

## Study Notes for *Ships in the Field* by Susanne Gervay

*Ships in the Field.*

By Susanne Gervay

Illustrated by Anna Pignataro

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### Synopsis

‘Ships in the Field’ is both personal and universal. Anna Pignataro and Susanne Gervay translated their families’ personal experiences of migration into ‘Ships in the Field’ translating it into the universal refugee immigrant experience of war, loss, migration, hope and home.

The story focus is on a second generation girl who carries the inherited fragility of her parents’ refugee and war trauma as she seeks to find a happy home life. There are wonderful moments of humor, love, courage and hope.

The little girl holds onto her ‘Brownie’ - a stuffed toy dog that represents her emotional alto-ego and companion. Her Brownie is a ‘real friend’ who shares her life as she becomes involved in the healing of her parents’ and her own trauma as they create a new future.

When Brownie and the little girl find a homeless dog, the family’s reaction symbolizes rebirth and healing in a new land. Anna’s parents left their dog behind. Susanne’s parents found a homeless dog in Australia. Now there is another dog, a new life.

Back Cover of *Ships in the Field*

‘Everyone has the right to a nationality’

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Jeer hat das Resht auf eyne Staatsangehörigkeit. German

Svako ima pravo na državljanstvo. Bosnian-Croatian

Minden személynék joga van valamely állampolgársághoz. Hungarian

Setiap orang berhak atas sesuatu kewarga-negaraan. Indonesian

Sing saha bae boga hak dina nangtukeun kawarga-nagaraanana. Sudanese

Her ferdin bir uyrukluk hakkı vardır. Turkish

‘Ships in the Field’ recognizes the refugee and an immigrant world. That is why Article 15 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights has been translated into a language from a country in each continent.

Excerpt from *Ships in the Field*

*Papa drives into the forest because*

*He loves rivers and trees.*

*Papa grew up in a village in the old country,*

*before it was broken.*

*Ma grew up in a city in the old country,  
before it was broken.*

Anna's Pignataro's double page muted water colours containing these words reveal a journey through a landscape of inclusion with basilicas, medieval cities, wooden cottages, farm houses, disparate trees as they search for an unbroken future.

The word 'broken' carries with it the language of a child, the language of a person speaking English as a second language, the subtext of war.

The illustration and text are integral in the theme of journeys to a new land.

### Author Inspiration

*Ships in the Field* are deeply embedded in the struggles of Susanne's family's wartime, human rights violations and the refugee experience. Her parents carrying their little brother, left all they knew to escape across 'no-man's land' minefields in the dead of night for freedom. Susanne's mother's Hungarian world was no longer the same with its operas, balls, visiting the health spa on Lake Balaton with her father's world as a Professor of Engineering at the university gone. The world of Strauss waltzes, a household with servants and afternoon teas on Margarita Island on the Danube had ended. Susanne's father's world was also gone with his land taken and years as a war prisoner.

The Austrian refugee camp was crowded, difficult, as they waited to be selected to go to a new country. They wanted to go to America, but it was Australia who took them. They went as bonded migrants on a battered WW11 warship. Like other refugees they worked long hours – her father in the Holden car factory; her mother in the clothing factory. Life in Sydney began in one room with the family sleeping on mattresses on the floor. But there was a belief in a new country and the future.

*Ships in the Field* contains Susanne's family's stories. Her father made hats from the serviettes at dinner time for the family's

amusement. Her mother cooked chicken soup every night. Her father worked in a factory and mother sewed dresses both in a factory and at home. Their trips into the country were happy family time and a celebration of being safe and here. Her father did see the ‘ships in the field.’

Susanne was deeply moved for herself and her parents and all those who make the journey to find home, when Governor Marie Bashir awarded her an Order of Australia in 2011.

Susanne’s conversation with ABC radio Richard Fidler is a small part of the journey - [www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/11/15/3066754.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/11/15/3066754.htm);

Website: [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com)

### Illustrator Inspiration

Anna Pignataro was waiting for a story that touched her. When she read ‘Ships in the Field’ she accepted immediately. ‘It’s my story’ she said. Her parents and family were expelled from Egypt and homeless. Although Italian, they had no place there and they migrated to Australia. They had to leave their beloved dog in Italy. Anna’s water colour washes with the soft lines and palette capture the character, love, family as they struggle with the past to seek a future. Her daughter became the natural model for the girl in Ships in the Field.

Anna put aside all other projects to dedicate the next 6 months to *Ships in the Field* – which was a deeply personal and important journey for Anna.

