

The Crossing



Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:

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Synopsis

Country of Origin: France, Czech Republic, Germany

Release Year: 2021

Director: Frances Mialhe

Languages: English, German, Swiss German, French

Themes: Refugees, Coming of Age, Family

Inspired by her own Jewish family's exodus from Russia, director Florence Mialhe's sumptuously animated film charts the perilous journey of two young siblings as they are forced to flee their war-torn village. Separated from their parents, Kyona and her brother Adriel become refugees, navigating their way to safety in another country. Set in an unnamed time and place, Mialhe's allegorical construct effectively links today's migrant crises with that of her own family. The first animated feature to employ hand-painted oil on glass, the film's bold colour scheme lend a fairy tale quality to this emotionally moving story of courage and survival.

Curriculum Links

The Crossing can be used as part of the Social Studies Curriculum from Grades 5-8 and as part of the Media Literacy component of the English curriculum from Grades 5-8.

Related Website

Interview with Frances Mialhe

French Institute UK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-fWSIAaWrA>

Context: Refugees

While *The Crossing* is a work of fiction, it draws from both the director's family experience of being forced to flee Odessa in 1905 and extends to the experiences of today's refugees who have had to leave their homes because of war, economic insecurity and persecution. There are no specific countries mentioned in the film; all of the places are fictional, but all of the experiences that Kyona and Adriel have as they try to make their way to safety reflect the very real risks and dangers that refugees have encountered throughout history. The fictional village of Novi Varna where the film begins sounds like it could be Ukrainian, and though the origin of the story was the persecution of Jews in Ukraine in the early 20th century, students today would be just as likely to equate the story to the plight of contemporary Ukrainian refugees escaping the war with Russia. Child trafficking, detention centres, unscrupulous smugglers cramming as many people as possible on unsafe boats are all images that we have become used to seeing every day in newspapers and on TV. As such, *The Crossing* provides teachers with an opportunity to explore one of today's most pressing issues.

Before watching the film, teachers should prepare students by devoting at least one lesson to defining what constitutes a refugee and what kinds of situations would necessitate having to risk one's life in order to find safety in another country. Explain to students that refugees are not people who choose to move to a different country but rather people who are forced to flee their home countries. Listed below are some questions you might want to ask to start a discussion:

1. What kind of dangers or threats might make someone run away from their home and country? Write down words like war, persecution, religion, race, dictatorships and ask students what these words mean and how they might force people to do anything in order to stay safe.
2. Have you heard stories about refugees before? If so, where have you heard about them?
3. Do you know any countries that refugees have fled?
4. How do you think you would feel if you suddenly had to leave your country, taking only the barest essentials? What would you take with you if you could only carry one backpack?

There are several sites that provide teachers with age-appropriate sites and lesson plans relating to refugees. Listed below are a few:

United Nations Association in Canada

<https://acgc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PK2-Refugees.pdf>

Schools Welcome Refugees

<http://schoolswelcomerefugees.ca/resources/>

The UN Refugee Agency

<https://www.unhcr.org/teaching-materials-ages-6-9.html>

Pulitzer Centre

<https://pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/migration-and-refugees-lesson-plans-20360>

Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/exploring-young-immigrant-stories>

Amnesty International

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/education/2015/10/8-educational-resources-to-better-understand-the-refugee-crisis/>

ADL

<https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/we-were-strangers-too-learning-about-refugees-through-art>

Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-about-ukrainian-refugee-crisis>

The Immigrant Learning Center

<https://www.ilctr.org/teaching-immigration-lesson-plans-resources/>

Suggested Activity:

Ask students to pretend that a Ukrainian refugee has joined their class and pose the following questions:

1. How did the refugee end up in Canada?
2. What do you think the refugee would want to know about you?
3. Where would you take the refugee to introduce him/her to the city?

4. What does the refugee need to know about your school?
5. Do you think the refugee will encounter any prejudice in your school? Why/why not?
6. What would you do to help the refugee adapt to a Canadian school?

