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Unpacking Nostalgia: Suitcases as Symbols of Nostalgia in Picturebooks about Refugees

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Nostalgia in picturebooks about refugees relies on aesthetics to create a nostalgic mood through verbal and visual text. Aesthetic strategies include imagery, symbols, metaphors, recurring motifs, and iconisation. The suitcase, as an emblematic symbol of the refugee, plays a crucial role. Depicted in an old-fashioned, classic form, it becomes synonymous with the self-enclosed miniature of a life. The object-souvenirs it contains, such as sepia-toned photos, distressed domestic items, and symbols of a homeland like a bottle of soil, are transformed into “biographical” objects from a life left behind. When these items are placed in a suitcase, they form a collection that reframes their context. The nostalgic mood in picturebooks is evoked through various aesthetic strategies, including dichotomies, black-and-white photographs, rhythmic text, pictorial gaps, and symbolic transformations. These elements collectively turn suitcases into potent symbols of refugee nostalgia.

Keywords: aesthetics of nostalgia, suitcases, picturebooks, refugees

Nostalgia in art has its own aesthetics and stylistic qualities that enhance and define a text or a piece of art as truly nostalgic. It is no coincidence that if nostalgia is evoked in one person, then it will also probably be evoked in other people (Salmoose 2012: 17). The essential importance of aesthetics in nostalgic art was recognised by Fred Davis in his work *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (1979), providing one of the first explorations of social and cultural nostalgia. As he mentions (73):

So frequently and uniformly does nostalgic sentiment seem to infuse our aesthetic experience that we can rightly begin to suspect that nostalgia is not only a feeling or mood that is somehow magically evoked by the art object but also a distinctive aesthetic modality in its own right, a kind of code or pattering of symbolic elements,

which by some obscure mimetic isomorphism comes, much as language itself, to serve as a substitute for the feeling or mood it aims to arouse.

If we consider nostalgia in art as an “aesthetic modality”, “one of its primary emotional modes” (Salmoose and Sandberg 2021: 191), the question arises: How does a work of art, a text, or a picturebook in our case, become nostalgic? Paul Grainge (2000) in his dissertation, talking about nostalgia and style in America in the 1990s, refers to the creation of a “nostalgic mode” and “nostalgic mood”. Far from a sense of longing, loss or even memory, the nostalgic mode is a cultural, consumable style (8), while, in contrast, the nostalgic mood is a feeling determined by a concept of longing and loss and is related to lived experience. The distinction between mood and mode is not a binary opposition; rather, it represents conceptual tendencies along a theoretical continuum (15–16). Grainge is concerned with nostalgia as a cultural style, an aestheticised mode, which in cultural production reflects nostalgic moods in cultural life.

Accepting that nostalgic mood and mode distinguish the poles of a theoretical continuum, it becomes evident that both mode – within a wider contextual perspective – and mood – on a more personal level – are conveyed by verbal text and pictures through aesthetic strategies that evoke nostalgic emotions. In this case, the emotions triggered by the text and pictures are linked with “external nostalgia”, though they do not exclude “internal nostalgia”, which is closely connected to one’s biography (Salmoose 2012: 159). The aesthetic strategies of nostalgia are diverse and have been studied by several scholars. Narrative techniques such as analeptic structure (Salmoose 2012: 192; Busi Rizzi 2020: 4) which “needs a frame story, a dominant point of narration which we call the first narrative, from which a subsequent narration of [...] past events commences” (Salmoose 2012: 297), narrative gaps (Busi Rizzi 2020: 12), the use of a present tense for a past narration that “activates the moment, isolates and idealizes it” (Salmoose 2012: 184–186), the use of asyndeton and polysyndeton that “have the ability to emphasize or create a movement, energy, impressions, pathos and rhythms” (191), the narrative voice which is represented by an extradiegetic, homodiegetic narrator in a first person narrative (209) and internal focalisation (210–211) are some frequent examples found in nostalgic narrations. Corresponding techniques are also present at the level of pictures. The use of a monochrome or black-and-white image as a form of aestheticised nostalgia (Grainge 2000: 27) and the use of sepia (Busi Rizzi 2020: 9) have the capacity to create a nostalgic atmosphere. The collage of elements such as voice, style and image create a pastiche which, by treating the past, offers a simulation and a “fashion-plate image” (Grainge 2000: 47–48).

Another way of inducing nostalgic sentiment in text and pictures is the use of “nostalgic tropes” as imagery, symbols, metaphors, recurring motifs and the iconisation of specific features characteristic of a particular time or era (Salmoose 2012: 241–242). Among these symbols and motifs, which can differ in each type of nostalgia, (e.g. a doll’s house for childhood nostalgia or a ruin as a prime symbol of decay for the nostalgia of passing time), there are also certain objects that by their symbolical meaning are

closely associated with nostalgia. Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), analysing the concept of “sadness without an object”, a sadness that creates a longing for something that is not truly real (23), conceives of narrative as “a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified” (ix). She explores the social disease of nostalgia by examining the relationships between narrative, origin and object, and in this framework deals with the miniature, the souvenir and the collection. Miniature in her study is considered “as a metaphor for the interior space and time”, the souvenir “as emblematic of the nostalgia that all narrative reveals – the longing for its place of origin” (xii), and the collection as “a form of art [...], a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of the context” (151).

