



EmpathyLab 2019

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Created *Mar '19*

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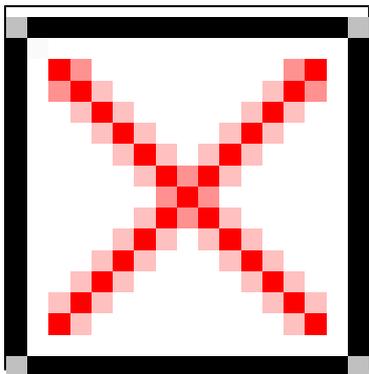
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An update from **EmpathyLab** founder **Miranda McKearney**

*In 2015 a new organisation called **EmpathyLab***

*sprung into life, drawing attention to the scientific evidence that reading builds real-life empathy skills. Since then, it has developed practical programmes to help schools, libraries and families harness the power of stories to increase children's understanding and practice of empathy. Books for Keeps has followed its progress with interest. Here, **EmpathyLab's** founder, **Miranda McKearney**, looks ahead to **Empathy Day**, and reports on a powerful refugee project with the Scouts.*

Get ready for Empathy Day, 11 June



In our divided world, empathy is a beacon of hope. We founded [Empathy Day](#) [3] to be a lightning rod for a new national conversation about the power of books to build empathy, and the power of empathy to build a better world. This year it's on 11 June.

Empathy Day is the day to step out of our bubble and make new connections with each other. And to celebrate a dynamic new wave of empathy work in our schools and libraries. The calls to action are **Read:** because stories and book characters build our real-life empathy; **Connect:** make new connections with people, inspired by sharing stories; **Do:** put empathy into action, in your home and your community.

If you only have a minute, these are our recommended actions

- Tweet about #EmpathyDay to swell the national empathy conversation
- Share how a book character made you **feel** in the huge #ReadForEmpathy campaign
- Use our [Read For Empathy Guides](#) [3] to choose a book for a young person

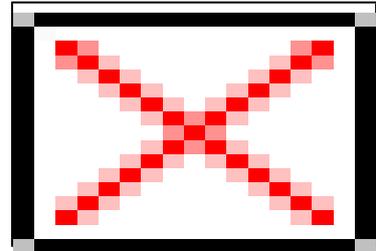
Save our *Read Connect Do* suggestions for another day - Empathy Day can be any day!

A new refugee project

One of Empathy Day's functions is to act as a focal point for on-going work to build children's empathetic understanding. An example is a powerful refugee project EmpathyLab has been working on with the Scouts, the illustrator Jane Ray, and Year 5 children from Kenilworth Primary School in Borehamwood. It has led to a new generation of children developing empathy skills and a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by displaced people.

Called **Moving Connections**, the project has helped children deepen their understanding of refugees' experiences. It was initiated by the **Scouts' Heritage Service**, drawing on the organisation's proud history of supporting displaced people. In the First World War Scouts helped Belgian refugees arriving at Folkestone, and Scouts across the world are still helping refugees. This project used a collection of objects from members of the **Scout International Relief Service**, who were sent to European war torn countries to help in the displaced person camps. The work was funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

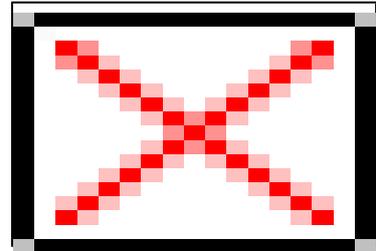
The project kicked off in autumn 2018 with a Year 5 workshop to raise awareness of refugees and migrants. Children looked at a selection of famous people and worked out what they had in common - they had all moved from their home country. Looking at the people in detail, the class then discovered which were refugees, and which were migrants, and explored the difference between the two terms.



Deciding which five items to pack if they had to flee their home, the class agreed that money would be useful! The top five things packed were money, mobile phone, games console and touchingly, a family photo.

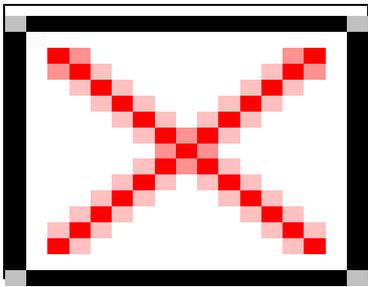
An activity which aimed to show the class the commonalities between themselves and refugees saw them write down their likes and dislikes, and then finding matches amongst their classmates. The main commonality was that they were all human.

In the plenary the class showed they understood that refugees are just like you and I, humans. And although we might not speak the same language, we can connect with people through similar likes and hobbies. One girl when asked, 'What would you do if a refugee joined your class?' immediately said, 'I would respect them, not judge them and be their friend?.'



[Jane Ray](#) [4] was chosen as the artist to work with Kenilworth's children. She has first-hand experience, because she runs a class at the **Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants**, with author Sita Brahmachari. One of **EmpathyLab's** aims is to help children recognise a wider range of emotions, in order to understand themselves and others better. Jane's wonderful, expressive artwork is a powerful springboard, and many of her books have empathy at their heart.