Breaking the Film into Chapters

The Crossing can be seen as a coming of age tale. One way to explore the film is to break it into chapters, each one reflecting a different stage of Kyona's life as she moves from innocence to experience with each new place she moves to. Below is a summary of each chapter with some guiding discussion questions for each.

Chapter One: Novi Varna

The opening of the film introduces us to Kyona and her family – 4 siblings, including a set of twins, a sister and her 12-year brother, Adriel. Materially, the family has nothing but Kyona notes that the family was happy and the bright colour palette of the animation underscores that. In a nod towards the biblical sin of eating from the tree of knowledge, Kyona's childhood will come to abrupt end as she sketches her village from the branch of a tree that she has climbed and observes her village set on fire.

Worried that his village is being burned because he stole some cherries from the tree, Kyona reassures Adriel that the only reason they are being targeted is because of hate: "They need an enemy at all costs. We were that enemy." In order to try to save their family, Kyona's parents devise a plan to escape across the border to a place called Arcata (a reference to the mythical Arcadia). The next day, the family gathers at the train station where large groups of other people are gathered with the same idea. Thanks to the efforts of her mother, Kyona and the family make it on to the train, but trouble ensues when border guards enter the train, asking for identification. Hidden by their father, Kyona and Adriel manage to stay on the train while the rest of the family is taken off. Before being led off the train, Kyona's father tells her to get off at the last station and wait for the rest of the family there.

Discussion Questions:

1. The name Novi Varna suggests a country in Eastern Europe, though no such place exists. The ransacking of the village and setting houses on fire is also reminiscent of the pogroms that Jews in Eastern Europe experienced. The

soldiers refer to the townspeople as “Yelzids”, something that sounds like a cross between the derogatory term “Yid” for Jew or Yazidi, a Kurdish religious minority persecuted by the Syrians. Why does the director make up names instead of referring to real persecuted groups?

2. Other groups of people waiting at the train station include Ostelians who are fleeing drought (climate change), and the Skanderbergs who are fleeing war. Why does the director mix different groups and nationalities in the same place when each of their reasons for escaping are different?
3. What indication do we have that there is also religious persecution happening even though no one mentions any religious group in particular? (hint: look at the clothing of the people waiting at the station)
4. How does the director use colour to convey a change in mood? How does the animation style differ when something frightening is being depicted?

Chapter 2: Street Kids

Kyona and Adriel arrive at Stemet svar station and wait for their parents, getting more tired and hungry as time goes by. As they are waiting, a group of thieves grab Kyona’s bag containing her sketch book and she and Adriel chase the thieves to their hiding place where they meet Iskender, the leader of the pack. He is annoyed that Kyona and Adriel have found where they live but he is impressed with Kyona’s drawings and promises to protect them. Kyona believes that she will just stay with them for one night before leaving to look for their parents, but Iskender understood that parents who got arrested never came back and he encourages her to forget the past.

Still unwilling to give up hope of finding her parents, Kyona spends her days at the train station waiting in vain. Adriel, on the other hand, quickly adapts to his new life as a street kid, joining the other young people in petty theft and scavenging for things to sell. At one point, Kyona finds a ring in a pile of rubbish, but before she can pocket it, a bird picks it up with its beak and flies off with it. This is not the last time a bird will be responsible for stealing something of value from the hands of a human.

After the bird takes the ring, Kyona decides it is time to leave, but a new obstacle arises. As much as he would like to protect them, Iskender is himself beholden to Jon, a corrupt official who leaves them alone as long as they can be of service to him. When an opportunity arises for Jon to sell Kyona and Iskender to a couple looking to adopt a boy and girl, he betrays Iskender and has the police raid their camping grounds at night. The children are all taken to the police station where Kyona and Adriel are singled out and taken away. Iskender is angry that Jon has betrayed him and vows to

kill him in retaliation. For her part, Kyona is surprised by how close she had become to Iskender: "I hadn't realised until then how attached I was to him. I felt like he was being ripped away from me."