According to Stewart, the miniature represents “closure, interiority, the domestic, and the overly cultural” (1993: 70), embodying an idealised vision of the past. Once the miniature is self-enclosed (like a doll’s house), time becomes frozen, creating a tension between inside and outside and leading to a type of tragic distance. The souvenir, on the other hand, serves as a trace of authentic experience and transforms the exterior to the interior. The object that constitutes the souvenir is always incomplete, functioning metonymically in respect of the scene of its original appropriation, either as a sample or a metonymic reference between the object as part and object as whole or as a representation in another medium. In any case, the souvenir represents an experience that the object can only evoke and can never entirely recapture (135–136). It authenticates the past and at the same time discredits the present. In contrast to souvenirs, which are closely related to nostalgia, collections are organised according to time, space or the internal qualities of the objects themselves; they work as a whole rather than as individual objects and create a new, timeless context. Stewart (152–165) asserts that they are characterised by their ahistorical character, meaning that their purpose is not to restore the past, but to re-contextualise objects into a new framework, and are magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition.

Picturebooks on the recent refugee crisis

In 2015, following the war(s) in the Middle East and, in particular, in Syria and Afghanistan, a sharp escalation of global forced displacement took place, making the refugee crisis the worst since World War II. Despite the fact that issues related to wars and refugees are frequently encountered not only today but also in the past (Crawford and Roberts 2018: 14), contemporary authors for young readers, touched by the current global refugee crisis, have produced an increasing number of books about war and the refugee experience, creating a genre of its own (Hope 2015: 17). This newly emergent genre reflects reality (Hope 2007: 290) and includes narratives for early readers in picturebook, graphic novel, comic, or animation format, based on fictionalised versions of lived experiences (Vassiloudi 2019: 35).

Books about refugees, beyond depicting their hazardous journeys, reflect the difficulties they endure in the host country and the incurable pain of longing for the homeland they left behind. Their purpose is likely to evoke empathy in young readers and make these challenges relatable. They connect the refugee with the nostalgia of a homeland that is idealised from the moment of departure, and almost automatically evokes longing, through the use of symbols and of specific aesthetic techniques. Therefore, the books about refugees create nostalgia as “a cultural style, an aestheticized mode” (Grainge 2000: 55) by including nostalgic features, expressing “the feeling of longing for a home that no longer exists” (Boym 2001: 7) and a mix of “loss, lack, and longing for a utopian time that may have existed before everything changed” (Busi Rizzi 2020: 3), before the outbreak of war.

The nostalgic mode that books create is especially conveyed through the presence of suitcases. Since refugee stories are strongly connected with a journey, suitcases have an “emblematic” status. Suitcases were mainly connected to emigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when transcontinental migration was widespread, and thus the first photographs of immigrants with suitcases at Ellis Island appeared. Although throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, art and literature portrayed people’s journeys, usually depicting travellers who carried knapsacks and bags, suitcases (as we know them today) did not appear until the 19th century. Immigrants could not afford their own suitcases before the 20th century, which in many cases served as proof of their accomplishments (McHugh 2016: n.p.). From that point on, suitcases became synonymous with the displacement of people around the world. If someone visits the most well-known museums of migration (e.g. Ellis Island in New York) or museums of the Holocaust (e.g. Yad Vashem Museum Collection), the first exhibit that stands out is a collection of suitcases.¹ The strong presence of suitcases in places associated with refugees results from the fact that suitcases were the only objects displaced people could take with them when they were forced to flee their homeland. They carried the most important and representative things from their past. This concrete material object was their only companion on their journey and the closest witness to their escape, their transition from one place to another. The suitcase, with its contents, could testify not only to personal stories but also to the history of immigration.

¹ Suitcases are also the core concept of art exhibitions regarding refugees. The most well-known artworks about refugees have key references to suitcases. Characteristic examples are art exhibitions with refugee baggage as their central theme, organised to recreate homes, rooms, landscapes, and tell real stories about real people by carrying memories. See, for instance, the exhibition by the Syrian author, Mohamad Hafez, “Unpacked: Refugee Baggage” (2020–2021). Bruno Catalano’s series of bronze sculptures, “The Voyageurs” [The Travellers] (2006–), also delve into themes of travel, migration, and journeying, exploring the ideas of home, belonging, and loss (Waldmann 2024: n.p.), while simultaneously expressing the emptiness of the permanent separation from family roots. Examples of artworks with suitcases as part of them are often found at memorials to Nazi crimes, such as the Kindertransport memorials by the artists Frank Meisler and Aria Ovadia (curated by Lisa Sophie Becher) in Hamburg, Berlin, Gdansk, Hoek van Holland, and London, to commemorate the Kindertransport rescue mission from Nazi Germany (Eckel 2022).

In this paper we study the suitcase as both an object and a symbol of the refugee and we explore the aesthetics of nostalgia through this symbol. Our focus will be on Greek picturebooks and picturebooks translated into Greek that were published in Greece from 2015 to 2022 which address the recent Middle East refugee crisis, since Greece, like many other European countries, has recently experienced a large influx of refugees from this area. More specifically, we examine five Greek picturebooks and picturebooks translated into Greek where a suitcase plays a crucial role in refugees' adventures. The books *Παλμίρ* [Palmyr, the English edition titled: *The Red Suitcase*, orig. published in French in 2019, titled *Palmir*] by Giles Baum and Amandine Píu, *Η Βαλίτσα* [I Valitsa = *The Suitcase*, orig. published in English in 2019] by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, *Τι θα Πάρω Μαζί μου Φεύγοντας!* [Ti tha Paro Mazi mou Fevgontas! = What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!], published in Greek by Niki Kantzou and Filio Nikoloudi, *Το Ταξίδι* [To Taxidi = *The Journey*, orig. published in English in 2016] by Francesca Sanna, and *Ρίχλα* [Richla] (2022), published in Greek, by Despina Heracleous and Persa Zacharia, were selected from lists of recommended refugee-themed books on Greek children's book websites (see Elniplex n.d.).

