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The representation of the refugee experience in Jane Mitchell's *Run For Your Life* and 'There and Here'

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ABSTRACT

Jane Mitchell's novel, *Run For Your Life* (2022), and short story, *There and Here* (2015), document the lives of two young female protagonists as they navigate and endure life in Direct Provision in Ireland. Mitchell's texts encourage young readers to have empathy for the plight of international protection applicants in Ireland by detailing the systemic problems with the deeply flawed Direct Provision system. My discussion will examine Mitchell's texts for child and young adult (YA) readers in the context of the Direct Provision system and the rise of far-right, anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment present within contemporary Irish society. I draw upon Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes' RefugeeCrit framework and Julia Hope's development of this framework to examine Mitchell's representation of the refugee experience in Direct Provision and contemporary Irish society, focusing particularly on the details omitted from the texts regarding the protagonists' nationalities, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and reasons for their displacement. I argue that to fully evoke empathy in the reader; to avoid a hierarchisation of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures; and to prevent a homogenisation of refugee experiences, it is vital that within narratives of displacement for children, characters' nationalities and their cultural backgrounds are specified and the reasons for their displacement provided.

KEYWORDS

Irish children's literature; displacement; refugees; RefugeeCrit; Direct Provision

Introduction

Jane Mitchell begins *Run For Your Life* (2022) with a dedication to the over two thousand young people living in Direct Provision, some of whom she writes, "have lived out their childhoods waiting for a decision about their futures."[1] The book follows 12-year-old female protagonist Azari and her mother's journey to Ireland and their navigation of the Direct Provision system. *Run For Your Life* is the most recent of Mitchell's texts focussing on the topic of migration and forced displacement: in 2017, she published *A Dangerous Crossing* which detailed the story of a young boy fleeing Syria and in 2015, her short story "There and Here," about a refugee family living in Direct Provision in Dublin, was included in the then Laureate na nÓg Eoin Colfer's edited story collection, *Once Upon a Place*. This paper analyses *Run For Your Life* and "There and Here" and examines the representation of refugees' experiences in Ireland and the Direct Provision system. The Direct Provision

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system in Ireland "is intended to provide for the basic needs of people who are awaiting decisions on their applications for international protection."[2] At the conclusion of *Run For Your Life*, Mitchell includes an explanatory note that informs readers that in 2021, "more than 7,000 people lived in Direct Provision centres across Ireland, of whom over 2,000 were children."[3] Mitchell's texts repeatedly and emphatically highlight the fundamental problems with individual Direct Provision centres and the system as a whole.

Although *Run For Your Life* and *There and Here* powerfully reflect the rising far-right, anti-migrant, and anti-refugee sentiment and climate in contemporary Irish society that has culminated in violent riots and protests in 2023 and 2024, the texts participate in a homogenisation of non-Irish and non-white ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures through failing to disclose specific information regarding the protagonists' identities and backgrounds. Both protagonists – Tanza in "There and Here" and Azari in *Run For Your Life* – experience racism, and, in *Run For Your Life*, other students in Azari's school indiscriminately call all characters of colour Africans and Black. The students' disregard for individual characters' backgrounds, nationalities, and ethnicities, along with their homogenisation of diverse racial identities is meant to reflect their prejudice, racism, and lack of cultural competence. However, both texts conceal the nationalities, racial identities, and ethnicities of their protagonists – the reader is provided only with general details about both girls' home countries – and as Sarah Park Dahlen argues, a "lack of specificity" results in a homogenisation of cultures, religions, and countries.[4] Using elements of Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes and Julia Hope's "RefugeeCrit" theoretical framework, particularly Hope's focus on the "depiction of the refugee experience,"[5] I outline the key pieces of information omitted from Mitchell's texts regarding the protagonists' experiences and analyse the implications of omitting this information.

Despite the significant problems the protagonists experience in their new lives as refugees, Ireland is presented as a better, safer place overall for both Azari and Tanza. As neither of the protagonists' nationalities are named, Irish culture and values are consequently presented as superior to a wide range of countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa that fit the general details and descriptions of the protagonists' home countries. I will argue that while Mitchell's work highlights the unjust, cruel nature of Ireland's Direct Provision system and successfully promotes readers' empathy for the plight of refugees, the texts' intentional vagueness regarding the characters' home countries coupled with the presentation of Ireland as "better" creates a problematic hierarchy of ethnicities, nations, religions, and cultures.

Before analysing Mitchell's texts within the context of RefugeeCrit, I will first provide a brief overview of the existing scholarship on children's narratives of displacement and the reasoning behind the development of a framework to support the analysis of refugee narratives.