Discussion Questions:

1. How do Kyona and Adriel each adapt to their new circumstances as street children?
2. What is the significance of the bird that plucks the ring from Kyona's hand?
3. How is Iskender depicted? What are the tattoos on his face meant to represent?
4. Why is Kyona chastised by another person for sharing her food with an Ostelian? What does her willingness to share say about Kyona?
5. Why does Kyona realise how attached she had become to Iskender only after she is taken away from him.

Related Activity

Chapter 2 introduces the issue of street children. Throughout the world, poverty forces children to make their homes on the street because they do not have parents that can care for them or find the resources to feed, educate and house them safely. There are many ways teachers can explore the issue of street children, child poverty and ways of combating the problem. Listed below are some links to lesson plans and resources related to this issue:

Center for Learning

<https://www.centerforlearning.org/pdf/ZP868TG.pdf>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

https://www.unodc.org/pdf/youthnet/who_street_children_module1.PDF

Social Studies School Service

<https://www.socialstudies.com/pdf/ZP863TG.pdf>

Mustard Seed

<https://theseed.ca/assets/pdfs/2021-Educators-Toolkit-Calgary.pdf>

Chapter 3: Forced Adoption

Jon takes Kyona and Adriel to a child smuggler and pays him to ferry them across the water to where they will be picked up and taken to their new home. Their passage in a boat that is barely seaworthy is reminiscent of the images we see in the media today of refugees arriving by boat to places like Greece and Italy. Once they arrive at Lower-Bathely, Jon picks them up and sells them “like puppies” to Maxime Della Chiusa, “prince of finance and money”, and his wife, the former famous actress, Florabelle. Compared to the way they had been living on the streets, the Della Chiusa’s mansion is a vast improvement in practical terms, but Kyona hates Florabelle on sight. Clearly, Kyona and Adriel have been purchased by the couple to replace their own two children who have presumably died because Florabelle insists that Kyona and Adriel refer to her and her husband as Mummy and Daddy and that they change their own names to Janet and Peter.

Just as Adriel adapted more quickly than Kyona to living on the streets, he is also more adept at adjusting to life with the Della Chiusas. Where Kyona fights against having her curls cut off, Adriel submits to having his hair dyed blonde and dressing the way Florabelle wants him to. Unlike Kyona, he learns to eat food with proper table manners that he has been taught. After she incurs the wrath of Florabelle for allowing a bird to fly away with one of her earrings (another instance of a bird absconding with something of value), Florabelle realises that her position in the house is precarious and she and Adriel should escape when they can. This is reinforced when Adriel overhears Florabelle speaking on the phone, making arrangements for Kyona to be taken away and a new girl brought to take her place. When a group of what appears to be soldiers arrives at the house, Adriel grabs Kyona and they manage to make their way to the forest where they know they won’t be followed. What they don’t count on is a fierce snow storm that makes them lose sight of each other. Buried in snow, Kyona is later found by a man and his dog who deliver Kyona to an old lady who lives on her own in the woods.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Kyona instantly dislike Florabelle?
2. How are Florabelle and her husband depicted?
3. One of the maid admonishes Kyona for not being like her brother and learning to adapt to her new situation. When Kyona says that her brother is no longer like

the boy he was, the maid tells her that he is smarter than Kyona because he knows how to play the game. Do you agree? Why? Why not?

4. What is the significance of the Della Chiusa's vast wealth? Why do you think they made Florabelle a famous actress?
5. Do you think the fact that their material circumstances have improved dramatically make Kyona and Adriel's predicament less stressful or easier to bear? Why? Why not?