All five picturebooks contain stories that foster children's engagement with significant aspects of society and history, such as past and present forced displacement of children (Tomsic 2018: 340). They are cultural artifacts that invite reflection and provide stimuli for political and historical discussion, understanding, thinking, and learning (343, 352), through their symbolism and abstraction or through implicit or explicit references to current events. They use the timeless symbol of refugees, such as the suitcase, which is a basic element in their verbal and visual narratives and in their peritexts.

Our purpose is to explore the aesthetic strategies used to create a nostalgic mode by transforming the suitcase into a symbol of nostalgia through both text and pictures. Stewart argues that the aesthetic celebrates the transformation of materiality by the abstract (1993: 32). Building on this idea, we examine below the suitcase as an object associated with nostalgia, drawing parallels and metaphorical connections to the miniature, souvenir and collection.

The suitcase as a miniature

In all the books, the presence of one or more suitcases is evident even from the peritext, the title, the cover, or the back cover. The appearance of suitcases is almost the same in all the books, retaining its typical old-fashioned form, even though the stories are modern.

In *The Suitcase*, by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, a stranger, an indeterminate creature, arrives in an unknown place with only a suitcase, where it is not initially welcomed. Upon arrival, the stranger tells the native creatures – a fox, a hare, and a bird – about the contents of its suitcase: a teacup, a table, a wooden chair, and a little cabin. Distrustful of the stranger's words, the locals break open the suitcase while the creature is asleep, dreaming of its difficult journey through a short analeptic narrative. Inside they find only

a broken teacup and a photograph from the stranger's home. Regretting their mistrust, they apologise, repair the belongings, and build the stranger a little house to stay with them. The inhospitable locals are transformed into friendly hosts. The nature of *The Suitcase* is mostly allegorical and symbolic, deriving its historical character from the context of its writing and its paratextual elements. Although Chris Naylor-Ballesteros revealed in an interview (Naylor-Ballesteros n.d.) that the early idea of *The Suitcase* was born in the context of Brexit, book reviews and book presentations – at least in Greece – refer to it as a book about displaced people that highlights current issues such as wars and refugees (Decastro 2022: n.p.; Pappos 2020: n.p.).

Although the timeline of the narration is unclear, the stranger's suitcase is distinctly old. The colour is grey, the suitcase closes with leather straps, and its interior is lined with a checkered fabric. Even when the other animals break it open to check if its contents verify the foreigner's claims, they regretfully restore the single broken object to its old form. In the image, the suitcase is presented almost new and untouched, with its classic, well-known design (as it has prevailed in its visual depictions), which symbolises the restoration of nostalgic memory and its acceptance by the host country and its inhabitants.



Fig. 1. The transparent, old-fashioned suitcase on the front cover of *Palmyr* (Baum and Píu 2019)

Sl. 1. Prozirni staromodni kovčeg na prednjoj strani korica slikovnice *Palmyr* (Baum i Píu 2019)

In *Palmyr*, a little dragon flees home and goes on a risky, unpredictable, but brave journey to find a new home and create friendships. From the book cover, where the red colour emerges like a bombed or fiery landscape, it becomes clear that the little dragon named Palmyr (as we are informed by the last picture of the book) is trying to escape a disaster. The place of destruction is probably Syria, since the Greek title of the book is *Παλμύρ* [*Palmyr*], which is a name alluding to Palmyra, the recently destroyed city from where an influx of refugees has overwhelmed Europe, and especially Greece. Even though all the peritextual elements point to a modern refugee crisis, the suitcase retains

its classic form with leather straps and a handle. However, its colour is unclear, as it is almost transparent (Fig. 1). The focus is on the red outline of the suitcase and on its classic shape, underlying the nostalgic mode that the old form creates. The transparency and design of the suitcase, characterised by rough lines throughout the book's images, embody various nostalgia-related symbolisms. The emptiness and transparency of the suitcase make it a symbol of any time. It also signifies the loss of a life that will always be yearned for but never regained. Simultaneously, its characteristics suggest the possibility of filling it with new experiences and hope. Like a blank canvas, the miniature of a life that must be filled, the suitcase can hold a new life, building on the nostalgic foundation of the old one.



Fig. 2. The suitcase Richla is dragging on the front cover of *Richla* (Heracleous and Zacharia 2022: 22–23)

Sl. 2. Kovčeg koji Richla vuče na prednjoj stani korica slikovnice *Richla* (Heracleous i Zacharia 2022: 22–23)

Richla also uses the classic, old-fashioned form of a suitcase, with an orthogonal shape and straps, although it is apparent that the protagonist of the book is dragging it (Fig. 2), a pictorial element that connects the old with the new, the past with the present. *Richla* (which means ‘journey’ in the Syriac language) is about the journey of a girl with

a big suitcase. At every stop along her way, she takes something from her country and culture out of her suitcase to help those she meets. The author, Despina Heracleous, stated in an interview with the author of this paper² that she was inspired by the recent refugee crisis in a country (Syria) very close to her own. She did not intend to write a story about the difficulties of refugees and the deficit with which they arrive, and which must be filled. Her purpose was to write about the surplus that refugees carry and that they can donate to the people of their host country.

