

Tell him about Vietnam: Vietnamese-Americans in Contemporary American Children's Literature.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Tell him about Vietnam":
Vietnamese-Americans in Contemporary American
Children's Literature**

Jan Susina (bio)

In Michele Maria Surat's picturebook, *Angel Child, Dragon Child* (1983), Nguyen Hoa and her sisters are continually tormented by their elementary schoolmates' taunts of "Pajamas." Hoa, known at home as Ut, an affectionate Vietnamese family name for the smallest daughter, is shy and attempts to ignore the hostility that is directed towards her and the other Vietnamese-Americans. Despite her attempts to avoid direct confrontation, the red-headed Raymond singles her out by throwing snowballs at her. The principal separates them after their snowball fight, and then insists that, "We can't have this fighting. You two have to help each other" (Surat n.p.). He then orders the two children inside and tells them:

"Hoa, you need to speak to Raymond. Use our words. Tell him about Vietnam." Raymond glared. "And you, Raymond, you must learn to listen. You will write Hoa's story."

(Surat p.p.)

Initially the two children refuse to cooperate, but eventually Ut shares her home name with Raymond and shows him the tiny photograph of her mother, who remains behind in Vietnam, which she constantly carries with her in a match box. Impressed by the sacrifices that the Nguyen family has made to immigrate to the United States—Ut's mother has stayed behind because the family cannot afford to send all the members at once—Raymond writes Ut's story which the principal reads to the entire school. Raymond then spearheads a campaign for a Vietnamese fair at school to help raise funds to reunite the Nguyen family.

The cooperation and retelling of Ut's story by Raymond is a fitting metaphor for the impulse behind the creation of many of the children's books that deal with the introduction of Vietnamese-Americans into U.S. society. While there are a number of excellent children's informational books which deal with Vietnamese immigration to the United States such as Brent Ashabanner's *The New Americans* (1983), Janet **[End Page**

58] Bode's *New Kids on the Block* (1989), and Linda Perrin's *Coming to America* (1980), I will focus primarily on fictional works on the same subject. While these fictional works appear to be strongly influenced by the biographical data gleaned from such informational books, the authors domesticate and reconstitute the information on the Vietnamese-American experience in ways they perceive as appropriate for their readers. In structuring their stories so that they revolve around discrimination that occurs at school, these authors attempt to develop a social conscience in their readers. While none of the authors I examine is Vietnamese-American, authors such as Katherine Paterson and Maureen Crane Wartski, having both spent much of their childhoods in Asia, are aware of many cross-cultural transitions which children experience. While these books are successful in introducing readers to the customs and culture of Vietnamese-Americans, in many ways what is more telling is how they deal with the various responses of the native-born Americans to these recent immigrants.

The first wave of Vietnamese refugees was well-educated and wealthy, capable of speaking English, and many had worked with the U.S. forces in South Vietnam prior to the troops' withdrawal in 1973. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the economic and social composition of Vietnamese refugees dramatically changed. The second wave of immigrants came from all levels of society, many made their way with little more than what they could carry on their backs to the relocation centers. These were the so-called "boat people" (Perrin 143-4).

This second wave of immigration which began after 1975 took place during a major economic recession in the U.S., which made the resettlement of such a large group of refugees—many of whom were unskilled and spoke little or no English—difficult. In order to prevent a concentration of these immigrants from settling in one or two locales, the U.S. government established a policy in which each Vietnamese-American family would have a sponsor. The intention was to prevent the development of large Vietnamese-American ghettos in a few urban areas. By distributing these refugees...

even translated into other cultures, Scouting is explicitly designed to uphold a liberal hegemony.

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Richard Flynn is the author of *Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood* (University of Georgia Press, 1990). A member of the executive board of the MLA's Division on Children's Literature, he has taught children's literature at Indiana State University, and is currently an assistant professor specializing in contemporary poetry at Georgia Southern University.

"Tell him about Vietnam": Vietnamese-Americans in Contemporary American Children's Literature

by Jan Yaacobi

In Mitchell Marsh Sunit's picture book, *Angel Child* (Dragon Child) (1983), Nguyen Hoa and her sisters are continually reprimanded by their elementary schoolteacher's taunts of "Paj-man." Hoa, known at home as Uy, an affectionate Vietnamese family name for the smallest daughter, is shy and attempts to ignore the hostility that is directed towards her and the other Vietnamese-Americans. Despite her attempts to avoid direct confrontation, the red-headed Raymond singles her out by throwing snowballs at her. The principal separates them after their snowball fight, and then insists that, "We can't have this fighting. You two have to help each other" (Sunit 121). He then orders the two children inside and tells them:

"Here, you need to speak to Raymond. Use our words. Tell him about Vietnam." Raymond glared. "And you, Raymond, you must learn to listen. You will write Hoa's story." (Sunit 122)

Initially, the two children refuse to cooperate, but eventually Uy shares her home name with Raymond and shows him the tiny photograph of her mother, who remains behind in Vietnam, which she constantly carries with her in a match box. Impressed by the sacrifices that the Nguyen family has made to immigrate to the United States, Uy's teacher has stayed behind because the family cannot afford to send all the members in one — Raymond was Uy's story which the principal reads to the entire school. Raymond then spearheads a campaign for a Vietnamese fair at school to help raise funds to reunite the Nguyen family.

The cooperation and reweaving of Uy's story by Raymond is a fitting metaphor for the impulse behind the creation of many of the children's books that deal with the introduction of Vietnamese-Americans into U.S. society. While there are a number of excellent children's informational books which deal with Vietnamese migration to the United States such as Peter Ashbridge's *The New Americans* (1983), Janet



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