Related Activity

The issue of illegal adoption and child trafficking is something that can also be explored in the classroom. From unwed mothers who were forced to give up their children for adoption at birth to Indigenous children being taken from their homes and forced into adoption by white families, children have always been vulnerable to exploitation, either from unscrupulous baby brokers or misguided programs that purport to be offering them a better future than one that their biological parents can provide. Below is a list of some resources that explore this issue:

The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential

<http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/138882>

United Nations Human Rights Commission

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-sale-of-children/illegal-adoptions>

CNN

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/16/world/international-adoption-saving-orphans-child-trafficking/index.html>

Unicef

https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/6-8_Child_Trafficking_MS_2016.pdf

(This is a middle school unit about child trafficking, not forced adoption)

Chapter Four: Kyona and the Old Lady

More than any other chapter in the film, this one feels the most like a fairy tale, only in this version, the old "witch" who lives in the woods is a sympathetic character who not only protects Kyona, but teaches her how to be self-sufficient and not feel sorry for herself. The tattoos on the old lady's face are similar to Iskender's, indicating that she is also part of the Skanbergs and thus could be a relative of his. She and Kyona live in

silent companionship; the only time the old woman speaks to Kyona is to admonish her when she complains of all that she has been through: "You think you're the only one." Clearly, the old lady has gone through similar tragedies, such as losing her child (Iskender). Nevertheless, the old lady is a fierce protector of Kyona and when soldiers bang on her door demanding if she has seen a runaway girl, she threatens to turn them into toads.

After the snow melts and spring arrives, Kyona is ready to leave the old lady's house. Before going, the old lady shows her a photo of herself as a young woman and hands Kyona the brooch she was wearing in the photo.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of this chapter which features Kyona by herself?
2. In what ways does the old lady seem frightening? How does her behaviour differ from her appearances?
3. Why do you think there are very few words exchanged between Kyona and the old lady?
4. Why does the old lady give Kyona the brooch?
5. What lessons does Kyona learn from her time with the old woman?

Chapter Five: The Travelling Circus

After leaving the old lady's house, Kyona finds herself at the edge of a travelling circus. Compared to where she had been living, this new environment is a riot of colour, noise and bustling activity. Kyona is spotted by the woman who runs the circus who recognises Kyona immediately as the girl who ran away from the famous actress's house. Much to her surprise, the woman takes her to Adriel who disguised as a girl in order to keep him safe from the smugglers looking for him. Soon, Kyona becomes part of the circus act with Adriel and Erdewen, a handsome young man who is attracted to Kyona.

Under the disguise of the travelling circus, Madame manages to get her performers closer to the border that they are all trying to cross for one reason or other. There is a price to be paid along the way, however. In order to keep the soldiers from arresting anyone, Madame offers up her dancers as prostitutes to "buy peace." When Kyona is angered by the way that Madame shows the soldiers naked photos of the women in

the troupe, Madame admonishes her by pointing out that life is not black and white, but grey. Survival comes at a cost.

One evening, the circus performance is invaded by the authorities, led by Jon the smuggler. He catches Shake, one of the trapeze artists who is also a runaway. Kyona and Adriel know that they have to run away before they are caught and Erdewen decides to go with them. Saying goodbye Madame, Kyona laments that she “kept losing people along the way. My heart had become a sieve.”

Discussion Questions

1. How has Adriel changed in the time since Kyona last saw him?
2. How has the relationship between Kyona and Adriel changed?
3. Why does Kyona reject Erdewen even though she finds him attractive?
4. What does Madame mean when she tells Kyona that “life is grey”?
5. Why do Kyona, Adriel and Erdewen try to leave without even saying goodbye to Madame?

Chapter 6: Shalanger Detention Centre

En route to a village where they can find smugglers to take them across the border, Kyona starts to feel sick. As they approach the village, they are all arrested and put into Shalanger, a detention centre where a guard takes Kyona’s sketch book and throws it away. She also finds the brooch that Kyona is hiding and takes it from her but, once again, a magpie appears at a pivotal moment and snatches it from her hand. The guard tries to shoot the bird to get the brooch but Kyona pushes her and she misses. While she is distracted, Kyona takes back her sketch book.

