



Writing Identities, Erasing Borders: *The Night Diary*, *Front Desk*, and Our Shared Story of Migration

—Paige Gray

Hiranandani, Veera. *The Night Diary*. Kokila, 2018. 272 pp. \$12.79 hc. ISBN 9780735228511.

Yang, Kelly. *Front Desk*. Levine, 2018. 304 pp. \$11.39 hc. ISBN 9781338157796.

In the August 2019 issue of *National Geographic*, writer Mohsin Hamid reminds us of our united state of transience, underscoring that a defining part of the human condition is to be in motion, to be a migrant: “To be human is to migrate forward through time, the seconds like islands, where we arrive, castaways, and from which we are swept off by the tide, arriving again and again, in a new instant, on a new island, one we have, as always, never experienced before.” In this cultural moment, an argument like Hamid’s stands in contrast to the headlines reporting the dehumanization of migrants and refugees, many of whom are children. In June, *Politico* reported that the US “Office of Refugee Resettlement is so swamped with new arrivals [at the southern border] that it is burning through cash to house children in military bases around the country . . .” (Renuka and Diamond). Moreover, “the agency even had to send 100 children back to a much-criticized Border Patrol station in Clint, Texas, saying it lacks the room to take them” (Renuka and Diamond). An August 2019 UNICEF *Advocacy Alert* tells of the “more than 900,000 stateless Rohingya refugees living in the camps of southeast Bangladesh,” who are primarily “focused on staying alive,” though the Rohingya “children and young people are clamouring for more than survival; they want quality education that can provide a path to a more hopeful future” (“Beyond” 6). What would that more hopeful future look like? In such a future, do national borders continue to limit and police our possibilities?

Two recent works of children’s literature explore these concepts of migration and identity and force us to consider our itinerant states of being. Despite their disparate geography and chronology, Veera Hiranandani’s *The Night Diary*

and Kelly Yang's *Front Desk* both speak to ideas that destabilize the conceit of home: the security of nation. Through their young female protagonists, these two novels suggest that pre-existing national borders cannot, or should not, limit or define us, with each text alluding to the porous, elastic nature of borders. Taken together, the literal writing of *Front Desk's* Mia and *The Night Diary's* Nisha communicate the ways in which our stories—our art—can metaphorically erase the borders that divide us. We are all migrants, as Hamid writes in *National Geographic*, but we can find permanence together through writing: through our capacity to create and shape our identities. This is the human story.

Front Desk opens in 1993, not long after ten-year-old Mia Tang and her parents move from China to southern California. The family left their home country in order to have a better chance at economic and social prosperity, telling Mia that “America would be this amazing place where we could live in a house with a dog . . .” (Yang 1). But the Tangs struggle. Mia mentions that they lived in their car before her parents both got jobs at a Chinese restaurant, which enabled them to rent a small apartment. After the restaurant fires Mia's mother, Mia wonders why they abandoned their comfortable lives in China for the challenging conditions they now faced. “Because it's freer here,” Mia's mother tells the young girl, which only confuses Mia more since “[n]othing was free in America. Everything was so expensive” (4). Here, the book nods to the “cost” of living in communist China and nods to the freedom and agency Mia eventually finds in America through her writing.

The Tangs secure work managing at the Calivista Motel just outside Disneyland, allowing them to live rent-free in the small living quarters behind the front office. Mr. Yao, the motel's owner, however, undermines this seemingly ideal situation by underpaying and overworking the Tangs. After school, Mia tends to the titular front desk, checking in new guests and answering customer questions while her parents clean the rooms. The motel distills the idea of migration into a physical place, suggesting our perpetual tourist selves, continually wandering literally and figuratively. The motel also functions as a nexus for people marginalized and exploited in a cutthroat capitalist culture—people often invisible in literature for young readers. At the Calivista Motel, Mia finds a sense of community with the “weeklies,” the five guests who pay by week instead of by the day. People that live in a motel,

usually people who struggle financially, rarely get a nuanced, multi-dimensional depiction (if depicted at all) in literature or culture. As Hank, Mia's closest "weekly" friend says, they are often "treated . . . like second-class citizens" (15). Instead, the novel humanizes these characters.

