

Books to breed tolerance: what children can read after the terrorist attacks in Paris

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In the week of the tragic terrorist attacks that took place in Paris my youngest daughter (aged 10) came back from school with homework to research and write about a human rights concern in relation to children anywhere in the world. She already had a clear idea of what she wanted to research.

I had the radio on and she listened to the news of the terrorist attacks that had taken place on the offices of the cartoonists Charlie Hebdo and the Kosher supermarket.

I attempted to explain to her that these terrorist attacks were against the freedom for people to believe in what they believe in and to express what they think through their cartoons and words.

“Why would the terrorists do that?” She asked; wide eyed and horrified by the idea. “You can’t kill someone for drawing a cartoon. You can’t stop someone saying what they think.”

I could not have expressed it more clearly myself and her words echo article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights summarised here for the very young in [We Are All born Free](#) a picture book by [Amnesty International](#).

“We all have the right to make up our own minds, to think what we like, to say what we think and to share our ideas with other people.”

But the sad truth is that all over the world, every day this and many other universal human rights are being threatened.

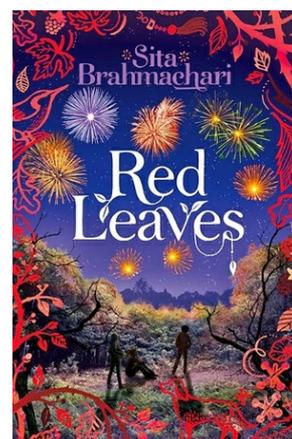
“That’s just wrong,” I heard my daughter mutter under her breath as she went on to do her homework.

The motivation for writing my last book [Red Leaves](#) came from finding it increasingly difficult to make sense of some of the great divides that exist in the world today... refugee experience, religious difference, intolerance and conflict, homelessness, the war in Syria... I thought if I find all this so difficult to understand how do children and young people view our increasingly fractured world?

So I turned to fiction because since my own childhood I have found sanctuary in stories, away from the news and the noise of the world, so many things can be understood, felt and discovered.

After a week of emotional turmoil it felt strangely comforting that my daughter was so keen to write about human rights abuses. As she carried on researching there were gasps followed by explanations of “I don’t believe this!” “How can adults do this to children?” “Why can’t people be fair with one another?” Her questions led me to think about how this sense of outrage is common to many great characters in stories for children and young people. I too love writing characters who find their voice and then are not afraid to use it.

Yet over these days I had sat at my desk listening to the news and felt unable to continue with my writing routine. I had not written a single word but my daughter’s passion set me off again and made me think that it’s more important than ever to write stories that explore our differences and our common humanity - stories that feature



young characters who may or may not be part of a religion or culture that is like us or unlike us... or those who are “notsurewho,” “notsurewhat” and “notsurewhy” about anything, but search to answer the big questions about human rights, minds and hearts.

I often sit down to write without fully appreciating what is for me to have a voice and to have that voice heard. As I witnessed my daughter exercising her right to express her opinion I decided to begin to compile a list of contemporary authors whose books have helped me and my family understand and empathise with some of the most complicated situations we face in the world today.

For younger readers

[For Every Child](#) – UNICEF (with a foreward by Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

[Girl with a White Dog](#) by Anne Booth

[Malala Yousafzai: Warrior With Words](#) by Karen Leggett Abouraya

[The Colour of Home](#) by Mary Hoffman

[We are all Born Free](#) – An Amnesty International picture book of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[Dare To Be Different – A Celebration of Freedom](#) in association with Amnesty International: collection of Stories and poems

For older readers

[The Arrival](#) – Shaun Tan

[Lines in the Sand: UNICEF New Writing about War and Peace](#) by Mary Hoffman and Rhiannon Lassiter.

[Once](#) by Morris Gleitzman

[Free? Stories about Human Rights](#) – Amnesty International anthology of short stories

[Freedom. Short stories celebrating Universal Declaration of Human Rights.](#) Amnesty International anthology

[Hidden](#) by Mariam Halahmy

[From Somalia with Love](#) by Naima B Roberts

[Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Changed the World](#) by Malala Yousafzai and Patricia McCormick

[Sold](#) by Patricia McCormick

[Refugee Boy](#) by Benjamin Zephaniah

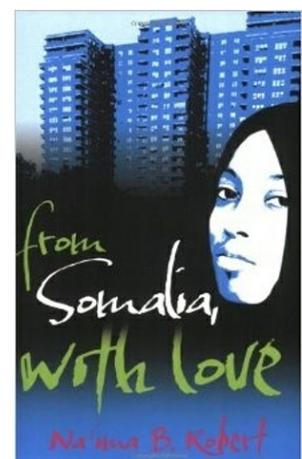
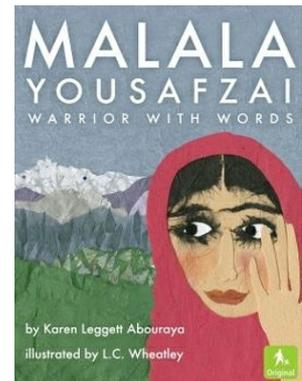
[Noughts and Crosses](#) by Malorie Blackman

