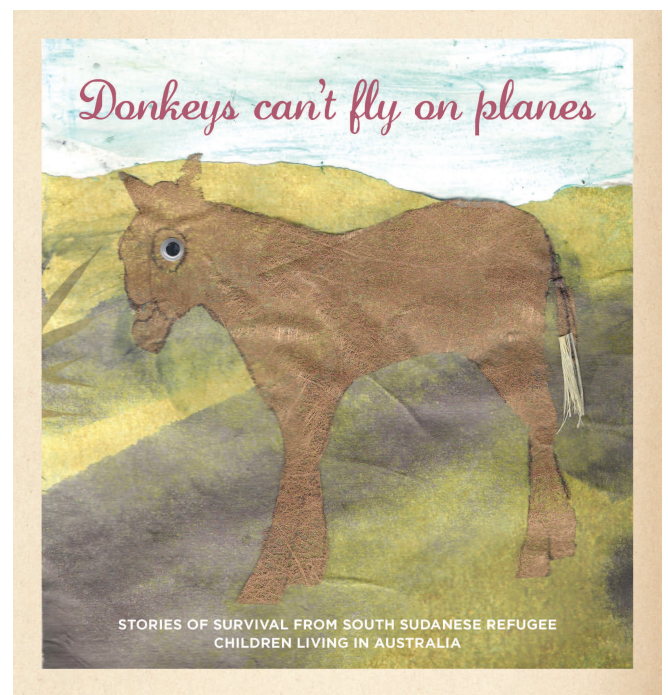
Dollard, Robson Kett and Tomsic describe a collaborative project between Kids' Own publishing, HTAV and University of Melbourne that seeks to support the use of the book *Donkeys can't fly on planes* through the creation of teaching resources.

Robyn Sheahan-Bright asserted in an article published in the journal *Magpies* that

memoirs written for, or read by, young people also develop their empathy by exploring the diversity of other experiences in multi-literate forms of text. While there are still gaps in the national autobiographical narrative for children and teenagers that might be addressed, Sheahan-Bright notes that Australian teachers are being encouraged via teaching resources produced by publishers...to innovatively promote such memoirs and other multicultural texts in their classrooms. (page 14)

The vision of [Kids' Own Publishing](#) is to work towards a world where books by children for children strengthen culture, language and literacy in all communities. The mission for Kids' Own doing this is to harness the power of books and the publishing process to connect children, families and their communities. Kids' Own has been based at the Abbotsford Convent Arts Precinct since 2011 where it partners with artists, writers and other like-minded arts organisations to provide children with high quality creative experiences.

Kids' Own has published over 150 books since 2007, partnering with communities in an artist-led process to produce collaborative publications which reflect the variety of cultural backgrounds of people in Australian society. Some titles are published in small quantities for the community only; some titles have the potential to resonate with a broader readership, like the enduring title *Donkeys can't fly on planes: stories of survival of South Sudanese children in Australia*, published in 2012.



The title of the book is taken from the poignantly pragmatic conclusion to one of the stories

documenting the experiences, stories and feeling of children of South Sudanese refugee background who came to live in Traralgon, Victoria. Intrigued by the stories the children told of the life they left behind, a teacher began recording them. Their parents were amazed at what their children remembered, with new awareness of the impact of these memories. Other schools asked for photocopies, so teachers could share them with their students. [Kids' Own Publishing](#) facilitated an illustration workshop and published a stunning picture book launched by writer and refugee advocate Arnold Zable.

Zable wrote:

These beautifully told stories are written with disarming directness, honesty and clarity. They are by turns harrowing, joyous, heartbreaking and celebratory, and bear witness to the refugee experience and the resilience of children.