Scholarship and "RefugeeCrit"

Until the 1990s, children's books about refugees were mostly historical fiction texts based during or after the Second World War.[6] According to Hope, in the last two decades "there has been an ever-increasing outpouring of such narratives following the vicissitudes of child refugees traveling mainly from across Africa and the Middle East."[7] A theoretical framework was needed to analyse the increasing number of children's and young adult texts focusing on the refugee experience. Strekalova-Hughes's framework of "RefugeeCrit," which

combines elements of Critical Refugee Studies and Critical Race Theory, allows researchers to move away from "blanket approval" of texts about refugees to "a more nuanced critique" of the sub-genre.[8] Hope's development of "RefugeeCrit" focuses on four elements: the "depiction of the refugee experience;" the "profile of the protagonist;" the "role of the reader;" and "the positionality of the author."[9] In analysing Mitchell's texts, I focus on two elements in particular, the "depiction of the refugee experience," and "the positionality of the author" because the positionality of the author affects the depiction of both protagonists' experiences of forced displacement. In her theoretical analysis of texts about refugees and migrants, Hope also notes that "middle grade/young adult texts have largely not been the subject of recent academic study, as attention is mostly focused on the burgeoning genre of picture books about the refugee experience."[10] Therefore, the following analysis of Mitchell's fiction contributes to the under-researched area of middle-grade/young adult fiction about refugees. This article, along with Katie Reschenhofer's article in this special issue on migration and displacement in Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick's picturebook *Owl Bat Bat Owl*, provides a significant contribution to the scholarship on Irish children's and young adult literature addressing the refugee experience.

Irish context: Jane Mitchell's *Run For Your Life* and "There and Here"

Mitchell's *Run For Your Life* and "There and Here" focus on contemporary narratives of forced displacement, and she focuses specifically on refugees' experiences in Ireland navigating and enduring the Direct Provision system. The texts reflect the realities of many refugees' experiences in Direct Provision, including being moved from centre to centre, with centres often located in isolated, rural areas in "the middle of nowhere."[11] As part of her research for the books, Mitchell interviewed residents of Direct Provision centres, reflecting their real-life, living conditions in both texts: Mitchell details the cramped living conditions, the lack of privacy due to residents being forced to share rooms with strangers, and the strict regulations around food, mealtimes, and curfews. As another resident of Azari's centre states, the centres are "worse than prison,"[12] with refugees suffering the added torture of not knowing how long their prison sentences will last. In "There and Here," we read a bleak description of Tanza and her family's living conditions: "I look around the room in the centre where we live. There is the bed I share with Mama and baby Gracie. There is the mattress on the floor where Benjamin sleeps … The window is nailed shut and the bathroom is down the hall, shared with five other families."[13] Tanza thinks about the contrast between her current living situation in Ireland and in her home country: "even in my home country, we did not have to share our toilet place with five families, but in Ireland, we are not free to find our own home."[14] In *Run For Your Life*, Azari, likewise, shares a tiny room with her mother that they must share with another woman, Meri. Although Azari and her mother complain about "overcrowding and no privacy," the manager "waves the rule book in our faces" to tell them it is permitted.[15] The residents are not allowed to use the kitchens to cook their own food, which is deeply frustrating for them as food has the potential to comfort and connect residents to the homes and cultures they were forced to leave. Tanza's mother is worried about the potential loss of their culture and customs due to their inability to cook: Tanza tells us that "Mama has not been allowed to cook since we got here" and, because of this, is concerned that their food culture will not be passed down to Tanza: "'How will you learn

to prepare traditional dishes? You will only know these Irish foods.'"[16] Food in these narratives represents the loss of homeland, the strangeness of the refugees' new environment, and the pressure to assimilate to a new culture. Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard analyse the importance of food in refugee narratives using Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* as a case study. In this autobiographical book based on the author's migrant journey from Vietnam to the United States, food:

> consistently serves as a cornerstone in the family's efforts, from their pleasure in the foods of their homeland before they leave, to their puzzlement over the strange new foods of the alien new land, and their adaptation of food traditions to maintain their cultural identity as they acclimate to American culture.[17]

The Irish food that is served is of extremely poor quality, which is reflective of asylum seekers' real experiences with food in Irish Direct Provision centres. A 2014 report published by Nasc, the Irish Immigrant Support Centre, found food in three Cork city centres to be "inedible, of poor quality, monotonous, bland, and culturally inappropriate."[18] In 2021, consistently substandard food motivated residents of a Cork Direct Provision centre to begin refusing meals. Residents sought permission to prepare their own meals which mirrors the request of fictional residents in *Run For Your Life* for permission to buy their own food ingredients and use the centre's kitchen facilities. Their request is denied by the manager, reinforcing the severe limitations imposed on residents' daily lives.