Finally, in *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* by Kantzou and Nikoloudi (Fig. 3), a suitcase takes on the role of the protagonist. In a first-person narrative, little Nur's suitcase recounts the journey of a family forced to flee their homeland due to war. The suitcase remembers the happy family past until war broke out. Alongside other suitcases, it wonders where they will end up, searching for a land of peace. The suitcases recall previous generations of suitcases that endured the same hardships, recounting their difficult journeys. Some manage to “survive”, while others do not. Nur's suitcase succeeds and looks forward to the future with optimism.



Fig. 3. Covers of *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* (Niki Kantzou and Nikoloudi 2016)

Sl. 3. Korice slikovnice *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* [Što ću ponijeti sa sobom kad odem!] (Kantzou i Nikoloudi 2016)

² The author conducted an unpublished oral interview with Despina Heracleous.

The suitcase as a “biography of a thing” (Kopytoff 1986: 66), an it-narrative, reveals hidden social structures (Nielsen 2018: 56) and, through its metonymic relationship with the real world (Freedgood 2010: 95), bears witness to the life of its owner, serving as a means to explain painful events to a child. The book employs an analeptic structure, first-person narration, and internal focalisation (Salmose 2012: 191–210) to foster empathy and engage modern children with the refugee experiences of Greek people from the past. The narrative becomes more explicit, and, in the words of the old suitcases, suggests that this is not the first forced displacement: “‘We have experienced these other times with previous generations’, said two very old suitcases from the back of the warehouse”³ (Kantzou and Nikoloudi 2016: 11).

What I Will Take with Me When I Leave! clearly connects the current refugee issue with the Greek refugee experience in 1922, after the war with the Turks in Asia Minor. The persistent personified presence of old and new suitcases is probably interrelated to the timeless existence of refugees around the world with their nostalgia. In all the images of suitcases, whether they come from children’s drawings (to identify with and evoke empathy in young readers) or other works of art, they maintain their classic form. Their old form evokes nostalgia, which underlines the nostalgic power of an old object.

It becomes clear that the old-fashioned form of the suitcase predominates throughout the books, regardless of the period represented in the narrative, thereby linking it to contemporary refugee events. The suitcases are presented as closed systems, embodying idealised visions of the past. Like miniatures, according to Stewart, they offer a world clearly limited in space (1993: 49), and when they become self-enclosed, time becomes frozen, creating tension between the inside and outside, and revealing a type of tragic distance (70). The iconographic imagery of the suitcase, distinguished by its profound interiority as a personal object, exhibits an impressive yet contradictory uniformity in its exterior. This preservation of traditional uniformity arises from a global aesthetic mode that, due to the intensity of contemporary refugee events, aims to sensitise the readership to a recognition of timeless refugee nostalgia. The old, traditional look of the suitcase conveys a nostalgic mode, evoking in the readers a nostalgic mood. The image of an old object triggers feelings of nostalgia and creates a nostalgic style (Salmose 2012: 154), as it originates from a past that has definitively elapsed.

Finally, a standout case of the suitcase nostalgia mode is *The Journey*, which won the 2017 Klaus Flugge Prize for the most exciting newcomer to children’s picturebook illustration. This picturebook by Francesca Sanna, inspired by real refugee stories, tells the story of an ordinary family leaving their home to escape the turmoil and tragedy of war. The importance of suitcases in the family’s experience is very strong, dominating in their old form both the front and back cover of the book.

A family of three embarks on an adventurous journey, changing means of transport, facing obstacles, hiding in the forest, and crossing the sea to reach a safe place. Along

³ All the translations into English have been done by the author.

their way, the protagonists lose all their belongings. The first-person narrator informs us that they took with them everything they had, without specifying certain items. However, the image, in addition to the text, depicts a library and books as symbolic containers of their culture. In this unrealistic image, strange and huge animals coexist with the family while they pack. As mentioned earlier by the mother, the new place they are trying to reach has strange cities, strange forests, strange animals, but no fear. The family figures appear as they pack their luggage surrounded by three massive piles of books, suitcases, and animals. Suitcases, as closed, miniature systems, contain their whole lives, their identity, and become synonymous with their internal past, their own experiences, and history, the “micrographia” (Stewart 1993: 43–44) of their lives.

Although there are no other nostalgic objects in the pictures besides the old-fashioned suitcases, the nostalgic mode is revealed through their form and through the objects left behind. The gaps in the narrative and imagery (as an aesthetic choice) concerning what happened to the suitcases, which constantly decrease in number and become lost, enhance the reader’s involvement, creating a basis for nostalgic reception (Busi Rizzi 2020: 12). Lost suitcases “become the visual expression of something that is hard to imagine or express in words” (Schlör 2014: 78). Since nostalgia “cannot be sustained without loss” (Stewart 1993: 145), we can argue that nostalgia also emerges from the motif and sense of loss. The cruel and violent loss of the life refugees had until now, the life they will always miss, is symbolically expressed through the loss of the suitcases.