### Inside the Imagery & Ideas of ‘Ships in the Field’

‘Ships in the Field’ is rich in subtext with the illustrations adding and illuminating meaning, complementing and enriching the text. The use of watercolours with a pastel palette, free flowing scribbly pencil outlines and generous use of white space create an artistic interpretation. The book cover is warm and welcoming with the red checked gingham spine, girl running in the field carrying a picnic basket and her stuffed ‘Brownie’ as the journey begins.

#### 1. Cover – Ships in the Field

There is a background of green fields with a girl running along the road between them. She's carrying her stuffed dog 'Brownie' and a picnic basket. The scene is a happy one with a light palette and soft colours – greens, yellow, light blue shoes.

There is great movement in the scene with the girl running with her plait whooshing behind her. The pencil lines and soft shadows under her feet propel the reader with her as she runs to the picnic.

The use of sharp red contrasts, yet compliments the soft water colours of the scene. The gingham checked spine, red of the title outlined in white, and the picnic rug in the basket are joyful.

The cover is intriguing with the gingham title – Ships in the Field – and the illustration of a girl racing to a picnic through fields. The title 'Ships in the Field' engenders curiosity. There is an anomaly. Ships sail on water not land. 'Ships' becomes symbolic of the 'journey' of an immigrant world. 'Field' becomes symbolic of the end of the journey, that is home and safety.

## 2. Endpapers

The red and white gingham pattern engenders emotions of home with gingham tea-towels, shirts, picnics with gingham picnic rugs, family as evident in classics such as in the musical Oklahoma and Dorothy who wore a blue gingham dress in the Wizard of Oz book and film.

## 3. The Dogs of 'Ships in the Field'

Brownie – a stuffed brown dog (teddy) who is the alter ego of the girl - someone to talk to, confide her fears and hopes, her companion and a way to work out her feelings and thoughts.

The illustrations show Brownie as part of the girl's life, sewing with her and her Ma, being twirled with her by her Papa, seeking comfort with her in her Ma's arms at night.

The dog of war – an ash covered, battle torn white dog. It has a faint touch of brown on its forehead. It is the dog Ma had to leave behind in the 'old country'. It is also the symbol of war representing the memory of a lost hope that travels with the mother to her new home.

The flying dog – the dog of hope, leaving the dog of war dying in the ashes of the past; flying with the refugees and their hopes for the future. The dog is white with brown earthy patches. Its presence is felt in the future, as its brown paw print dot the ground around the little girl, who represents the future.

The girls' words and drawings of a dog – symbolic of the whole families dreams of a complete family. One day, they will have a dog again.

The scared little dog - is a mixture of the dog of war and the flying dog. It is white with brown patches, but has the ash black edges and scribbled lines. It is a lost dog who has found home. The whole family has found home, belonging and their 'field'.

#### 4. Subtext : The theme of the refugee and immigrant experience

'Ships in the Field' can be read as a warm narrative of family life, with finding a dog as the narrative drive.

However within the words and illustrations are the refugee and immigrant experience and search for belonging.

- a. The struggle to create a new life in a new country is integral to the refugee journey. They start wherever they can get work. The girl's parents no longer own home, land and the mother isn't a teacher.

Ma was a teacher in the old country. Papa was a farmer in the old country. In the new country Ma sews dresses. Papa works in the car factory.

- b. Children are silent travelers in the refugee journey. They are often not recognized. 'Ships in the Field' gives voice to the voice and emotions of young people on this journey.

c. The mother's emotional distance throughout both in text and illustration reveals the emotional trauma of the past as it impacts on the journey to a new home and belonging.

## 1. Language

Speaking a native language as a second language brings barriers and complexities.

'Ships in the Field' is the mispronunciation of Papa who means 'Sheep in the Field'. The mispronunciation is humorous, but also a cause of ridicule, alienation of the parents, anger for the girl and courage, as she defends her father by singing, 'Babb baa black ships.'

Non English speakers face barriers in continuing their professions, gaining work and often accepting unskilled jobs. They also can face barriers in social acceptance and can become either isolated or locked into ethnic communities.

## 2. Color

Color interlocks with the text to enhance emotion, the journey, war and peace. While Anna Pignataro uses strong primary colors, they are softly muted with water color washes, blurred edges, impressionist style.

There are is brave use of large white spaces which intensify the focus on the illustration and allows the illustrations to crosses borders. This enhances the movement and life force within 'Ships in the Field'.

Black is used carefully, with soft gray, muddied tones representing war. The dog of war is outlined with softy black, like ashes.

However it is red that is the dominant color. It is an innovative color as it links into so many emotions and cultures. Red acts as a thread drawing readers into special places, relationships and themes, while also partnering the narrative journey home.

