



The images and symbolism of dogs in 'Ships in the Field'
by Susanne Gervay, illustrated by Anna Pignataro

'Ships in the Field' reaches into the refugee and immigrant experience driven by a search for belonging. For both the illustrator Anna Pignataro and the author Susanne Gervay, 'Ships in the Field' is deeply autobiographical emotionally engaging into their families' escape from political upheaval and war. While personal, the girl who drives the narrative of 'Ships in the Field' is the universal child, seeking the universal hope for understanding, family, safety and home. The presence of dogs partners, comforts, heals and is a participant in the journey of belonging.

"My little dogs ... heartbeats at my feet." — Edith Wharton - One of the first founders of the ASPCA | The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals www.asPCA.org/

Brownie, a stuffed brown dog teddy, is the alter ego of the girl in 'Ships in the Field'. Brownie is someone to talk to, confide fears and hopes, be her companion and help her work out feelings and thoughts as her parents create a new life in a new country. Brownie is part of the girl's daily life - sewing with her Ma, being twirled with her by her Papa, seeking comfort with her in Ma's arms at night, sharing her thoughts, fears and joys.

There is another dog that edges onto the pages of 'Ships in the Field'. The dog of war is an ash covered, battle torn white dog. It has a faint touch of brown on its forehead linking to Brownie the stuffed teddy dog. It is the dog Ma had to leave behind in the 'old country'. Symbolizing war and the loss of a past home and community, the dog of war is the mother's 'heartbeat'. The dog of war represents the memories of the past, carrying the tragedies of war and loss with the mother and family to their new home.

As the refugees leave their war torn homes to board the huge ship, a flying dog travels with them. A white dog with a brown patch – the dog of hope, leaving the dog of war dying in the ashes of the past; fleeing with the refugees and their hopes to the future. The dog is white with brown earthy patches. Its presence is felt in the future, as its brown paw prints dot the ground around the little girl, who looks back to the war but whose body faces the new 'field' of home.

Throughout the gentle, warm, funny, loving family scenes, the girl draws picture of a hoped for dog. Her father says that one day she will have a dog in her new home. One day, the family will have a dog again.

The scared little dog at the end of the book nervously finds the girl and parents. Homeless, ragged, it is a mixture of the dog of war and the flying dog. It has white and brown patches, with matted ash black edges. The little homeless dog is accepted by the girl and her parents. The family has found home, belonging and their 'field'.

The dogs within 'Ships in the Field' are the 'heartbeats' of belonging and love.

www.sgervay.com

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