The suitcase as container: souvenirs and collections

Refugees carry, apart from the necessities for their life and voyage, objects from their country and home for preserving their memory, their past, and identity. Suitcases may contain memories, inanimate objects, tastes, smells, images and sounds (Hirsch 1992: 390) of the past, particularly of a home left behind and the family’s memory of everyday life. These objects, the “remembering” objects, “symbols of the past” (58), have a sense of “bittersweetness” (Niemeyer 2014: 1), since they evoke mixed feelings and encompass both the present and the past as a complex projection: “the invocation of a partially idealized history merges with dissatisfaction with the present” (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000: 32). These same objects help displaced people establish a new life in the host country.

In this context, suitcases serve as containers for personal belongings and as a medium between places and between an idealised past and an uncertain future. The contents of the suitcase function as souvenirs, emblematic of the nostalgia that the narrative reveals as “the longing for its place of origin” (Stewart 1993: xii). This place, shaped by nostalgia, represents a utopian reunion. The narrative evokes nostalgia as a yearning for something that cannot be realised – a desire for desire (23). The souvenir becomes the material embodiment of a location and in this way it acquires value.

In *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* Nur, the little girl, packs her suitcase with objects that include a ceramic plate, a doll, a notebook, some pencils for drawing, a family photo, and some pot-cultivated flowers. These objects depict Nur's personal story and history, her roots, and turn her suitcase into one of "biographical objects" (Schlör 2014: 78). They become a representation of a lifetime and a connection between "here and there". The suitcase becomes a bridge between the spatial and temporal gaps in her life, representing hope for her future. The objects are imbued with emotional weight, the intensity of which depends on the rejection of the present. The past is maintained with determination as idyllic and "frozen" in memory.

Among the things Nur packs are a small statue and a pebble, two things that seem incongruous with the other objects but relate so well to nostalgia. The marble or stone, which the statue and the pebble are made of, "becomes an immutable object, a material metaphor of a homeland frozen in time" (Yannicopoulou 2023: 293). Moreover, as a material, it depicts the harshness of reality, which emphasises longing for the past.

Similar contents are also found in the picturebook *The Suitcase*. The protagonist of the book, the strange creature, claims that its suitcase contains a teacup, a table, a wooden chair, and a small cabin. However, when the locals open it, they find only a broken teacup (a metaphor for the symbol of ruin, which relates to the irreparable and therefore nostalgic past, but also to change) and a photograph of the creature's home. These objects are reframed as material images for recall, they elicit mnemonic responses, and preserve personal remembrance, which derives from the complex content of survival (Read 1996: 29). They are familiar and represent the essence of a beloved home. Home functions as a symbol of identity and stability, a symbol of family or homeland, and, at the same time, especially the house where someone was born, is invested with a strong sense of nostalgia (Alston 2005:16).

The contents of the suitcases in the books mentioned above are objects from a home left behind and serve as memories of a period of life that has irrevocably ended and is highly desired. These household and family objects are souvenirs "mapped against the life history of an individual [...] from a compendium which is an autobiography" (Stewart 1993: 139). Some of them, such as photographs, teacups, plates, or even the statue, bear metonymic reference to domesticity. These referents are not limited to objects but can also metaphorically encompass events and now-distant experiences that the object can merely evoke and echo, but never fully recover (136).

All of them function as "transitional objects" (Parkin 1999: 313) that link the protagonists with their past before departure; they are internal versions of a person's life and history and have been carried by the protagonists to the new country to offer comfort and solace. Some of them are related to nostalgia for comfort and domestic bliss (table, plates, teacups, flowers), while others evoke nostalgia for the security of a home. Besides, some serve as symbols of the preservation of the homeland (pebble, small statue), thus becoming "symbols of loss and rescue" (Schlör 2014: 77) and embodiments of nostalgia. In this way, they are the protagonists' "lifejackets" in a new life, in a new world, in a new process of making a home away from home. They are important, carefully selected,

and very limited, as both in the past and today refugees could only carry one piece of luggage for economic or spatial reasons (Szabados 2016: n.p.).

These essential objects are the foundation of a new reality, a way to start over, connecting two temporalities: the past and the present. Even the act of packing and unpacking can be seen as “dealing with one’s own past and future, as an in-betweenness in time and space” (Schlör 2014: 78). Suitcases with their contents shape the stages of life and sequence the stories they represent. Their imbued double-edged quality is also apparent since their portability and mobility give them a paradoxical sense of disconnection, while also enabling migrants to bring along items that preserve their sense of belonging (Banerjee 2016: 7) and the possibility of new home-making (Schlör 2014: 78).

The material heritage of the suitcase is also related to the characters’ identity. The indicative symbolism of this is the bottle of soil that Nur puts in her suitcase in *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* Soil, a symbol of home (Salmose 2012: 140), becomes a nostalgic metaphor that conveys not only the personal, internal memory and nostalgia of Nur but also that of all displaced people in the world. Since it has a metonymic relation as an object to events and experiences, it is incomplete by nature, enveloping the present within the past (Stewart 1993: 136, 151). It represents the cultural identity and the roots of the homeland, and, at the same time, it becomes the base on which the new identity of the protagonist is built and strengthened. In this way, it represents and incorporates two temporalities and two worlds: the nostalgic world of the past and the world of a present reality.

