
Glynis Clacherty is the author of *The Suitcase Stories*. By March 2001, this researcher had spent several years working with children all over southern Africa on issues ranging from violence against children to issues of child poverty and migration, hence she sought to run a workshop with child refugees in intercity Johannesburg as to record their experiences of life in South Africa, the results of which are documented in the 184 page book.

The children, with whom she became involved, were all under the age of 18, and they had become orphaned or separated from their parents prior to arriving in South Africa. The Children mentioned in the book were from the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Angola. All of the children's displacement had been caused by conflict. Over time, Clacherty becomes more involved with the children and begins to meet with them on a more regular basis. At first, the children were resistant to sharing stories of their past experiences. Furthermore, the children remained skeptical about any variety of formal "counseling". It was not until the following year, when the group is joined by art teacher Diane Welvering that the children begin to show signs of amenability. Welvering helps Clacherty to develop the suitcase project: an approach to which the children are much more receptive.

This approach emerges as an attempt to help the children deal with the psychological and social consequences of displacement caused by conflict. As part of this project, after teaching the children many different art techniques and giving them different materials, Clacherty and Welvering collect several second-hand suitcases and give them to the children. The children are then encouraged to use the materials and techniques to help tell their stories. As the children become more comfortable with Clacherty they begin both to share with her their artwork and begin also to tell their stories.

The book can be seen as a response to a request of a young Ethiopian girl, by the name of Zenash, who was initially a member of the group. “Help me make a book about my story.” She said to Clacherty, “People need to know why we are here. We don't choose to come here. They need to know” (p. 13). This book is thus a collection of the artwork and accompanying narratives of the children: the so called “Suitcase Storytellers”. In a brief section at the beginning of the book Clacherty describes the methodology employed in collecting the stories: “Children told me their stories, some over a period of three years. The process was completely voluntary and children could choose how much of their story to tell, if they wanted it taped, and even if they wanted to tell it all.” She transcribed the stories that were taped and “represents what the children said exactly as they said it, keeping the form of the spoken word” (p. 6). The book thus effectively conveys a powerful and moving depiction of the experiences, mind set, and circumstances surrounding the life of a refugee. *The Suitcase Stories* is written with (at least) two objectives in mind: The first, as previously mentioned, is that of magnifying the life experiences of this group of refugees. The second is to present this “mixed media storytelling” approach as a viable substitute for more widely practiced clinical approaches of psychosocial healing. The first objective is done in an extremely positive and moving manner as the narratives being presented in the words of the refugee provides not only a useful insight into the circumstances surrounding the life of a child refugee, but it also manages to provide an increased acumen of the psychosocial effects of conflict induced migration. In coordination with this objective, the
The book also does a decent job at placing these narratives in a greater political and social context. This is done primarily with a collection of brief overviews of the circumstances in the refugee’s countries of origin that led to their displacement. Depending on the reader’s past knowledge of these events, these overviews may be seen as oversimplifications. For example, the book uses limited material to discuss the intricate circumstances that not only led to the Rwandan genocide (the overview begins in 1959) but also that overviews the ongoing consequences of the conflict. These overviews could have been done with a lot more conceptual rigor. The second objective is seen primarily in a brief section toward the end of the book by Clacherty titled “A Reflection on the Storytelling Process” (p. 166). Though done in a (sufficiently) convincing manner, this section is rhetorically misplaced. The overall context of the book is seemingly geared toward a general audience of readers who have little experience with issues involving conflict induced migration or approaches of psychosocial healing. To an average reader, the arguments are less than compelling as the there is little to nothing that a person not directly involved with the fields of migration or psychosocial counseling would be compelled, let alone be able, to do with the information provided. This leaves the reader questioning the intended audience of the final arguments. The Suitcase Stories, as stated on the back cover, “provides a unique insight into the past and present worlds of refugee children in South Africa”. Therefore, it is a rewarding read for most.

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