Jane collaborated with Year 5, creating artwork that helped the children to empathise with the refugee experience. Time spent



Empathy BookSpotting inspired the class to focus on books with refugee and empathy themes, and they contributed books recommendations on luggage labels. These included Francesca Sanna's [The Journey](#) [5]; Kate Milner's [My Name is Not Refugee](#) [6], Judith Kerr's **When Hitler Stole the Pink Rabbit**, and Morris Gleitzman's [Boy Overboard](#) [7].

The children worked with Jane to draw a variety of facial expressions, exploring how to 'read' feelings. The idea of flight, migration and freedom manifested itself in the form of 'Wish Birds', where the class wrote wishes for a child refugee arriving in the country. One response, 'I wish everyone could be treated equally' shows the power of their understanding.

The third workshop took place at the Scouts Headquarters at Gilwell Park, Chingford. The class learnt about Scouts' contribution on the Home Front during both World Wars and activity in Prisoner of War camps. Children explored objects which brought the learning to life. Inspired by these, the class created artworks, including letters thanking the Scouts, and comic strips from both the perspective of a Scout and a refugee.

Further workshops have created postcards to be sent to refugee transit camps in Greece and Sudan where Scouts are working, and an Empathy Tree which explores the empathetic vocabulary learnt by the children throughout the project. One session looked at campaigning and activism, which resulted in the class creating their own campaign placards in support of refugees. The children also wrote a letter to their MP, expressing their hopes for refugees arriving in the UK.

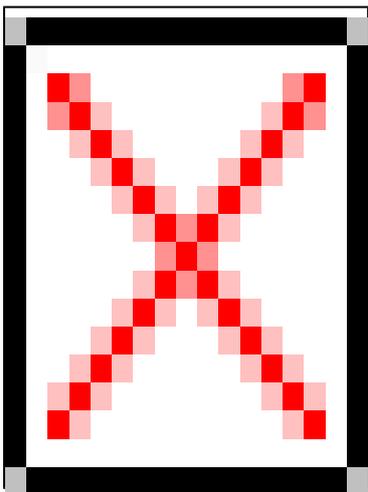
All the material was brought together in a moving exhibition at the Mill Green Museum.

Jane Ray describes the illustrator's role

I ran three workshop days at Kenilworth. The idea of birds as symbols of freedom is a recurring theme in my work and in our first session, having read my book [Ahmed and the Feather Girl](#) [8], the children created Wish Birds. They imagined what it might be like to have to leave their homeland, and then wrote hopes and wishes on the birds' pleated paper wings.

As an illustrator I need to be able to show facial expressions to tell a story, and after reading **The Unicorn Prince**, we experimented with drawing expressions on blank faces.

We talked about how we interpret what people might be feeling through their expressions. The children also drew self-portraits and thought about how they communicate their own feelings.



In our second workshop we explored symbolism, how simple images can represent

something bigger and more emotional. For example, the bird representing freedom, and the tree representing growth and strength, with its buds and blossom, leaves and fruit representing new hope and development. The Empathy Tree is our response to these ideas, and was created by the whole class ? a truly collaborative work!

In our final workshop together, everyone was given a postcard on which to paint a brightly coloured bird. On the back they wrote a hopeful and friendly message. These will be reproduced and posted to children who are currently living in refugee camps and temporary homes in other parts of the world ? the children of Kenilworth Primary School holding out their hands to children of similar age whose lives have been torn apart by war and upheaval.

I have loved my time with Year 5. Through the art activities, working with the Scouts, the sharing of books, and the resulting discussion and thought, the children have developed a much deeper and more empathetic understanding of the refugee experience and our response to it?.

Some EmpathyLab resources for schools and libraries

- **Read For Empathy book collections**, curated by an expert panel. 30 books for primary aged children, and 15 for secondary. You can [download the linked Guides](#) [3] and [buy the collections](#) [9] at a 26% discount.
- **Toolkits for Empathy Day**: there are three toolkits with creative ideas and resources.
- **Training**: EmpathyLab now offers training. Enquiries to miranda@empathylab.uk [10]

Miranda McKearney

is a social justice entrepreneur who has spent 35 years turning kitchen table ideas into nationwide campaigns, culminating in founding The Reading Agency, a national charity, in 2002.

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Links:

[1] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/miranda-mckearney>

[2] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/235>

[3] <http://www.empathylab.uk>

[4] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/223/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-223-jane-ray>

[5] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/222/childrens-books/reviews/the-journey>

[6] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/225/childrens-books/reviews/my-name-is-not-refugee>

[7] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/139/childrens-books/reviews/boy-overboard>

[8] <http://feeds.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/186/childrens-books/reviews/ahmed-and-the-feather-girl>

[9] <http://www.peters.co.uk/empathy2019>

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