

Readers and Refugees

by Theo Heras

Beginning in the spring of 2018, IBBY [International Board on Books for Young People] Canada initiated the Readers and Refugees program in Toronto. The program was inspired by IBBY Children in Crisis Fund programs, such as IBBY-REFORMA's joint Children in Crisis Project at the U.S./Mexico border and IBBY Italia's work with refugees on the island of Lampedusa. IBBY Canada partnered with Christie Refugee Welcome Centre and COSTI Immigrant Services, organizations that offer assistance to newcomers to Canada. Individuals from the children's literature community in Toronto—teachers, librarians, storytellers, writers, publishers, and others who are IBBY Canada members—eagerly volunteered to participate in Readers and Refugees.

One of the locations where the program was offered is a hotel in the northeastern part of the city. The hard-working COSTI team welcomes and helps settle new families who are temporarily housed there. At the hotel, many different programs are offered for children, including art therapy, music

therapy, storytelling by the Toronto Public Library, and English conversation circles.

Once a week for eight weeks last fall, my IBBY Canada colleagues Mariella Bertelli, Laurie Malabar, and Carolyn Madonia and I went to the hotel with nothing more than picture books and our enthusiasm, to implement Readers and Refugees. We were met with children, ranging in age from six to twelve, who came from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Eritria, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and—as Mirna El Sabbagh, General Manager of COSTI's Stakeholder Engagement, stated—“almost any country facing a refugee crisis.” We discovered that most of the children spoke English. They were attending school, and many of the older children read fluently.



Theo Heras is a children's librarian and author, a member of the IBBY Canada board, and a volunteer reader. For more on IBBY's Children in Crisis programs, visit IBBY.org.

HARRY

THE DIRTY DOG



by Gene Zion
pictures by Margaret Bloy Graham

The room where we met each week was not ideal, being a large room with high ceilings. Sometimes it doubled as the “laundry room,” with clothes bundled in the corners. Chairs were stacked against the walls; initially we set up the chairs in four circles, but eventually some of us preferred to sit on the floor with the children. In order to add color and to demarcate the four reading areas, we laid down Kente cloth (which was supplied by Laurie). The books were scattered on the floor within these circles. The children entered the room and gravitated to one circle or another where a volunteer reader was sitting. The children chose a book to start with, and off we went. We ended each hour-long session in a large circle and sang a song (“Big Brass Wagon”), much to the delight of people who were learning it for the first time.

Initially it was hit or miss with the books. We never knew from week to week which books would work and which wouldn't. We never knew how many children would attend (we had

upwards of forty or fifty children at a session!). We had to be ready for anything. I think that the four of us got better and better at selecting books to bring as the weeks went on. The children were attentive during the reading time, even in a very cacophonous environment, and we were attentive, too. The only time we lost their attention was during the first snowfall in Toronto; outside they ran and then back in they came with tiny snowballs that melted too quickly! Of course, we readers greeted them with *The Snowy Day*.

The children indicated which books were their favorites—by requesting them again and again. The big surprises for me were two books published decades ago: *Harry the Dirty Dog* (1956) by Gene Zion, illustrated by Margaret Bloy Graham; and *Corduroy* (1968) by Don Freeman. What was it about these two books that captivated the children?

In *Harry the Dirty Dog*, our hero doesn't want a bath, so he runs away from home. He has some adventures and gets very dirty. The wanderer tires of his adventures (and is hungry besides) and returns to his house, but his family doesn't recognize him. Harry has to do the very thing that he ran away from. With the bath, Harry is restored as the beloved family dog.

In *Corduroy*, the bear-without-a-button also goes on an adventure. He searches high and low for a button in the department store and gets into some trouble. The security guard finds Corduroy and places him back on the

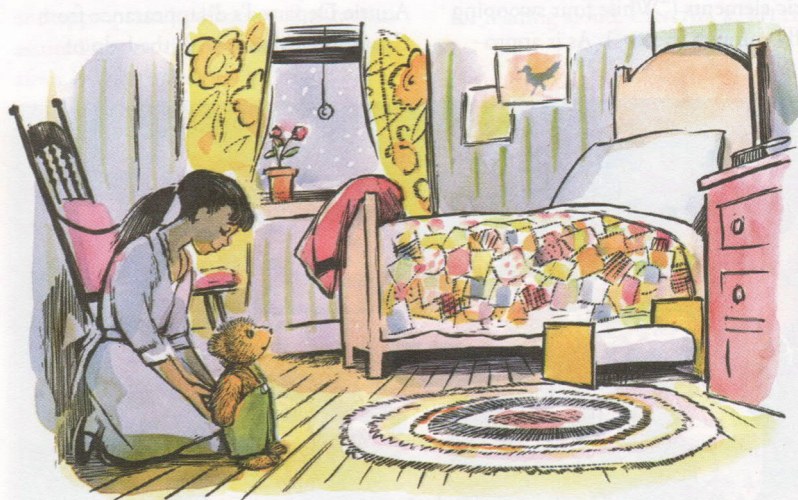
toy shelf. The next day a girl named Lisa returns to the store with the right amount of money to bring him home, and when they arrive at her family's apartment, Corduroy says: "This must be home...I *know* I've always wanted a home!"

I have read these books hundreds of times to many audiences. We all know the adage that any book is new the first time you read it, no matter how old it actually is. Reading these stories to this group of newcomer Canadians made the tales new to me again, too. These gentle tales do not reflect the harsh realities of many of the children's lives before coming to Canada; yet, reflected in the listeners' eyes was a sense of wanting and dreaming of a permanent, safe, and loving home. These books, written so many years ago, resonate deeply today. They reassure children that they, too, can find their way home.

According to COSTI workers at the hotel, IBBY Canada's Readers

and Refugees program turned out to be one of the children's favorites, as demonstrated by the large numbers and enthusiasm of the attendees each week. The Readers and Refugees Program is planning to expand this fall. Another refugee center in Toronto has asked IBBY Canada to deliver the program there, and IBBY Canada members in Montreal and Winnipeg will begin to offer Readers and Refugees programs in those cities, too.

Reading books aloud with children is always surprising. You never know where the stories will lead, what doors or windows to the world they will open, or what emotional responses they will evoke. Books build connections between the reader and the listener and between the listener and the story. Reaching out to refugee children with books has added a new dimension to my life, and helped me to see beyond the covers of books I thought I knew so well. ■



From *Corduroy*.