In *Richla*, the protagonist also carries a bottle of soil with her, but not only that. Richla brings in her suitcase all the cultural mementoes of her homeland: a photo, a piece of cloth, a strange seed, a food recipe, a feather for writing, and a music box. All these souvenir objects are part of a whole, like metonymic samples of the scene of their originals (Stewart 1993: 136). They represent the culture of Richla’s homeland, such as music, spiritual heritage, traditional clothes, agriculture, local food, and monuments. These items change the people she meets as she walks through the town of her new country. Her new neighbours become better people because of the heritage Richla brings from her homeland. Like other protagonists in the examined books, although she encounters suspicion and non-acceptance from the locals, as the story progresses, through the characteristic and representational objects she carries from her country, she becomes accepted and has a significant impact on people’s lives. Her nostalgic feeling for her past and her homeland is expressed through the contents of her suitcase and is reframed in a positive and hopeful present and future, where two cultures mix.

Among the objects in a suitcase, the photographs that the fictional characters bring with them hold a special place. Photographs have an important structural function throughout the narrative, as they are used as thresholds, or connecting devices (Busi Rizzi 2020: 13), for the embedded stories of the characters’ past. They facilitate the memorisation of people, events, and objects and are associated with emotional experiences, which are placed within contemporary thoughts, feelings, and

circumstances (Roberts 2011: 24). Richla brings with her a photo that, disappointingly for the reader, is not included in the book's pictures, but as we are informed by the verbal text, it portrays something she has in common with the individual past and the collective history of the people she meets. She also has a photograph that invokes nostalgia and emotion not only in herself but also in the people of the host country for their historical heritage. This form of nostalgia comes from a common and irreversible past, from a lost homeland.

In *The Suitcase*, the photograph that the "stranger" brings with him is not real but has a realistic form, presenting the protagonist's life back in the homeland, especially the moments of his previous life in his home. This is why the protagonist, as a newcomer, tells the people that in his suitcase he has a wooden cabin with a kitchen, where he makes his tea. This sepia-style photo coexists with a new, colourful one at the end of the book. By viewing the photograph from the past, the protagonist gives form to his experiences, and structures his memories. His new life is connected with the old, and a new, hopeful reality is born. This reality does not lack nostalgia for the past, but it becomes "larger" to accommodate new friends and people, in a process of building a new life. It is an old photo portrait that functions as an identification of the protagonist, a depiction of his previous status in a certain spatial and temporal context which, when looked back on, leads him to notice both continuity and change and to re-evaluate his current situation (Roberts 2011: 11, 25). With its sepia style, the photograph attests to the protagonist's pre-existence (Barthes 1981: 82) but also reminds him that its content is already history. Photos are imbued with nostalgia and melancholy, since they are without a future (78), but at the same time, they bring the irreversible past into the present (Dant and Gilloch 2002: 3). In this way, like suitcases, they mediate between the now and then, between the current and the previously pictured self.

Finally, we can say that nostalgia is triggered not only by the souvenirs contained in a suitcase but also by those that did not fit in it. In the book *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* the questions that form the kernel of the problem are clearly and distinctly posed: "What would someone take with him if he were forced to leave his country? How can you fit a whole life in a suitcase?" (Kantzou and Nikoloudi 2016: 15). These questions find their answer at the end of the book: "We cried for the place we left behind, the place we found... and started our life from the beginning; with a suitcase full of memories" (21).

All the aforementioned contents of the suitcase are objects full of memories. They are object-souvenirs that come from a specific place, a specific time and that constitute a kind of biographical collection. A collection that, unlike the individual souvenirs it contains, offers an example rather than a sample, a metaphor rather than a metonymy (Stewart 1993: 151). In this collection, the past offers authenticity, and when the refugee finds a new place to stay, the collection automatically becomes a form that reframes the objects it contains. In this way, the suitcase on the one hand transforms into what Bidisha Banerjee aptly describes as "akin to a magic box that can grant momentary access to the world someone has left behind" (2016: 8). The memory of this world aids

in the continuity of identity and provides hope, roots, and an opportunity for a new life. On the other hand, as a collection of souvenirs from a past life, it creates a new context of an era that has ended. The objects of this era gradually lose their personal character and turn into public collections representing the refugee experience and, more specifically, refugee nostalgia. Thus, not only does the suitcase, with its special feature of “in-between-ness”, form a nostalgic mode, but so do the nature and the symbolism of its contents, both as individual souvenirs and as collections.

The suitcase as vessel

Although the suitcase itself is a symbol of the refugee, the creators of the picturebooks under consideration also use other images, symbols, metaphors, and stylistic choices related to the suitcase to deepen the nostalgic mode. Suitcases, as symbols of displaced people, carry many layers of meaning through their contents (O’Reilly and Parish 2017: 103) and through themselves. They, as “memory containers” (Banerjee 2016: 7), convey memories and experiences, encompassing both good and bad times, including the perilous journeys the displaced people must undertake to survive.

