

Reading Matters

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Getting by with a Little Help: Celebrating Books about Partnerships with Families by Jean Dugan

All families are different. With apologies to Tolstoy, happy families are as unlike each other as are unhappy families and everyone in between, and each of them — to one degree or another — needs outside help from time to time. To that end, there must be in place a network of support robust enough for all families who need assistance. Fred Rogers called it a “neighborhood expression of care.”

For the families of refugees, the journey is a scary one and those who enable them along the way deserve profound admiration and respect. Three new books (each of them beautifully and imaginatively illustrated) tell the story of three different family situations.

Jean Dugan, a long-time friend of *Exchange*, has been connecting kids with books for over 40 years. She helped establish a library program in the elementary schools of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and later brought her love of children's literature to the public library there. This is one more opportunity for her to share the best new books with children and those who care about them.



In **My Beautiful Birds**, a boy named Sami mourns the loss of his pet pigeons as his family leaves the destruction of their town in Syria and walks many miles to the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. There they find new friends, a school, and a safe community of shared culture. And out of the same sky, Sami finds new beautiful birds — pigeons of course, but also yellow canaries and rose colored finches to brighten his world. Suzanne Del Rizzo's polymer and mixed media textured illustrations are astounding in their detail.



My Beautiful Birds by Suzanne Del Rizzo (Pajama Press, 2017) Ages 5 – 8.



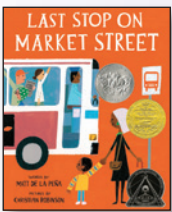
Children's relationships to their pets are universally appealing, and sometimes animal stories are the easiest with which to identify. Kunkush is a refugee cat, hidden in a basket, carried out of Mosul and on to Greece in a crowded inflatable boat, long after the family's bag of food has been consumed and their clothes and other personal items left behind. This is an incredible true story by and about the volunteers who cared enough to help the family reunite with its littlest member — in Norway! The book includes a map and photos of Kunkush, his family, and his rescuers.

Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush's Incredible Journey by Doug Kuntz and Amy Shrodes, illustrated by Sue Cornelison (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2017) Ages 5 – 8.

The Journey is a much darker book, a meld of immigrant stories that takes a family from the comfort of a home by the seaside after the death of the father during the chaos of war in an unnamed country. Mother and two children leave everything behind and travel in secret, along the way learning the realities of border guards, human smuggling, and cap-sized boats on their way to a place where they can feel safe again. Francesca Sanna's art is haunting, her story hopeful.



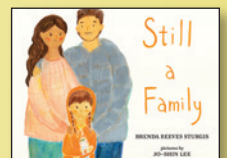
The Journey by Francesca Sanna (Flying Eye Books, 2016) Ages 5 – 10.



In 2016, Matt de la Peña won the Newbery Medal for **Last Stop on Market Street**, an unusual feat for a picture book. The story is revealed gradually; we only know at first that young CJ and his Nana are going for a bus ride. While CJ wishes for the cellphones and bikes and material goods that he sees in the hands of other children, Nana quietly points out the things that money can't buy — the rhythm of guitar music, the soaking rain, the bus driver's magic tricks. It's not until the end of the book that we learn their destination — the soup kitchen at the last stop on the Market Street line where they gather with their family of friends to break bread together.

Last Stop on Market Street by Matt De La Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2015) Ages 4 – 8.

The preschooler in **Still a Family** used to have a quiet room with a comfortable bed and a quilt that kept her cozy. Now she lives in a women's shelter with her mother while her father lives nearby in a shelter for men. Despite being homeless, the family maintains a semblance of togetherness as they meet each day for community meals, walks in the park, and a shared birthday cupcake, complete with a wish and a candle. Jo-Shin Lee's illustrations are childlike and perfect for telling this all too common story from the viewpoint of a very young child. The book includes resources for helping families who are homeless.



Still a Family by Brenda Reeves Sturgis, illustrated by Jo-Shin Lee (Albert Whitman & Company, 2017) Ages 3 – 6.



Yasmin is the self-proclaimed “world's biggest book fan.” She is also a passionate voice for justice when the questionable politics of her town in India threaten to close Book Uncle's rickety neighborhood library with its sign: Books. Free. Give one. Take one. Read-read-read. Yasmin and her friends Reeni and Anil, their parents, neighbors, and teachers have all benefited from Book Uncle's generosity and their letter-writing campaign in his support during the mayoral campaign is a victory for community, literacy, and freedom. This would be a good read-aloud for the early grades.

Book Uncle and Me by Uma Krishnaswami (Groundwood Books, 2017) Ages 7 – 10.