In addition to highlighting the internal problems within individual centres, Mitchell's texts highlight and explicitly criticise the lengthy periods of time people are forced to spend in Direct Provision. According to STAD (Standing Together Against Direct Provision), the organisation that works to promote and protect the rights of people from a migrant background in Ireland, the "system was designed as a short-term measure in the year 2000, but many applicants experience lengthy stays, which is associated with declining physical and mental health, self-esteem and skills."[19] In *There and Here*, the child protagonist Tanza tells the reader, "We have been living in this room for too long now."[20] Tanza's baby sister Gracie was "a curled little thing" when they first arrived in Ireland but has now "stretched out her bones and filled her skin."[21] For Gracie, life within the small room within the Direct Provision centre inhabited by many other families is all she has ever known. As stated on STAD's website, the length of time in centres affects residents' mental health and self-esteem, and we see this with both Tanza and her brother, Benjamin. They are embarrassed by the fact they live altogether in one small room and neither of them tell their school friends where they live. Benjamin isolates himself from his school classmates and the story implies that this is due to the humiliation he feels about where his family lives. Instead of interacting with other children, he sits on his own at break-time, "reading his book."[22] Princess, Azari's friend in *Run For Your Life* and a long-time resident of Direct Provision centres, voices the strongest criticism of the system:

> We have no *choice*, no freedom, no *opportunity* as long as we stay in Direct Provision. Some of us are here *years* – wasting our lives away while normal life continues beyond these walls … We've no *freedom* in this place … Why must they clip our wings so we can *never* take flight – and then *pretend* they care for us? They don't care for us! This manager: he only cares for his money. This government: they only care for power. In their greed, they feed us cheap plastic food. Herd us together in these places … these barns … like animals. They control *everything* about our lives like we are *experiments* for them to study.[23]

Run For Your Life follows Azari and her mother's journey through the international protection application process. The characters wait months for their applications to advance and at each step, Azari must re-live the trauma of escaping from her abusive, violent father and community by re-telling her story to each new legal aid solicitor and case worker. As a refugee, there is immense pressure on Azari – which is exacerbated by her mother's refusal to speak during the interviews – to prove that she and her mother are "real refugees" by telling "a convincing story of the immediate circumstances of their individual persecution."[24] Most refugee narratives for child readers "focus on the refugees' long journeys with a warm reception at the end"[25]; Mitchell's novel instead focuses on the long journey through the complex Direct Provision system that the protagonists must navigate and endure. In a striking reflection of the flawed Direct Provision system, by the conclusion of the story Azari and her mother are still awaiting the outcome of their asylum application. In addition to grappling with the complex and ineffective international protection application process, the residents of the Direct Provision centre have become the target of extremist anti-migrant protests.

Racism and anti-migrant sentiment in Irish society

In both texts, Mitchell portrays realistic Irish societies that conflict with the romanticised vision of Ireland as the land of a thousand welcomes. The towns and cities that Azari and Tanza's Direct Provision centres are located in are unwelcoming, to the point where they become physically dangerous places for the centres' residents. Mitchell's texts capture the contemporary climate of anti-migrant sentiment in Ireland: Stephen McDermott's article in *The Guardian* discusses the "wave of protests" that began in November 2022, instigated by "far-right agitators" who organised "demonstrations in working-class areas where refugees were being accommodated."[26] In November 2023, a violent anti-migrant riot erupted in Dublin after three young children were attacked in the city centre by an Irish citizen who was born in Algeria. The spate of protests, arson attacks on sites earmarked for International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS), and support for anti-migrant politicians and local councillors in 2023 and 2024 can create the erroneous impression that anti-migrant sentiment is a recent phenomenon within Irish society. Anti-migrant rhetoric has intensified and become more widespread in recent years, but a 2009 opinion poll reveals the deeper roots of the issue: in a national poll of 1004 adults, 72% of the respondents wanted "to see a reduction in the number of non-Irish immigrants" living in Ireland.[27] 43% said "they would like to see some, but not all, immigrants leave the State" and 29% "would like to see most immigrants leave."[28] Ebun Joseph argues that Ireland's anti-migrant and specifically anti-refugee stance dates back to the Second World War when "the Irish government … refused to take in Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe," which leads Joseph to believe that a "strong sense of nationalism and seeing others (and others' difference) as a threat appears to be woven into the fabric of Irish society."[29]