### Red:

- picnic gingham red rug representing home and domesticity
- the little girl wears a red dress, highlighting her positive life force and central role in the story
- Ma has splashes of red on her clothes as she fights for connection with family and home
- the paper serviettes at the dinner table have red dots connecting the family and even Brownie
- the red of the ships represents the emotional power of the journey
- the red splashes on Ma's clothes in the last illustration have intensified and is strong and bright

### 3. 'Ships in the Field' – opens discussion

Example of the themes, techniques and discussion:-

Double page spread of the refugees boarding the ship (pages 14-15)

Page 13: Text: 'I don't like war, Brownie.'

Page 14-15 wordless illustration.

- a. Page 14 War Scene: - is a scene of a war damaged city, town, village with it muted charcoal watercolors, and faded red rooftops, broken fences, lights, houses, chairs ....community.
- b. Page 15 Ship Scene: - is a scene of escape with refugees boarding a ship. The colors are clearer and the red of the ship dominates the page with hope.

- c. The fighter planes in the war scene at the top become black birds, then white seagulls as they cross the red ship, representing the journey of war to peace
- d. The dog of war, with its dirty white color and ash black outlines is dying and dies. The paw prints are charcoal black. As the refugees move towards the ships, the dog becomes a white brown patched flying dog of hope and dream. The girl is standing in the future moving forward, but looking back. She is surrounded by the brown paw prints of the dog of hope.
- e. The refugees are drawn with their backs to us, carrying a few things for their new lives. Some are transparent as we know they do not make it to the ship. However others do make it.
- f. The refugees become tiny as they near the ship, representing the enormity of their journey.
- g. The few refugees who will board the ship are tiny like shadows within long shadows tied to the war and past.
- h. The huge poles symbolize the barriers to boarding the ship.
- i. The red ship is huge taking up half the page, taller than the clouds as the journey is huge.

### In the Classroom

*Ships in the Field* stimulates students to enquire and discuss. It emotionally and intellectually engages readers in the story of refugees, immigrants, war, belonging and finding home. It has relevance to newly arrived immigrants, indigenous and the many cultures. It provides pathways into the past, present and future developing students' curiosity and imagination.

*Ships in the Field* promotes skills used in the process of historical and current inquiry, encouraging the use of sources. The key inquiry questions provide a framework for developing students' knowledge, understanding and skills.

The multiple layers of meaning in the text and illustrations in *Ships in the Field*, give it wide application across all ages.

## Issues

1. Refugees
2. Family
3. Belonging
4. War
5. Diversity in culture

## Classroom discussion and activities

Interviews of grandparents, parents, family, friends, teachers, organizations.

- Retell a story about an immigrant family
- Personal opinions on the story/stories
- Group discussion and sharing of interviews

## Research Projects

- Internet and/or visits to museums on immigrants
- News in the world
- Research relevant organizations such as the United Nations.
- Create reports.

## Questions

1. Do you like the little girl and her parents? Explain why. Discuss the characters in *Ships in the Field*. Would you like them to be your friends? Why?
2. Why is the little girl ‘frightened of war’? What is war? Why does war happen? Why is the family happy to live in a country without war? What problems do they face?
3. What do you feel about each of the many representations of dogs and the dog illustrations?

4. In what way is the girl and her parents similar to people you know?

5. Why is the girl upset that people laugh at her father's accent? What does she do? What would you do?

6. Anna Pignataro's illustrations are emotional and complex. Studying, enjoying, emotionally engaging in the illustrations opens discussion. For example:-

- Explore the multiple meanings in the illustrations
- Why is the little war torn dog on some of the pages?
- What are funny scenes? Why are they funny? How do they make you feel?
- What emotions are portrayed? How are they portrayed?

7. Find out more and report on:-

Courage to Care - [www.couragetocare.com.au/](http://www.couragetocare.com.au/)

The Jewish Museum Washington - [www.ushmm.org/](http://www.ushmm.org/)

Ellis Island, New York - [www.ellisland.org/](http://www.ellisland.org/)

United National Australia - [www.un.org.au/](http://www.un.org.au/)

United Nations USA - [www.unausa.org/](http://www.unausa.org/)

Ibby – [www.ibby.org](http://www.ibby.org)

Room to Read – [www.roomtoread.org](http://www.roomtoread.org)

The Kim Foundation - Kim Phuc - [www.kimfoundation.com/](http://www.kimfoundation.com/)

8. Log onto Susanne Gervay's website – [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com) and you can blog or twitter her and tell her what you think about *Ships in the Field*.