[The Weight of Water](#) by Sarah Crossan

[Secrets of the Henna Girl](#) by Sufiyah Ahmed

[A little Piece of Ground](#) by Elizabeth Laird

[The Garbage King](#) by Elizabeth Laird



[Quicksilver](#) by Samira Osman

[Shadow](#) by Michael Morpurgo

[A Beautiful Lie](#) by Irfan Master

[Guantanamo Boy](#) by Anna Perera

I was just beginning to think that I would love to have more recommendations to add to my list when my daughter sighed deeply

“Mum! What else can I read about children forced to work in clothes making factories?!” She asked. “A story... not news. I want to write it as if I’m her.”

I was so happy to have a choice of stories to suggest to her. If you have recommendations of books that have opened up your world, helped you understand human rights and see things differently please share your thoughts... If we spread the word about the passion these stories inspire in us no voice can be silenced and together we might have the power to transform and expand all of our worlds.

Post script from Sita, 15 January

For me this set out as a wish to share a few books on my family bookshelf that had helped my children explore human rights. When we invited people to help me expand the list I had no idea that the response would be so heart-warming. This is still in no way a comprehensive list, but it is one that may help young readers navigate through some complex human rights concerns. I’m sure there are books to add but for the time being I think we have created a hopeful list to celebrate freedom of speech and narratives of unity:

[Come On Everybody](#) by Adrian Mitchell (Collected poems)

Michael Rosen’s [The Best Children’s Poetry From Agard to Zephaniah](#)

[All Sorts to Make a World](#) by John Agard

[The Child’s Elephant](#) by Rachel Campbell–Johnston

[I Have the Right to Be a Child](#) by Alan Serres (Translated by Sarah Ardizzone)

[Kami and the Yaks](#) by Andrea Stenn Stryer

[The Humans](#) by Matt Haig

[The Dragon Fly Pool](#) by Eva Ibbotson

[Journey to the River Sea](#) by Eva Ibbotson

[Phoenix](#) by SF Said

[Varjak Paw](#) by SF Said

[Sawbones](#) by Catherine Johnson

[Torn](#) by David Massey

[Where I Belong](#) by Gillian Cross

[Wolf](#) by Gillian Cross

[After Tomorrow](#) by Gillian Cross

[Shine](#) by Candy Gourlay

[Tall Story](#) by Candy Gourlay

[Iqbal](#) by Francesco D’Adamo

[Street Child](#) by Berlie Doherty

[Far From Home](#) by Berlie Doherty

[Looking At The Stars](#) by Jo Cotterill

[Abela – The Girl Who Saw Lions](#) by Berlie Doherty

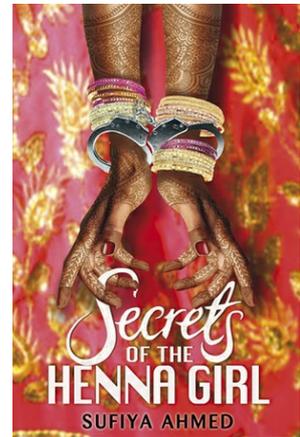
[Boy Overboard](#) by Morris Gleitzman

[Girl Underground](#) by Morris Gleitzman

[Old Dog, New Tricks](#) by Bali Rai

[The Savage Fortress](#) by Sarwat Chadda

[Deadly Letter](#) by Mary Hoffman



[The Island](#) by Armin Greder
[Under The Skin](#) by Cathy MacPhail
[Klaus Vogel and the Bad Lads](#) by David Almond
[Nadine Dreams of Home](#) by Bernard Ashley
[Three Wishes Palestinan and Israeli Children Speak](#) by Deborah Ellis
[One of Us](#) by Jeannie Waudby
[A Stone in My Hand](#) by Cathryn Clynton
[Undone](#) by Cat Clarke
[Blackberry Blue and other Fairy Stories](#) by Jamila Gavin
[The Wheel of Surya](#) by Jamila Gavin
[If You Were Me](#) by Samira Osman (To be published in April 2015)
[Bird](#) by Crystal Chan
[The Heaven Shop](#) Deborah Ellis
[Children of War](#) Deborah Ellis
[The Other Side of Truth](#) by Beverley Naidoo
[Artichoke Hearts](#) by Sita Brahmachari
[Jasmine Skies](#) by Sita Brahmachari
[Red Leaves](#) by Sita Brahmachari
[Breadwinner](#) Deborah Ellis
[Now Is the Time for Running](#) by Michael Williams
[In The Sea There are Crocodiles](#) by Fabio Geda
[The Middle of Nowhere](#) by Geraldine McCaughrean
[She Wore Red Trainers](#) by Naima B Roberts
[Tasting the Sky](#) by Ibtisam Barakat
[My Basmati Mat Mitzvah](#) by Paula J Freedman
[Kindertransport](#) by Diane Samuels

Thank you to everyone that has shared.

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