Ireland's history is a history of emigration, with "approximately ten million people" emigrating from Ireland since 1800.[30] According to EMIGRE: Current Irish Emigration and Return, "no country in Europe has been as affected by emigration over the last two centuries as Ireland."[31] During the Celtic Tiger in Ireland, from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, Ireland turned "from a state defined by emigration to a state defined by immigration,"[32] but for some, Ireland's history failed to instil a sense of connection or

empathy towards immigrants. This is due to the stark contrasts created between Irish emigrants and immigrants to Ireland: in his foreword to Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh's book *After Optimism? Ireland, Racism and Globalisation*, the journalist Fintan O'Toole examines the Irish government's response to undocumented Irish people in the US, which emphasised the "hard-working" nature of Irish people who emigrated to the US and contributed significantly to the wealth of the nation.[33] O'Toole argues that the Irish government "plays up the suggestion that the Irish are good migrants,"[34] and this contrast between "good" productive Irish migrants and "bad" migrants who abuse the generosity of the Irish welfare system is frequently heard to justify anti-migrant rhetoric in Ireland.

Mitchell's "There and Here" and *Run For Your Life* capture the hostility towards migrants and refugees present in a segment of Irish society which, in both the texts and in reality, is often grounded on a belief that migrants apply for international protection in Ireland to live "for free and [do] nothing."[35] Asylum seekers are, as Joseph states, "Ireland's quintessential racial others," which is reflected in the marginalised status of both protagonists of Mitchell's texts.[36] Through the use of first-person narration, the reader experiences Ireland through the lens of these marginalised, "racial others."[37] In "There and Here," Tanza experiences racism within her school and seeks the isolation of the Phoenix Park for respite from the people who "laugh at my mixed-up English," who "stare at my threaded hair," and who "turn away from my foreign smell."[38] However, within this tranquil natural space, she is frightened of being found or of being followed by "the boys from my class" or even worse, "the bigger boys from Benjamin's class."[39] An underlying fear taints her enjoyment of the park; while the natural landscape is inviting, the people of this country make her feel unwelcome and unsafe. Azari, likewise, experiences racism in her secondary school, which begins when she tells other students that she lives in the Direct Provision centre: "It was a mistake to tell them. I know it as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Their faces change. They nod to each other: *told you so*. It's as though they see me differently from then on."[40] The Irish students' attitude towards her affects her own self-image: "Something of their response rubs off on me. I feel ashamed."[41] The explanation for why the students see Azari differently is later explained when two students tell her: "'You shouldn't be here' . . . 'Sponging off tax-payers. My da says yous are only here for free handouts: jobs and houses and medical cards.'"[42] Echoing the rhetoric of their parents, the students reflect the real-world rhetoric of anti-migrant protests in Ireland in recent years. An Oireachtas committee report published in 2023 argued that "issues such as the housing crisis have been a 'key catalyst' for anti-immigrant sentiment in Ireland because it had created the impression that resources are scarce and that people have to compete for services."[43] Anti-migrant protestors in *Run For Your Life* gather outside the Direct Provision centre with placards stating "Our town says NO! Find another solution. NO Direct Provision here. Migrants, go home!"[44] In December 2023, a hotel in county Galway intended to house 70 international protection applicants was set on fire by anti-migrant, anti-asylum seeker protestors. In July 2024, in Coolock county Dublin, a former factory undergoing renovations to house international protection applicants was also set alight by protestors. The text sadly predicts the extremity of protestors' actions, as the fictional centre housing Azari and her mother is set on fire while the residents are inside sleeping. Through the use of first-person narration, which increases the reader's likelihood

of identifying with the protagonist,[45] the reader is intended to experience the shock and fear felt by Azari, one of the many victims of the arson attack.

Exclusion of detail: explanation and implications

Mitchell's texts must be praised for their direct engagement with the anti-immigration sentiment and outright racism within Irish society and her fictional representation of the impact of such protests and rhetoric on a young, extremely vulnerable refugee. The texts also accurately document life in Direct Provision centres, highlighting the tumultuous existence the residents endure while awaiting their asylum application outcome. However, specific details about the refugee protagonists, such as their nationalities and ethnicities, are intentionally omitted. Furthermore, the details provided about their undisclosed home countries are overwhelmingly negative. The negativity and lack of specific information regarding the protagonists' backgrounds complicate and partially undermine the anti-racism and pro-migrant messages of the texts. The omittance of this information relates to a central element of Hope's RefugeeCrit framework, namely the "depiction of the refugee experience" and whether "the location prior to flight [is] disclosed."[46] The reader is provided with physical and cultural information about Azari's home country: we learn it is "hot and dusty," where "mango trees and jasmine flowers" grow"[47]; it is unusual for girls to attend secondary school and to play sports; girls and women are expected to "clean and cook and mind the boys"[48]; and child labour and child marriages are common, demonstrated by Azari's work in the garment factory and her 15-year-old sister Sharnaz's intended marriage to an older man. The reader learns that she is not from Syria or Eritrea as these countries are mentioned but not in connection to Azari. Azari is not African, as when she is told to "'Go back to Africa'" by another student, she tells them "'I speak English … And I'm *not* from Africa.'"[49] Her food culture is close to Indian food, implying she is from somewhere in South Asia or perhaps the Middle East.