Indeed, one of *Front Desk's* central tenets proves to be showing the economic and cultural challenges faced by immigrants and minority groups. Mia succeeds in starting a kind of Calivista whisper network among the southern California immigrant community—they know the Tangs will let them stay free if they are in dire straits. These guests further underscore the workplace exploitation that immigrants encounter. Aunt Ling (with "Aunt" denoting familiarity or friendship) tells the Tangs of her job at a nail salon in Irvine where she "spent the entire time hunched over, kneeling on the floor" and listened to all the "wealthy American women as they complained . . . about their Chinese maids" whom they assume "all steal" (113). Mia's best friend, Lupe, who often visits the motel with her cable technician dad, deals with issues similar to Mia's—feelings of insecurity because of her ethnicity and class. When Mia asks Lupe when she will have her over to her house, Lupe responds, "Ah, it's not much to look at," and gives Mia only a noncommittal answer of "[s]oon" (194).

Front Desk reflects the multiple power structures that can silence young people, minorities, and low-income families, but suggests through Mia's writing that we have the ability to overcome these power dynamics by way of our words and creative expression. Throughout the novel, Mia composes letters to solve both minor and central conflicts. These notes are reproduced as a facsimile of Mia's handwritten letters, including typographical errors and content edits that she crosses out or "erases," but which readers are still able to see. With their handwritten-like typeface, Mia's letters stand out as distinct and special—and effective. Through them, Mia helps Hank get a job and successfully poses as a lawyer in order to threaten an exploitative employer taking advantage of one of Mia's Chinese "uncles." Mia also discovers that writing holds therapeutic power when she composes letters to express her anger, but then chooses not to send them. In a letter to the "mean girls" at school who ridicule her because of her inexpensive clothes, she writes:

~~Your~~ You're right. I ~~by~~ buy my clothes by the pound. My mom and I go to the Goodwill and we buy old secondhand clothes. Clothes you probably ~~through~~ threw away. I'm probably wearing your socks right now. . . . I think I'd rather never go on vacation ~~then~~ than be like you. (136)

After giving life to the feelings boiling inside her via the words she prints on paper, Mia recognizes writing's "satisfying" effect. With this letter and others, the erasure of mistakes—but mistakes left evident for the reader—the text embraces the writing process, valuing effort and revision. As an extension of humanity, writing itself is always in a state of becoming, in a state of motion, always in migration. And though the "mean girls" never get this letter, we, as readers, can acknowledge the ways in which the letter erodes the class barriers between Mia and the mean girls by distilling them all down to vulnerable, fallible human beings.

The idea of writing as agency—and the means through which we connect to one other—comes not only by way of the product, like Mia's letters, but also through detailing Mia's progression as a writer, or more specifically, an English writer. The text shows Mia struggle. We see it in her letters as well as her narration. After getting back a less-than-stellar essay at school, Mia tells us, "Twelve. That's the number of exclamation marks my teacher used to describe how bad my writing was" (121). She also faces discouragement from her mother, who tells her, "You just can't be as good as the white kids in their language, honey. It's *their* language" (90). But despite these setbacks, despite the admission of writing's difficulty, Mia still actively embraces it. She discerns how, through writing, she controls her narrative, and that even the choice of word can shade and contour narratives in new, compelling ways. When she borrows a dictionary from one of the weeklies, she's amazed to discover that it "wasn't just a dictionary" but "had something called a thesaurus, too" (126). Here, Mia understands words as a form of currency, noting that "[y]ou could trade them freely, like you can trade one US dollar for eight renminbi" (126). In equating an adeptness of language to the conversion between foreign currencies, the text suggests that writing—capturing the textures of the human condition through language—holds the potential to connect disparate cultures.

