Anne Sibley O’Brien’s *I’m New Here* tells the story of three immigrant children as they seek to adjust to their new school environment. Maria is a Guatemalan, soccer-loving girl whose frustration resides in not understanding the English language. Jin is a Korean boy who is confused by the western typography. Fatimah is a Somali refugee who feels uncomfortable in her new routine. All stories are narrated in the first person. The tone, vocabulary, and illustrations are strong and powerfully insightful, yet simple and accessible enough for young and ESL readers.

The book initially introduces the characters, then follows the same order of events for each of them. First, a flashback of the homeland alludes to a place where things were coherent and harmonious. Then, the characters confess their frustration: loneliness, confusion, and sadness. The text adopts a more hopeful note when the characters realize that overcoming their frustration depends primarily on their own perseverance, courage, and initial effort to reach out to someone. This effort is met by acceptance from others, leading to willful cultural exchanges. Each story concludes with a positive outlook on the future.

O’Brien’s narrative is evidently reminiscent of Bud Howlett’s book of the same title. Nevertheless, this text extends the story of Howlett’s Salvadoran protagonist, Jazmin Escalante.
O’Brien’s characters each experience a distinct form of ostracization. Maria struggles to interpret what she hears phonemically; her foreignness is primarily linguistic. Nevertheless, as soccer constitutes a bridge between Guatemalan and local cultures, the text engages readers to perceive sport as language. Playtime allows the multicultural group to establish communication based on soccer rules and moves, rather than settling on the verbal linguistic difference. In contrast, Jin’s foreignness is typographic. Once he practices the motor skill of letter tracing, he starts to appreciate the new calligraphy. As for Fatimah, her foreignness is more concerned with proxemics (Hall et al. 83–100). Her frustration, “I cannot find my place” (O’Brien unpaged), arose from the contrast between her former school’s spatial, gendered organization (where teachers were male and where boys and girls sat on different sides) and the new cultural landscape.

_I’m New Here_ is an honest depiction of the lengthiness of the adaptive process. While the narrative does not explicitly state how long it took for Maria to pronounce her first English words, for Jin to trace his, or for Fatimah to volunteer in class, the illustrations allow the reader to note that it took several days. The characters wear different clothes throughout the book, and every step of their journey is marked by a different outfit.

O’Brien’s text valorizes communicative events and the reciprocal benefits of cultural exchanges, as exemplified through the characters’ testimonies: “I am finding new friends. And they are finding me;” “I am learning from others. And they are learning from me;” “I am sharing with others and they are sharing with me” (unpaged). Furthermore, Fatimah’s hijab and Jin’s sharing of words in Hangul suggest that adaptation does not require abandoning one’s culture, but rather sharing it.

One of the theoretical strengths of the narrative is that it assumes that race should not be a primary concern or factor in the adaptive process. The students presented here are in a multiethnic environment. O’Brien unequivocally states through her illustrations that foreignness is not based on race. Some might also interpret the display of multiculturalism as an attempt to remind American readers of their own ethnic diversity rather than an invitation for international readers to relate to racial otherness.

Immigrant students might find the story rather idealistic, however. The narrative assumes that they would always be made to feel welcome, if they would just reach out. While the protagonists’ efforts to reach out to their American classmates are immediately met with enthusiastic warmth, most foreign readers—young and old—know that the reality of foreignness includes a certain amount of rejection or reticence. Such reticence is often overcome through friendships with other foreign students (Leung et al. 137–142), but here the protagonists’ paths never cross. Librarians, teachers, and parents who recommend this book to foreign students should pair the reading with an in-depth discussion of the characters’ interactions with their American peers.

Otherwise, _I’m New Here_ is a wonderful read for American students who receive new foreign classmates. It inspires them to see the human behind the foreign, to empathize with
the immigrant. Foreign readers will be captivated by the remarkable illustrations that are rich in content and implications. All will appreciate O’Brien’s hopeful tone and her encouragement to have open and honest dialogue regarding the frustrations and fears of newcomers in our country, as well as the multicultural presence in numerous American schools.

Works Cited


About the Author

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