Likewise with Tanza in "There and Here," we learn that her home country is hot with "loud and hard and heavy" sunshine that "leaves behind dust storms"[50]; and similarly to Azari's home country, women and girls are expected to obey the men and boys in their families. There is a reference to "teff,"[51] which is a food commonly eaten in Ethiopia but, as with descriptions of Azari's home country, Tanza's nationality remains unknown. The necessity of Azari and her mother's escape from their home country to Ireland is clearly explained in *Run For Your Life*: Azari is escaping a dangerous, abusive father and community who are responsible for the death of Azari's sister, Sharnaz. In "There and Here," the reason Tanza and her family left their home country is unknown. Tanza is awaiting the arrival of their father and other brothers to Ireland, which is indicative of broader national or economic reasons for their departure, rather than direct family issues.

While the ambiguity regarding the protagonists' nationalities, cultural identities, and reasons for leaving may help to facilitate greater relatability for readers in similar situations to Tanza and Azari, the decision to obscure their home countries results in a homogenisation of countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that fit the very general descriptions provided by Mitchell. Sarah Park Dahlen, in her work on adoption in children's literature, discusses the problem of impreciseness in discussing countries and cultures and argues that the lack of specificity causes a homogeneity of many different nationalities and cultures. In children's books published in the US on the subject of adoption, Dahlen

found that the Asian child's nationality is often not specified and writes "the lack of specificity actually perpetuates the stereotype that any one Asian person/country/culture can stand in for another Asian person/country/culture."[52] *Run For Your Life* is critical of the racist disregard for individual refugees' identities exhibited by students in Azari's school who collectively refer to all the non-Irish, non-white students as Black: the additional classes organised to help "non-Irish girls . . . catch up" is referred to by the Irish students as "Black School,"[53] and other students tell Azari to "'Go back to Africa . . . Go on back to your jungle.'"[54] Although the students voicing these racist remarks are portrayed negatively, the texts themselves homogenise migrant children and young people's identities by failing to disclose the central characters' countries of origin. In 2008, Hope conducted interviews with five young readers – two of whom were refugees – who read and were interviewed about nine children's and young adult books on the subject of forced displacement. One of the young refugees interviewed "felt that information about the country and background, and the use of maps, would be useful as a prologue to books dealing with geographical displacement and flight."[55] Including these details may counteract the tendency towards "generalisation, homogeneity and stereotyping"[56] that Hope identifies in other narratives about refugees. Natalia Ward and Amber Warren's identification of a potential "overgeneralisation" of refugee narratives due to texts' depiction of "universal stories" and "universal journeys"[57] reinforces the need for specific information regarding the refugee character's background and journey, as they argue that universal stories can "inadvertently depict refugee-background characters' experience as all the same."[58]

As demonstrated, details relating to the protagonists' home countries are sparse, and significantly, the details that are provided are mostly negative. The reader gains an impression of both countries as oppressively hot and arid, and food is depicted as the only positive aspect of both protagonists' cultures. The regions and cultures that Azari and Tanza belong to are repeatedly contrasted against Ireland and Irish culture, with Ireland – despite its significant problems – presented as better than the protagonists' respective home nations. Mitchell's texts are not unique in their positioning of the new character's country as superior: Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes has identified the embedding of contrasts with "safe" places such as Europe and the United States in other refugee narratives which "pathologizes some countries and privileges others."[59] The protagonists themselves engage in the positioning of their home countries in contrast to Ireland and, in doing so, realise that Ireland's natural landscape and culture are superior to their home nations. In *There and Here*, Mitchell repeatedly emphasises the physical and cultural differences between Ireland and Tanza's home country: while Tanza is in the Phoenix Park, Ireland is described as a far gentler country:

> We don't have green air in my home country . . . We don't have soft green grass in my home country. In my home country the sunshine is loud and hard and heavy. It sucks up the green air and leaves behind dust storms and heat-shimmer and brown earth. But Phoenix Park makes magic in my heart.[60]

