Brave new world: Myth and migration in recent Asian-Australian picture books

Wenche Ommundsen

Abstract

From Exodus to the American Dream, from Terra Nullius to the Yellow Peril to multicultural harmony, migration has provided a rich source of myth throughout human history. It engenders dreams, fears and memories in both migrant and resident populations; giving rise to hopes for a new start and a bright future, feelings of exile and alienation, nostalgia for lost homelands, dreams of belonging and entitlement, fears of invasion, dispossession and cultural extinction. It has inspired artists and writers from the time of the Ancient Testament to the contemporary age of globalisation and mass migration and it has exercised the minds of politicians from Greek and Roman times to our era of detention centres and temporary visas. This reading of Asian-Australian picture books will focus on immigrants’ perception of the ‘new worlds’ of America and Australia. The Peasant Prince, a picture-book version of Li Cunxin’s best-selling autobiography Mao’s Last Dancer, sets up tensions between individual ambition and belonging, illustrated by contrasts between the Chinese story ‘The Frog in the Well’ and the Western fairy-tale of Cinderella, to which Li Cunxin’s own trajectory from poor peasant boy in a Chinese village to international ballet star is explicitly related. Shaun Tan’s The Lost Thing and The Arrival trace the journey from alienation to belonging by means of fantasy worlds encompassing both utopic and dystopic visions. By way of a conclusion, the paper considers the nature of myth as evoked and dramatised in these texts, contrasting the idea of myth as eternal truth with Roland Barthes’ insistence that myth is a mechanism which transforms history into nature.

Keywords

myths of migration; picture books; asian-australian writing

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