

Teaching Children About Human Rights Using the Work of Eve Bunting

by Judith Singer

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child looks at human rights from the vantage point of meeting the particular needs of children. It also provides a way of looking at human rights issues through the eyes of a child. Eve Bunting (1928 -), an author of more than 100 books for children, has an extraordinary ability to engage children in thinking about serious and complicated social issues through her writing. Several books by Bunting can be used to stimulate discussions of human rights issues with elementary school children. I have paired titles and book summaries with specific human rights concerns.

To learn more about the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, see Kay Castelle, *In the Child's Best Interest* (NY: Defense for Children International, 1989) or www.unicef.org.

Every child has the right to be loved.

Train to Somewhere (NY: Clarion Books, 1996). Illustrated by Ronald Himler.

Children on the "Train to Somewhere" are orphans from New York City in the late 1800's. They are being sent to live with farmers in the Midwest, where they will provide hands to do the work of farming and homesteading. This story has us accompany a young orphan girl, lonely for her mother, who worries that no one will adopt her. Her yearning for love reminds readers of present-day foster-care children, many of whom also yearn for love they may never receive.

Every child has the right to a home.

Fly Away Home (NY: Clarion Books, 1991). Illustrated by Ronald Himler.

Andrew and his dad live in the airport, because Andrew's dad doesn't make enough money to pay rent on an apartment. The airport is warm and safe, but they have to be very careful not to be noticed or the airport security guards will throw them out. Sometimes Andrew wants to push the people on their way to their homes and tell them, "Why do you have homes when we don't?" The story conveys a sense of the fundamental unfairness in not having a home.

Refugee children have the right to special protection.

How Many Days to America ? (NY: Clarion Books, 1988). Illustrated by Beth Peck.

"It was nice in our village. Till the night in October when the soldiers came." This family is desperate to escape the soldiers who oppress them in their country. Together with a boat full of other refugees, they drift in the ocean; they are prey to thieves; and they are sent back by a group of soldiers, before they finally find welcome in America. Children can feel the fears of a child uprooted from his home, not knowing whether he and his family will ever be accepted in a new place.

Every child has the right to peace and friendship among all people.

Smoky Night (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1994). Illustrated by David Diaz.

Daniel and his mother watch from their window as rioters carry off household appliances, clothing from the cleaners, shoes, and footballs. As they carry away cases of cereal from Mrs. Kim's store, Daniel muses that he and his mother do not shop in Mrs. Kim's store, because, "Mama says it's better if we buy from our own people." When their building catches on fire, Daniel and his mother are thrown together with Mrs. Kim. Following the lead of their two cats, they begin to re-examine whether there can be friendship with people who are not "our own."

Every child has the right to freedom from armed conflict.

The Wall (NY: Clarion Books, 1990). Illustrated by Ronald Himler.

This story speaks of the sadness and loss of the Vietnam War through the absence of a grandfather in a little boy's life. Each of the more than 58,000 names on the Wall in Washington, D. C. stands for a lost parent, grandparent, brother, sister or friend. The little boy agrees he is proud of his grandfather, "but I'd rather have my grandpa here."

Every child has the right to life and to protection from danger.

Terrible Things (NY: Harper and Row, 1980). Illustrated by Stephen Gammell.

In this allegory of the Nazi holocaust, the "Terrible Things" represent an unknown and unfathomable danger. The animals live together peacefully, until the day the "Terrible Things" come and begin to take them away in their nets, one group at a time. None of the remaining groups makes a protest, until there is no one left except the little rabbit. There is a chilling sense of impending doom in this book, which raises the question of the consequences when we fail to take responsibility for one another. Little rabbit provides a glimmer of hope at the end, as he escapes the "Terrible Things" and runs off to warn the other animals in the forest.

A world without these rights--to love, a home, protection, peace, and friendship, is a world full of "Terrible Things" for children. Eve Bunting helps readers feel the fears of the characters in each story, but in each story she also provides a ray of hope. The final book raises the question of what each of us has to do to preserve that hope. What will happen to our own rights if we don't take a stand for rights of others?

Other books by Eve Bunting on social issues include:

Someday a Tree (NY: Clarion Books, 1993). Illustrated by Ronald Himler. Environmental concerns.

Going Home (NY: HarperCollins, 1996). Illustrated by David Diaz. Ethnic Identity.

A Day's Work (NY: Clarion Books, 1994). Illustrated by Ronald Himler. Immigration.

So Far from the Sea (NY: Clarion Books, 1998). Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet. Injustice/Japanese Internment.