Tanza's memories of her home country are of a harsh environment, which differs significantly from the positive, nostalgic recollections of other refugee characters' homelands in the children's and YA books analysed by Layla Savsar. In analysing one of the texts, *Journey of the Sparrows* (1991) by Fran Leeper Buss, Savsar includes a quote from the

protagonist María's perspective in which she remembers her home in El-Salvador: "The world was green, and immense white clouds shared with me their secret faces of the saints. Flocks of green and yellow parakeets soared over our heads, and in October, light pink coffee blossoms whispered their sweet smell into the clear air."[61] As Savsar argues, the book "reflect[s] María's yearning for her homeland in spite of its poverty and oppression."[62] A similar attitude to homeland is found in Edwidge Danticat's *Behind the Mountains* (2002), a story of a Haitian refugee in the US: "Juxtaposed with the descriptions of hardship is a romanticized image of Celiane's fondness for her tiny mountain village with 'the rainbows during sun showers … the smell of pinewood burning, the golden-brown sap dripping into the fire' … another glorified, almost mythical representation of the homeland as imagined by the child protagonist."[63] In "There and Here," however, the protagonist's description of her home country is overwhelmingly negative, and she instead idealises her *new* country's natural environment. The short story concludes with Tanza lying "back on the soft green grass," letting the "Phoenix Park work its magic on me."[64] The natural world in Ireland is presented as a healing force that will allow Tanza to flourish, unlike the oppressive nature – in terms of both environment and culture – of her home nation.

The text's romanticisation of Ireland's natural landscape is influenced by Mitchell's identity as an Irish author who has spent most of her life in Dublin. Hope includes the "positionality of the author" as an important factor to take into consideration when analysing children's literature about refugees.[65] In Mitchell's texts, it is clear that her affection for Ireland significantly influences her refugee narratives, as despite the presence of racism and anti-migrant, anti-refugee rhetoric, her love for the country still radiates throughout the texts. Hope provides further questions to examine the positionality of the author, suggesting researchers ask "what is the author's background?" In what ways are they qualified to write about this subject matter? What research have they conducted?"[66] Regarding research, an article in *Dublin Gazette* discussing Mitchell's process of writing *Run For Your Life* explains that "despite making contact with Direct Provision centres, Mitchell was unable to visit in person;" however, she did "meet with current and former residents of the centres, to create an authentic setting for *Run For Your Life*."[67] Following the book's completion, Mitchell coordinated creative-writing workshops with the Dublin-based charity, Fighting Words, in Direct Provision centres "to coincide with the publication of the book."[68] Despite conducting research and engaging with residents of Direct Provision centres, Mitchell's texts fall into a trap identified by Hope in that they "implicitly reinforce myths of Western supremacy."[69]

A clear message is communicated to readers in both texts that despite Tanza and Azari's current living conditions, they are ultimately better off living in Ireland. For Tanza, Ireland is a healthier environment and as a young woman, far greater possibilities exist for her here. Socially and culturally, Ireland is presented as far more progressive in terms of women's rights: Tanza is told by her teacher that "girls can go to college in Ireland if they want. And they can get jobs without the permission of their fathers or brothers."[70] In reality, access to higher education for young people in Direct Provision is severely limited by financial barriers: asylum seekers are "considered international students/non-EU students and do not qualify for the 'Free Fees Initiative."[71] The Direct Provision system makes it extremely difficult for young people in Tanza's situation to go to college in Ireland. The system also ensures that each young refugee attends primary and secondary school,

which for Azari, is an opportunity denied to her in her home country as "girls in our village always left school at the end of primary school."[72] Once Azari began menstruating and had her first period, her father insisted she "start work now … School is over."[73] In the Direct Provision centre, she receives a letter from the Department of Education insisting she starts secondary school, which her mother is unhappy about. However, in Ireland, in contrast to her home country, Azari's parents can no longer deny her an education.

Run for Your Life and "There and Here" repeatedly contrast the restrictive nature of the protagonists' home countries with the freedom and rights enjoyed by both girls and boys in Ireland. In Tanza's home country, having "a smart tongue is never good for a girl" because "no man wants to marry a smart girl,"[74] but in Ireland, she realises that "having a smart tongue is not so bad after all."[75] The story presents the family's home society and culture as conservative with regard to gender roles, which are seen to also negatively affect Tanza's brother, Benjamin. The responsibility their father has given Benjamin to be the man of the house takes a toll on the young boy: Benjamin opens up to Tanza, telling her, "It is difficult to be a man in a new country where everything is different and strange."[76] In the park, in the natural Irish setting, Benjamin can "take a break from being a man. You can be a boy here."[77] He is still a child, and in Ireland, without the control of his father and his home country's gender norms, he is allowed to be an emotional, vulnerable boy. Likewise, in *Run For Your Life*, Azari is freed from her home country's restrictions on sports when she moves to Ireland. She hopes to follow in the footsteps of the athlete Jinani Azad, the Olympic gold medallist from the same province as Azari's family. In primary school in her home country, Azari is permitted to join the running club, but once she reaches puberty, her father rescinds his permission because "women don't run."[78] In Ireland, these restrictions are no longer in place, and she is encouraged to return to her sport by a teacher in her school and by her friend, Robert.