Adriel and Erdewen find a bunk bed for Kyona who is deathly ill. Issawa, a young boy in the bunk above tells them that Kyona needs something to eat and he parts with three small pieces of fruit. He tells them that Kyona needs medicine but he will only find it for them if they can give him something in return. Erdewen promises that they will take him with when they escape and Issawa finds them someone who can bring medicine. In a surprising twist, the “medicine man” turns out to be Iskender who comes every day while Kyona is sick. Erdewen recognises him from the sketch that Kyona had drawn when she was living with the street kids, and he is so jealous that he sends him away.

When Kyona eventually wakes up, she thinks that everything had been a dream, including Iskender's visits. She does not recognise Issawa because she was too sick to take note of him when she arrived, but he has gotten very used to her being around. In fact, he asks her to be his mother since he does not have one and he is all alone in the world.

As she convalesces indoors, Kyona looks out the window to find the magpie who stole the brooch. It drops the brooch and picks it up. As the weather turns warmer, Kyona ventures outside and starts to sketch again, becoming very popular with the other inmates who all want her to draw them. One day, she sees Iskender and asks him why he never came back after bringing her medicine. She gives him his mother's brooch, but he does not think he deserves it. They embrace and he leaves.

A little while later, watches as Iskender makes a deal with one of the guards, but she realises that that is how he has managed to survive for so long. Erdewen tells her to forget him and tells her that they will be escaping soon.

When a fire is started in the detention centre, a fight breaks out between inmates and guards. As they break out of the centre, one of the guards shoots Erdewen point blank and kills him. Kyona is beside herself with grief, but they must leave him behind. Eventually, Kyona, Adriel and Issawa find a tunnel, but when they come out the other end, they find Jon and Iskender waiting for them. Jon is jubilant that he has finally caught them, but Iskender takes the brooch that Kyona gave him and stabs him the neck, finally fulfilling his promise to kill him. Even though he has save their lives, Adriel tells Kyona to forget about him and they set off without him. Finally, they reach the border where a new beginning awaits:

"Fleeing had ruined our childhood, and with it, our entire former life. I didn't know what was waiting for us on the other side but Adriel and Issawa were with me. We had crossed the last border. And yet all I was doing as I was running was crying and I didn't know why. Erdewen, Iskender, my parents, the twins, my little sister. All the people I had loved and left behind. All my life I hoped that one day they'd ring my doorbell...we never know right?"

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the magpie in this section?
2. Why does Issawa part with his fruit and agree to help find medicine for Kyona?
3. Why does Iskender not want to take his mother's brooch when Kyona gives it to him?

4. Who do you think is a better person: Iskender or Erdewen? Why?
5. Why does Adriel tell Kyona to forget about Iskender even though he saves their lives?

Related Activity:

Students could research the practice of detaining undocumented immigrants in detention centres. What countries detain refugees? What are the living conditions in these centres? What are possible alternatives to detaining people who are escaping war and persecution?

General Discussion Questions

1. Why decide to tell the story through animation? Could it have worked as a live action film? Why? Why not?
2. How does the director use colour to convey different types of events and emotions?
3. What is the significance of the magpie that keeps appearing?
4. How does Kyona and Adriel's relationship change over time?
5. What elements of the film are realistic? What elements are more like a fairy tale? Why combine these two very different styles?
6. There is no specific country, time period or conflict mentioned in the film, yet each chapter is reminiscent of particular historical realities. What are some of the parallels you can draw between what Kyona and Adriel experience on their way to safety to other periods in history where people were forced to migrate?
7. Why do you think the director deliberately avoided mentioning any time or place? What effect does this have on the viewer?
8. Other than the physical danger, what is the hardest part of Kyona and Adriel's journey to safety?
9. Why do you think that the director introduced Issawa to the story at the end?
10. What do you think was the hardest part of Kyona and Adriel's journey? Outline your reasons for this choice.

References

(All websites cited are from April 2023)

French Institute UK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-fWSIAaWrA>

United Nations Association in Canada

<https://acgc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PK2-Refugees.pdf>

Schools Welcome Refugees

<http://schoolswelcomerefugees.ca/resources/>

The UN Refugee Agency

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-sale-of-children/illegal-adoptions>

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Unicef

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