

EXCLUSIVE AUTHOR INSIDER:

Zana Fraillon



Award-winning children's fiction author, Zana Fraillon annotates an excerpt from her stunning picture book, *Wisp: A Story of Hope* with useful insights for teachers and students about her writing and research process, historical influence and cultural impact.

When I was first asked by my publishers to write a picture book about a child growing up in a refugee camp, I wasn't sure I could do it. Sure, I had written novels about children in harsh situations before - children growing up in detention centres; children who had been trafficked into slavery; and children taken from loving families and placed in institutions where they were abused and traumatised. I could write those books because the length gave me enough space to pay respect to the real-life victims and survivors, and also to bring the reader a sense of hope and even moments of joy, in amongst extremely dark situations.

I could give them that lightning quick ability children have to

I could give my characters strength and resilience and determination.

find pieces of happiness and laughter despite their situation. I could give them the hope and knowledge they needed to continue to believe that someday, things would change. And in doing so, I could give readers a chance to imagine a different reality, for themselves, for others, and for the whole world even. There is always hope for the future, as long as we can keep imagining.

And understanding that, I suddenly saw how I could squeeze all those emotions and

ideas and lives and issues into a single picture book. It is all about imagination. About imagining our past, our stories, our futures. It is about imagining the world we want to live in. And there are no better imaginers, than children.

Wisp became more than a story of a single child. It became a springboard for understanding how our world is now, and hope for everything it could become. It whispers of community, and of story, of memory and shared culture, of difference and of celebration. It allows children to stretch their minds wide open and imagine what could be.

When writing *Wisp*, the illustrator and I had no contact. I had seen his previous work and knew it

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would suit my story, so was able to trust in the process. However, I had to think how to convey through the words of the story, how I imagined the pictures to look, and then Graham had to take those words and create his own images with them. I couldn't have been happier with the outcome - he somehow took the images from my head and put them down on paper more brilliantly and beautifully than I had even imagined.



But this idea of being inspired by another's work, to create a new collaborative piece is thrilling for me, and it is an idea that children seem especially excited by as well. A favourite activity, especially when reading a story the children haven't heard before, is to give them a jumbled assortment of the pictures, but with no text. The students choose some of the pictures and order them to create their own story. We share these before reading the actual book. It is so wonderful to see how images can inspire such a diverse array of stories, and there is always keen interest to see how many different ideas came from the same images. The pictures in *Wisp* are especially good for this activity as they are so varied and full of magical imagery that can be interpreted in so many different ways. My favourite example of this so far was when a child took the first picture of the story and made it the last of his story. *'And no matter how dark it got, the light was always there to warm the boy and make him happy.'*

One of my favourite things about writing is the ability to play with language and words. To stretch and twist meaning, to mess with convention and rules, and by doing so, create a new meaning, a new way of thinking. The words become suggestions, shadowy, almost magical in our almost, but not quite, understanding of them. What does it mean to grow full with rememberings? Or to spin memories from your fingers, or to brighten the dirt? I encourage children to play with words and language too. I ask them what a promise might taste like, what memory sounds like, or joy smells like. I ask what ache looks like, or what morning feels like. I often keep the answers anonymous, written down on pieces of

paper that are then shared anonymously as a group.

So often writing becomes stilted or false when we know that it will be read by someone else. Whenever I write, the first step is convincing myself that it will never be read by anyone, otherwise I am overcome with doubts, and I second guess every idea and word. But the knowledge of anonymity does wonders for releasing our minds to spread and imagine and twist in unusual ways. Often the shyest of kids will write the most beautifully moving sentiments if allowed the space to remain unknown.

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When I read *Wisp* to children, I love how their interpretations of the story are so wide and varied. One child believed the story was set on the moon because of the empty, dark landscape. Another, that it was on Nauru, because they had seen on the news how there were more than 100 children living in camps and unable to leave. Another thought it was set in a refugee camp similar to the one her father had lived in. With reading, books are whatever the reader believes they are. And that is part of the magic. So what now becomes of the child on the moon? In a detention centre? In a camp? What of their lives before? What will happen next? What would you do, if a Wisp were to fall at your feet? What would you do, if you were the child in the story? Where did the Wisp

come from? Why does it glow? When I first imagined the Wisp, it was a steam punk piece of metal junk. How does changing what the Wisp looks like, change the story? What if the Wisp was something else? An animal? A person? A letter? What else might it bring with it? Would it be better if it brought material things that were needed? And for older children with an understanding of Australia's refugee policies, why do they think I chose hope as the thing the *Wisp* brings?



I love this image of the tree, sprouting up just the other side of the wall, of hope blooming in the world outside at the same time as it begins blooming in Idris. This image fits so easily with the idea of a wish tree, or a tree of promise, or dreaming, and is a lovely way to end a reading. Just a simple drawn or cut out tree silhouette is transformed as everyone writes a wish onto a leaf shape, and we watch the tree grow with each wish and dream that is added. I don't give any restrictions to the wishes people make, and they can be anonymous, but there always seem to be more altruistic wishes by the end than not. I have grand designs of setting up a tree in the middle of a school or a town square even, and filming a time lapse over the course of the day as more and more wishes and dreams are added to the tree. I haven't done this yet, but I think it would be a lovely way to illustrate how hope blooms and spreads in our communities, if only we allow it to.

***WISP* by Zana Fraillon and illustrated by Graeme Baker-Smith is out now, published by Lothian Children's, an imprint of Hachette Australia. ■**

By Zana Fraillon, Author

Discussion and activity ideas, inspired by *Wisp*

On refugees and detention...



DISCUSSION POINTS:

1. Idris and his family have lived in a refugee camp all his life. This sort of upbringing is difficult for those living in safe and secure communities to even imagine. And yet millions of people live like this and governments struggle to deal with this global crisis. Discuss with students the facts of this crisis. For example, explain to students that there are legal requirements for immigration but that many have no option but to flee persecution in ways which are unsafe or may be deemed illegal. How should governments tackle this issue?
2. Discuss the contribution which has been made to Australian society by immigrants, some of whom were deemed illegal, e.g. Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s.



ACTIVITIES

- Brainstorm with students how refugees might be assisted and housed, rather than being kept in detention.
- Encourage empathy by having a guest speaker who has emigrated to Australia describe the journey they took to find safe harbor here, or by reading to students the memoir of someone who has made a successful transition to Australian society.
- Read other picture books about refugees and compare them to this one.