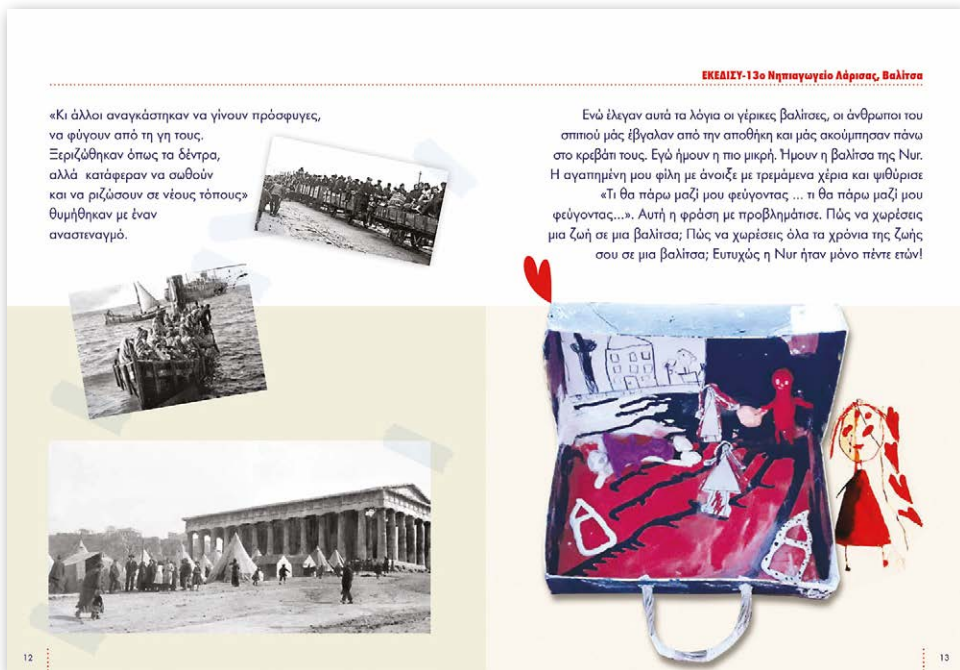


Fig. 4. A double-page spread from *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* (Kantzou and Nikoloudi 2016: 10–13). Black-and-white photographs are combined with photo collages of suitcases.

Sl. 4. Dvostranica iz slikovnice *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* [Što ću ponijeti sa sobom kad odem!] (Kantzou i Nikoloudi 2016: 10–13). Crno-bijele fotografije kombiniraju se s kolažem fotografija kovčega.

In *What I Will Take with Me When I Leave!* the two authors use photographic documents, as a medium of documentary realism (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2018: 155), to draw connections between refugees' journeys from the past and the current refugee crisis. Through the particularly nostalgic technique of flashbacks (Salmose and Sandberg 2021: 204) and of using black-and-white photographs combined with photo collages of suitcases (Fig. 4), the two authors establish a connection between suitcases and the ongoing refugee journeys. In doing so, they unveil the past and evoke a sense of nostalgia (Grainge 2000: 106), a prevailing theme throughout the book.

The presence of old black-and-white photographs in the text bears witness to the enduring connection of refugees' journeys and nostalgia. The use of emblematic documentary photographs – emotionally charged, politically and socially influenced, dating back to the Greek refugee flow from the Asia Minor Catastrophe – goes beyond showcasing the photographer's artistic skill. These images are the conscious act of persuasion and storytelling, intended to communicate a message to the audience (Curtis 2003: 5). They create concern and empathy (Hirsch 1983–1984: 142) in the reader, revealing that being a refugee is a timeless situation. Black-and-white photographs possess a timeless quality, connecting both to the original context and to the universal aspects of the human experience (Roberts 2011: 25). In this case, the memory of the journey, which is always related to a suitcase, is linked not only to the concept of historical memory, but also to the continuity of life, which can be revitalised in a new place with its assistance.

Staying on the theme of the journey, another technique used to evoke nostalgia is the stylistic quality of the text's rhythmic flow (Salmose 1993: 15). In *Palmyr*, the text on the first pages informs us that the refugee dragon had to leave suddenly: "One morning I had to go. I catch a suitcase, I don't fill it up" (Baum 2019: 1–2). From that point on in the Greek translation,⁴ a rhythmic first-person narration begins, using verbs in the present tense to convey the journey and its difficulties: "I walk, I run, I go on, and on, I jump, I cross the sea ..." (2019: n.p.). During the journey and its pictorial depiction, the suitcase helps the little dragon to face the difficulties, the dangers, and the obstacles. It is a dystopian journey, and the rhythmic narration and recollection enhance the feeling of nostalgia. In this case, the suitcases, as vessels of the journey they enclose, become amplifiers of nostalgia's impact for something lost that can never be regained. As irreversibility is essential to nostalgia (Salmose 2012: 121), and the possibility of an impossible journey to a mythic return becomes hopeless, nostalgia for the loss of "an enchanted world" (Boym 2001: xvii) pervades the new life of the protagonist.

The suitcase protects the little dragon, Palmyr, in many ways. As we can observe in the pictures, the suitcase, through its various transformations, aids the small dragon in its survival. It is transformed into a boat and lifejacket, an umbrella for the rain and the

⁴ The original text in English is written in the imperative verb mood: "One morning just go. Fetch a suitcase and don't fill it up" (Baum 2019: 1–2). In Greek, the entire text is translated in the first-person present tense. In both languages, the text exhibits a rhythmic flow with short, sharp sentences and repetitions of verbs, expressing the agony of fate and survival.

sun, a vehicle, a parachute, a hiding place, a ladder, a blanket, and a stair. At the book's conclusion, the suitcase is transformed into a book that recounts the dragon's life story and adventures.