In both texts, apart from their families and their culture's traditional food, neither protagonist misses home; they are both portrayed as willing to leave their culture behind in favour of adopting and conforming to Ireland's cultural values. Due to the freedoms the young characters enjoy in Ireland, they are understandably optimistic about their futures in their new country and eager to avail of the opportunities Ireland affords. The young characters' approach to emigration is in direct contrast to the adult refugees with whom they travelled: Azari's mother repeatedly expresses her desire to return home, telling her daughter, "'I want to be home more than life itself.'"[79] Within the Direct Provision system, young people's daily lives are structured by school, but adults including Azari and Tanza's mothers and Azari's friend, Princess, are entirely restricted to a prison-like existence within the centres. Although the texts are sympathetic towards the mundanity of life in Direct Provision for adult refugees, Fiza and Azari in *Run For Your Life* and Tanza in "There and Here" are presented as rightly recognising the faults with their own culture and religion, realising the advantages of assimilating into Irish culture, and choosing to adapt and adopt to Ireland's social and cultural values. Azari's mother and the Farooqs, another family from the same country, are negatively portrayed due to their desire to retain the values and customs of their home nation. The Farooqs believe Azari and her mother "shouldn't turn our backs on our customs because we're in a new country" and encourage Azari's mother to "stay strong to our values in Ireland"[80] but as these values resulted in the death of

Azari's sister, this approach is presented to the reader as misguided. Retaining their home country's customs and values in Ireland would prevent Azari from running, the activity she loves most, and would prevent her from seeing her friend Robert.

Similarly, for Fiza Farooq, a refugee from Azari's home country, Ireland is a liberating, empowering environment for the young girl, despite her parents' attempts to control her. Fiza and her parents are labelled by Azari as "the Orthodox Farooqs" and described as "more conservative than my family."[81] Fiza is "a couple of years younger" than Azari and appears, at first, to agree with her parents' conservative views, which include the belief that "respectable women never run" and "women should cover up and show modesty."[82] However, Princess tells Azari: " Fiza is watching and taking it all in, even with her mother constantly whispering in her ear. *She's growing up in Ireland now*. Learning a whole lot of new stuff about how to behave. Give her a little time. *I think we're going to see an independent personality blossom*."[83] Paul Gilroy argues that "diversity, equality and integration encourage racial and religious minorities to conform, compromise and comply in order to gain a level of acceptance in a racist society,"[84] but in Mitchell's text, Azari and Fiza's willingness to conform and comply is presented positively, rather than challenged as a problematic path towards integration into Irish society. The text presents the protagonists' nations' cultural values as clashing with Ireland's – they are mutually exclusive, they cannot co-exist – and consequently, the texts strongly imply that the correct solution for the young characters – Azari, Fiza, and Tanza – is cultural assimilation. This is reinforced as the correct way forward given the texts' negative portrayal of their home nations' cultures.

Because the protagonists' national identities are not known, the connection in the texts between the characters and their countries is tenuous. The characters' previous national identities are less important than their current transition to an Irish national and cultural identity. In the final chapter of *Run For Your Life*, Azari demonstrates through language her increased integration into Irish culture. She refers to her friend Robert as "an eejit" and tells him "Will ya hang on there, bud!" when he begins discussing their future running plans together.[85] Ultimately, there is a problem with presenting Ireland – a Western, European, predominantly white and Christian country – as superior to Tanza and Azari's non-European, non-white, and non-Christian (at least in Azari's case) home countries, located somewhere in Africa or Asia. Furthermore, the lack of specificity regarding Tanza and Azari's home countries, combined with the presentation of Ireland as, despite its faults, a better, safer country with far more opportunities and freedoms for both protagonists, consequently results in a portrayal of Ireland as better than a wide range of countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This created hierarchy of nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and cultures is reinforced by the non-Irish protagonists' desire to leave behind their own nations' values and enthusiastically assimilate into Irish society.