This connection remains critical across time and space. The ideas of migration and identity at the centre of *Front Desk* and *The Night Diary* manifest in different eras, but they very much speak to our present moment. In the introduction to a 2018 special issue on migration from the *Children's Literature Quarterly*, Philip Nel relays that “244 million people live outside the country of their birth,” and that, “[o]f that number, 65.6 million have been forced to leave their homes. Nearly 22.5 million are refugees. Over half of all refugees are under the age of eighteen” (357). Through the specific stories told in *Front Desk* and *The Night Diary*, there exists the universal experiences of fear, insecurity, curiosity, wonder, and hope. The potency of storytelling’s ability to humanize cannot be overstated, particularly in relation to today’s current state of global migration. For, “[w]hen children’s literature cultivates an empathetic imagination,” Nel writes, “it can bring people of all ages closer to understanding the displacement felt by migrants, refugees, and those in diasporic communities” (358).

The Night Diary brings to life the largest historic instance of such displacement, the 1947 partition of India. The novel comprises the diary of Nisha, who addresses each entry to her dead mother. In her diary, Nisha not only documents a pivotal, violent chapter of mass migration, but also shows the interconnected, fluid relationship between writing and identity; just as Nisha moves geographically from current-day Pakistan to India, she too moves psychically, emotionally, and spiritually, and works through these changes in her diary. While political authorities instate new national borders in an attempt to define Indian and Pakistani identity, Nisha shows us the arbitrary, permeable nature of borders. For *Front Desk*’s Mia, writing enables action. Mia writes an identity through giving words to what she wants to see happen. For Nisha, writing enables self-examination and meditation. In her diary, she has a safe space to explore challenging questions without easy answers. And, through her exultation of the written word, Nisha reveals that national and individual identities are stories that we are continually writing, erasing, and rewriting.

Indeed, the existential importance of writing—the idea that writing equals being—shapes the entire narrative of *The Night Diary*: it is only through Nisha’s diary that she or her story can come alive for us, the readers. Alongside our meta-awareness of this significance, Nisha also affirms the value of the diary in making it an extension of her mother. The diary, in

essence, becomes a substitute or surrogate mother that Nisha can only access through writing. The novel's opening entry also alludes to writing's capability to shape global consciousness via the perspectives it provides. Nisha references "an English story where a little girl got a big pink cake and presents wrapped in shiny paper and bows for her birthday" (2-3). Such a story is one familiar to Western readers. *The Night Diary*, however, enables these same readers a window into Nisha's twelfth birthday on the Indian subcontinent, an occasion on which she delights in receiving a special "ripe tomato from the garden, sliced, salted, and sprinkled with chili pepper"—not a pink cake (3). The attention Nisha gives to the material details of the diary itself suggest the text's concern for the preservation of stories. Of her diary, a birthday gift from the family servant Kazi, Nisha writes that it "is covered in purple and red silk, decorated with small sequins and bits of mirrored glass sewn in" (3). "The paper," Nisha describes to her mother through the diary entry, "is rough, thick, and the color of butter," and it "is not lined" (3). These physical qualities matter to Nisha because they facilitate the production of her writing. She knows she needs to "make a record of the things that will happen . . ." (3), underscoring the ways in which writing both creates and safeguards story, history, and identity.

Amid a confusing, uncertain world, Nisha finds strength and confidence in her control over written language. Partition makes Nisha question everything she knows about herself. It dislocates her physically, as she, her brother, and her father must move from their home in present-day Pakistan to what's now considered India because Nisha's father is Hindu. But Partition dislocates Nisha's sense of self as well. Because Nisha's mother was Muslim (as is Kazi, whom she loves dearly), Nisha cannot easily categorize herself—Muslim or Hindu, Pakistani or Indian. What would her family do if her mother were alive, Nisha wonders. "[H]ere is the question that is most on my mind," she writes, but "I'm afraid to say it, even afraid to write it down" (90). Writing engenders a level of legitimacy, Nisha suggests here. The act of writing makes something real, and Nisha does not want to "think about the answer . . ." (90). Her "pencil needs to write it anyway," however, and she asks, "If you were alive, would we have to leave you because you are Muslim? Would they have drawn a line right though us, Mama?" (90).