As the protagonist narrates his journey, he meets new friends and ultimately survives. Through these transformations, the suitcase serves as a protector for Palmyr, since the nostalgia it embodies acts as "a strategy of survival" (Boym 2001: xvii). At the same time, both the obstacles the protagonist encounters and the transformations of the suitcase embody motifs connected to survival and refugees, as waves, boats and journeying. The idea of waves functions as a representation of the tragic and melancholic elements of life for the readers (Salmoise 2012: 258), and the concept of journeying as a movement from one place and time to another incorporates two temporalities and two places, linked by the symbol of a boat, a symbol of rescue and survival, which is embodied in a suitcase. As a cohesive link and as a reminder of a journey, suitcases establish a nostalgic connection between the past and the present that could not exist without the experience of a difficult journey, which intensifies the nostalgia for the past.

Conclusion

The creators of picturebooks about refugees seem to aim beyond depicting the difficulties faced by their displaced protagonists. Through their aesthetic choices, they strive to create a nostalgic mode to move their readers, despite their lack of a refugee background or similar personal experiences. In doing so, they use metaphors, stylistic and textual elements, iconographic imagery, motifs and symbols.

One of the most commonly used objects with metaphorical meaning is the suitcase. It is no coincidence that in most picturebooks about refugees,⁵ there is a suitcase, even on the cover page. The artists depict in detail the form and contents of the suitcases and underline their metaphorical role. As self-enclosed, miniature systems, in a recurring typical, old-fashioned form, suitcases become synonymous with the "micrographia" of life. They are frozen in time and space, with no possibility of returning to the past life they represent. The object-souvenirs they contain, regardless of their relation to the age, social or family role of their owner – which might correspond to reality – become "biographical" objects (Schlör 2014: 78) from a home and a life left behind. These include items like sepia-toned photos, domestic, distressed objects, and symbols of a homeland, such as a bottle of soil.

Most of these souvenirs, even though they have little or no objective material value, acquire emblematic significance for their owners and become precious treasures, as they are connected to their biography, to the "way of life that once surrounded them" (Stewart 1993: 139, 144). Unfortunately, between these souvenir-objects and their references there is no continuous identity, except through memory. It is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. At the same time, the souvenirs become "transitional" objects that authenticate the past and link it with

⁵ E.g. *Migrants* by Issa Watanabe (2020); *Migrant* by Maxine Trottier and Issabelle Arsenault (2011); *Marwan's Journey* by Patricia de Arias and Laura Boràs (2018); *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2006).

the discredited present of the protagonists. Even though these souvenirs are distinct objects, when placed in a suitcase, they reframe their meaning. They cease to be treated individually and now constitute a collection. Together, they represent the past and evoke an era and a place that is irrevocably lost and therefore nostalgic. Simultaneously, they become the roots and the starting point of a new beginning.

The nostalgic mode of picturebooks is also based on the form and the use of the suitcase as an object and of its contents. The black-and-white photographs, the rhythmic flow of the text, the gaps the pictures create, the use of other symbols and, of course, the enclosed dichotomies, evoke nostalgia. Nostalgia is embedded in dichotomies (Salmose 2012: 245) and the refugee suitcase embodies them. “Here and there”, “now and then” and “bitter and sweet” are some of the main dichotomous characteristics of the suitcases, giving them the essential feature of “in-between-ess” (Schlör 2014: 78). All of this results in moving the readers and engaging them in nostalgic feelings that might be “internal” or “external”, corresponding to their own experiences, those of their family and friends or at a non-personal level. In doing so, regardless of the nature of the experience – personal or not – the strategy remains impersonal (Salmose 2012: 244).

Through careful and deliberate aesthetic design, the suitcases become symbols of nostalgia. Just as symbols in literature are synthetic, polysemic images, evoking subliminal collective, psychic emotional associations in readers, suitcases become emblematic objects not only of travel and journey but also of refugeeism. They serve as fundamental symbols of the collective unconscious, enriched with associations due to history and human experience (Embler 1956: 54). These associations correspond to the image of the displaced, the journey they must undertake, what they carry with them, and what they leave behind. As true symbols, all these meanings stimulate an emotional response in the observer (49). Suitcases in their typical, old-fashioned form, filled with highly emotional objects, are transformed into timeless iconographic clichés that become creators of refugee nostalgia.

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Raspakiravanje nostalgije: kovčezi kao simboli nostalgije u slikovnicama o izbjeglicama

Nostalgija u slikovnicama o izbjeglicama oslanja se na estetske postupke kako bi stvorila nostalgično raspoloženje kroz verbalni i vizualni tekst. Estetske strategije uključuju slike, simbole, metafore, ponavljanje motiva i ikonizaciju. Kovčeg, kao simbol izbjeglice, igra pritom ključnu ulogu. Prikazan u staromodnom, klasičnom obliku, postaje sinonim za život u malom zatvoren u sebe. Predmeti-suveniri koje sadrži, poput fotografija u nijansama sepije, istrošenih kućanskih predmeta i simbola domovine kao što je boca zemlje, transformiraju se u „biografske“ predmete iz života u napuštenoj zemlji. Kada se ti predmeti smjeste u kovčeg, oni čine zbirku koja preoblikuje njihov kontekst. Nostalgično raspoloženje u slikovnicama izaziva se raznim estetskim strategijama, uključujući dihotomije, crno-bijele fotografije, ritmički tekst, slikovne praznine i simboličke transformacije. Svi ti postupci zajedno čine kovčege moćnim simbolima izbjegličke nostalgije.

Ključne riječi: estetika nostalgije, kovčezi, slikovnice, izbjeglice