Conclusion: recognising the diversity of the refugee experience

Philip Nel writes of the importance of including migrant, displaced, and refugee child characters in literature. He states:

> When children's literature cultivates an empathetic imagination, it can bring people of all ages closer to understanding the displacement felt by migrants, refugees, and those in diasporic communities. Such literature can affirm the experiences of children in those communities, letting them know that they are not alone. Finding stories that resonate with one's own life story is vital for those forced to live in emotional or physical exile. It tells these children, "You are heard."[86]

By creating stories of individual children and individual families enduring the harsh conditions of Direct Provision centres, Mitchell's texts somewhat fulfil the intention of telling young asylum seekers in Ireland that "you are heard." Furthermore, the texts encourage Irish readers to have empathy for the plight of asylum seekers by detailing the systemic problems with the Direct Provision system. It is also fair to assume that for young readers, Mitchell's texts may function as an entry point into the real-world problem of Ireland's asylum system, raising young readers' awareness of the appalling conditions children and young people endure as refugees. As individuals working with children and children's books, as Nel writes, "we can guide readers to books that harness the imagination's power to nourish empathy, and we can steer them away from those that reinforce bigotry."[87] However, to avoid homogenisation of refugee experiences, it is crucial that within narratives of displacement, characters' nationalities, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds are described in detail and the reasons for their displacement provided.

The discussion of children's literature about refugees raises questions regarding authorship: specifically, who is best placed to write about the experiences of forced displacement? To ensure that narratives about migrants and refugees fulfil the intention of giving voice to displaced children, perhaps, as Mary Tomsic and Matthew Zbaracki's argue, we should privilege "personal narratives" that are "created by children with refugee backgrounds" above authors with no direct experience of displacement.[88] These texts privilege "the voices of children with these backgrounds, and simultaneously value children's cultural expression more broadly."[89] These contrast starkly with books written by adult authors with no direct experience of displacement, or "outsiders," as Hope refers to them, who often have a "limited understanding of refugee experiences."[90] Authors without direct experience can romanticise the refugee journey, or romanticise the refugee's adopted country. While ideally, children's refugee narratives would be written, or at least co-written, by individuals whose lived experiences align with the subject matter of the text, it is also possible for adult authors to include scholarship on RefugeeCrit as part of the research process to ensure their work does not fall into the trap of romanticisation or unintentionally perpetuate ideas of Western supremacy.

Notes

1. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 4.
2. STAD.
3. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 139.
4. Dahlen, "How to Evaluate," 155.
5. Hope, "Applying RefugeeCrit," 194.
6. Ibid., 191.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 199.
9. Ibid., 194.

10. Ibid., 192.
11. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 15.
12. Ibid., 136.
13. Mitchell, "There and Here," 125–6.
14. Ibid., 126.
15. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 64.
16. Ibid., 126.
17. Keeling and Pollard, 168.
18. Barry, *What's Food*, 7.
19. STAD.
20. Mitchell, "There and Here."
21. Ibid., 126.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 128.
24. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 92.
25. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 294.
26. See note 5 above.
27. McDermott, "The Dublin Riots."
28. O'Brien, "Poll Shows Hardening of Attitude."
29. Joseph, *Critical Race Theory*, 63.
30. Glynn, "Irish Emigration History."
31. Ibid.
32. Lentin and McVeigh, *After Optimism?* 4.
33. O'Toole, *After Optimism?* ii.
34. Ibid.
35. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 124.
36. Joseph, *Critical Race Theory*, 63.
37. Ibid.
38. Mitchell, "There and Here," 129.
39. Ibid.
40. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 28.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 29.
43. Coyne, "Housing Crisis 'Key Catalyst.'"
44. See note 35 above.
45. Nikolajeva, "Memory of the Present," 98.
46. See note 5 above.
47. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 6.
48. Ibid., 21.
49. Ibid., 31.
50. See note 38 above.
51. Ibid., 133.
52. See note 4 above.
53. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 28–9.
54. Ibid., 29.
55. Hope, "One Day," 301.
56. Ibid., 297.
57. Ward and Warren, "In Search of Peace," 408.
58. Ibid., 410.
59. Strekalova-Hughes, "Unpacking Refugee Flight," 35.
60. Mitchell, "There and Here," 128–9.
61. Savsar, "Mother Tells Me," 399.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 402.

64. Mitchell, "There and Here," 135.
65. See note 5 above.
66. Ibid.
67. Cunningham, "Dublin Author's".
68. Roy, "Jane Mitchell".
69. See note 5 above.
70. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 20.
71. USI, "Written Submission to the Committee on Justice and Equality."
72. Mitchell, "There and Here," 125.
73. Ibid., 135.
74. Ibid., 133.
75. Ibid.
76. Mitchell, "There and Here," 133.
77. Ibid.
78. Mitchell, *Run For Your Life*, 36.
79. Ibid., 108.
80. Ibid., 47.
81. Ibid., 85.
82. Ibid., 42.
83. Ibid.
84. Lentin and McVeigh, *After Optimism?* 2.
85. Ibid., 138.
86. Nel, "Introduction: Migration," 258.
87. ibid., 359.
88. Tomsic and Zbaracki, "It's All About," 862.
89. Ibid.
90. Hope, "Applying RefugeeCrit," 192.

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