The success of the book locally then prompted the adults in the community to share their own stories in two subsequent books *In My Kingdom* (2014) and *All the Way Home* (2015). These books can be read in different ways for different purposes, but historian and researcher Dr Mary Tomsic saw them as rich and accessible primary source documents that could form the

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basis of historical learning. To enable the stories to be more readily used in schools, a collaborative project developed involving Kids' Own Publishing, the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) and researchers from the University of Melbourne with some of the young

adults who were the child authors of these stories. The subsequent development of teaching resources has been financially supported by The Scanlon Foundation, The Melbourne Humanities Foundation at The University of Melbourne and through the Community Fellows Program at the Social Equity Institute at The University of Melbourne. While many history resources focus on post World War II immigration to Australia, this one provides teachers with an opportunity to discuss more recent experiences of immigration with their students. The resources ask teachers and students to see stories by children as the basis for thinking and learning in classrooms. The stories and activities provide opportunities to examine experiences of seeking refuge from war and conflict, journeys of migration to Australia and experiences of living in a new country alongside ongoing connections to people, places and cultures. The resources are in the final stages of peer review by practising teachers and teacher-librarians, as well as sign off by the original authors and illustrators who've chosen to take part.

A range of life-experiences are related by the children in *Donkeys*. These include family events and attending school in refugee camps alongside friendly and frightening encounters with animals. Almost all of the stories convey a range of emotions, many describe the impacts of violence, processes of resettlement and family separation as well as the difference between homes and lives in Africa and Australia. Ignoring these stories is to ignore the stories of children all around the world.

Some teachers and teacher-librarians may hope that nobody in their classes have ever experienced forced separation, violent conflict and extreme trauma in their childhood, but many students, in different contexts, have. These stories imbue readers – students and teachers alike – with a very real understanding of why people must flee their homeland for safer nations. These stories can also act as a prompt to encourage students to think of their own family's stories of migration and movement as an important part of Australian history and culture.

One of the young authors of *Donkeys*, Angeth Malual, reflecting as a 19 year old in 2018 on the creation of the books, said

I hope these books open up different discussions with different communities in Australia. Reading these books and understanding these stories from both parents and children kind of opens people up. If we come to an understanding that we've all been through something and we all came from something, at the end of the day we can realise that we're not that different from each other.

The authors today are no longer children. They are mature, resilient, aspirational, humorous and articulate young adults – finishing high school, getting jobs, starting apprenticeships and university, some moving away

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from their childhood communities. They are creating new stories now, built upon the sturdy foundations of their childhood narratives, thinking about their future and navigating their journeys as South Sudanese Australians living in Victoria. Because these young people were willing to share these stories with teachers and students across Australia, they can be used to facilitate conversations in our classrooms and libraries that can only benefit us all.

## References

Sheahan-Bright, R (2018). 'Australian memoirs in nonfiction and fiction for young people', *Magpies*, 33 (4) September

**Anna Dollard** has worked in publishing and the arts for over 20 years and before joining Kids' Own Publishing was closely involved in the establishment of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program in schools around Australia. Anna is Co-Director at Kids' Own Publishing and has worked on over 50 community publishing projects in six years – bringing together artists, designers, booklovers and communities of readers who've said "Let's make a book!" Anna is a Community Fellow at the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at The University of Melbourne. Facebook: Kids' Own Publishing

**Margaret Robson Kett's** first career was as a children's librarian in metropolitan and regional libraries in Victoria, Western Australia and the United States. In 2011 she brokered a partnership with Kids' Own Publishing for State Library of Western Australia's Better Beginnings Family

Literacy Program which created eight books in communities and acquired three Book Cubbies to tour the state. Margaret has worked with Kids' Own for the past five years, as well as editing, writing and reviewing.

Instagram: @40\_years\_of\_picturebooks

**Dr Mary Tomsic** is a Post Doctoral Research Associate on an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship on the history of child refugees and Australian internationalism at The University of Melbourne. Her current research is on visual representations of child refugees. Her book *Beyond the Silver Screen: A History of Women, Filmmaking and Film Culture in Australia 1920-1990* (MUP) was published in 2017 and she has recently published work in *History Australia*, *The Journal of Family History* and online in the *Overland* blog and *Pursuit*. She has been a co-convenor of the Australia Women's History Network and the Melbourne Feminist History Group.

Twitter: @mary\_tomsic