Nisha does not understand this forced migration, nor why Hindus and Muslims cannot live peacefully together like her mother and father did. But she can maintain order on the pages

of her diary, for in the diary she decides *what* and *how* ideas can come into being via the page. And the text privileges the written word over the spoken word. Speaking carries with it a disorienting spontaneity and instability. “I was made for writing in a diary,” Nisha tells her mother in an early entry, adding that she would “much rather write than talk” because with talking, “once the words are out, you can’t put them back in” (12). Writing permits constant revision, Nisha asserts, for “if you write words and they don’t come out the way you want them to, you can erase them and start over” (12).

While *The Night Diary* advocates for the preservation of stories, it also stresses that stories remain in flux; we have the ability to “erase them and start over.” In so doing, the text forces us to consider the stories we tell ourselves about identity—and nationhood. If geographical borders can be so easily constructed, as with India and Pakistan, can they not just as easily be taken down? Nisha understands herself as Indian, but she realizes that “[w]here I live is not called India anymore” (89). The diary links the acts of writing and migration, thus collapsing and conflating ideas of space, place, and self. “My feet are burning even as I sit here and write,” Nisha confesses (123). Just as she is forced to move between nations, leaving her feet battered and blistered, Nisha is compelled to write. And while she has no control over this exodus, she can give voice to the questions it raises and suggest the arbitrary nature of borders. “It still feels so strange to say the ground where my sore feet step on is not India anymore, but a place called Pakistan,” Nisha says (123). Who and what defines us, she seemingly asks: outside systems of rule and power or our own inner lives and experiences? Her diary entries invite inquiry into the nature of human creativity and how we make meaning through grappling with the fact that nothing is really fixed, not stories, not our identities, not even our national borders; we are seemingly always erasing and starting over.

The novel further reflects this creative anxiety through Nisha’s refusal to speak. Speaking, like writing, is a creative act, and for Nisha, the utterance of words brings ideas into existence. Her fear of not saying the right thing paralyzes her, and she believes that “[e]veryone is better off when I don’t talk” (222). She boldly declares, “I’m not going to, Mama, ever again. . . . When I really need to say something I will write my words down on a chalkboard so they can be erased” (222-23). The words we put into the world, Nisha and Mia learn, wield power. This

power can create community and unity, or it can isolate, divide, and destruct. So terrified of what her words may do, Nisha determines that she will only give life to those words over which she has complete authority, as she does with the regulated, editable space of the diary.

Front Desk and *The Night Diary* share stories of young people dislocated from their original homes—stories of young people in search of new homes. But the new homes that Mia and Nisha find, arguably, are not the physical places of southern California and India, but the psychic spaces accessed through writing. Their stories reflect the figurative dislocation that young people experience so keenly as they navigate individual and social identity. But the stories of Mia and Nisha also echo the very real material circumstances of so many children who become part of the global migration narrative. “The immigrant must be central, not marginal, to the historic processes,” Leyla Savsar asserts, and the immigrant must be “free to assemble, remember, speak, and rewrite his or her story—acts that are essential to the possibility of resistance in the face of colonial subjugation or neocolonial exploitation” (396). In these two works, the immigrant protagonists use the act of writing to claim agency and recover meaning, with Mia using writing to engender action and Nisha writing to assemble order. Through the story of the child migrant, narratives like these two novels “are able to see both sides” of the protagonists’ cultural identity, but they also “explore new sites of identity” (Savsar 396). Moreover, in actively depicting Mia and Nisha as writers amid “the disruptive and cataclysmic experience of migration,” these works put forward that child migrants can “play the significant role of inventors of culture rather than mere appropriators or learners” (Savsar 396). In this ability to resonate on a level of specificity and universality, to be both a window and a mirror, *Front Desk* and *The Night Diary* show us that the migrant’s story is *our* shared story, that of humanity. They remind us that our time on Earth is a collective journey forward—that we all are, indeed, migrants.

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