

on the Record

Not Alone

Children’s Books Spark Discussions About Homelessness

by Melissa Walker

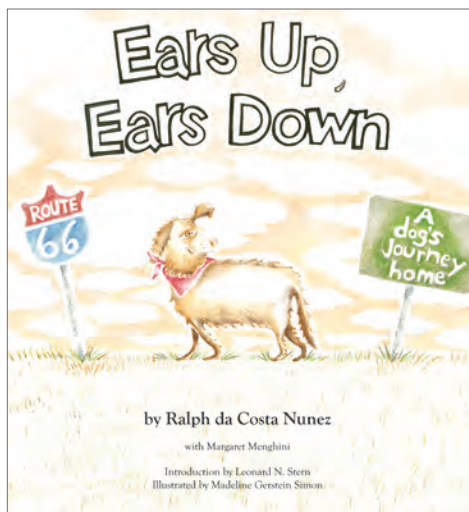
For kids, books are safe windows into worlds of adventure, magic, and real-life feelings and situations not yet experienced. They are also places where wide-eyed new readers look for reflections of themselves, to find validation, comfort, and insight.

The children’s books described below all serve to shine a light on aspects of homelessness—through furry characters, under-sea creatures, and everyday kids. Each one offers points for discussion as well as thought-provoking moments for readers of every age.

For readers in kindergarten or older:

Ears Up, Ears Down, by Ralph da Costa Nunez with Margaret Menghini; illustrations by Madeline Gerstein Simon (*White Tiger Press, 2012). A dog called “Ears Up” finds himself out of a home after the closing of the junkyard where he has lived since he was a pup. Sadness brings his ears low, and the family he meets along the highway calls him “Ears Down.” Together, Ears Up, Ears Down and his new friends travel to a tent city where many homeless families live, and our canine

hero meets many new and interesting people and learns the ups and downs of major life change. A separate activity book illuminates the story through games and discussion questions. *Ears Up, Ears Down* gives readers a lovable character to relate to and root for as he searches for a home and a new purpose.



Mango’s Quest, by Ralph da Costa Nunez with Robyn Schwartz; illustrations by Amarides Montgomery (*White Tiger Press, 2008). When Mango the hamster’s classroom cage gets overcrowded, he has to find refuge elsewhere. After being turned away by the classroom’s other animals, he stumbles upon a kindly old mouse who runs a shelter of sorts in the school library. The next day the students in his class, after brainstorming to help their friend find a new home, come up with a creative way for Mango to have a comfy wood-chip pile of his own again. This story is a perfect lead-in to a classroom discussion about homelessness. A related activity book provides opportunity for reflection through games and questions.



Where Can I Build My Volcano?, by Pat Van Doren; illustrations by Wanda Platt (HEAR US, Inc., 1998). Susan, a third-grader, has a stuffed bear named Ted and a best friend named Ellen. When her aunt’s house gets too crowded, Susan and her mother must live out of their car, and eventually in a shelter, where the young girl feels vulnerable and afraid. The biggest sources of stress in Susan’s life are the secrets she keeps—about her homelessness, why she has rips in her dress, and why she never has a pencil in school. With the help of a loving

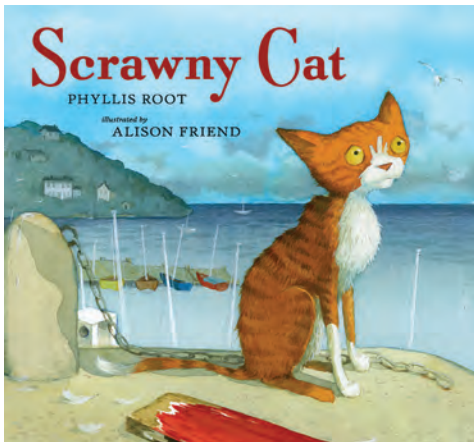
*White Tiger Press is an independent publisher of books about family poverty and homelessness for both children and adults in collaboration with the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness.

on the Homefront

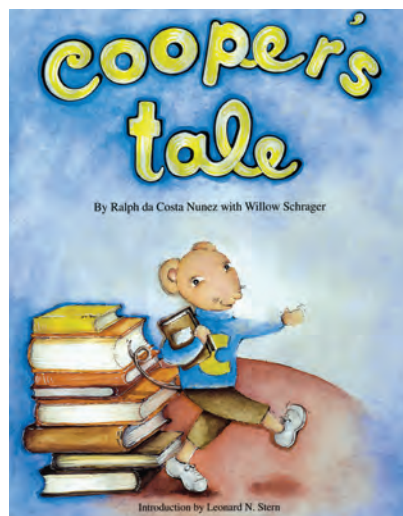
mother, a kind teacher, and a worker at the shelter, Susan starts to see the positive parts of her life: she has a warm place to sleep and someone to care for her. Though Susan worries that she will lose her best friend if the truth is revealed, she discovers the relief that comes with being honest and not keeping secrets. This book explores the daily details and unique challenges of living as a homeless child, as well as the hope and encouragement that the right people can provide.

Scrawny Cat, by Phyllis Root; illustrations by Alison Friend (Candlewick Press, 2011). Scrawny Cat used to have a home and a girl who loved him, but now he's wandering and afraid, wondering where he belongs and whether he'll ever be warm

and cozy again. The story of a lost cat and his misadventures on the street with strangers and barking dogs will resonate with any child who has ever felt alone, lost, or without a home. The hopeful ending showcases an inspiring inner strength.

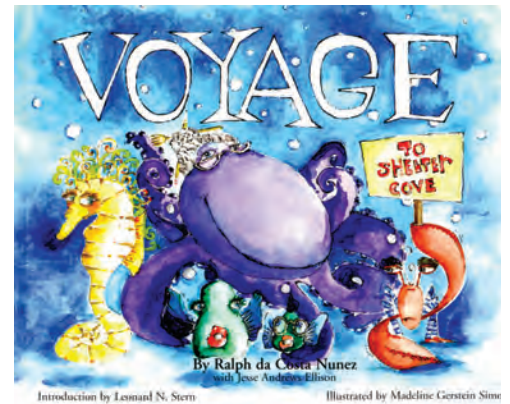


Cooper's Tale, by Ralph da Costa Nunez with Willow Schrage; illustrations by Madeline Gerstein Simon (*White Tiger Press, 2000). When the old man he lives with disappears suddenly, Cooper the pink mouse is thrown out of his home. He wanders to the playground, where he sees three children who are not playing but sitting apart from the other kids. "We're homeless," one of them, a little girl, tells him. "We don't feel different. But here at school they say we are." Cooper feels a strong

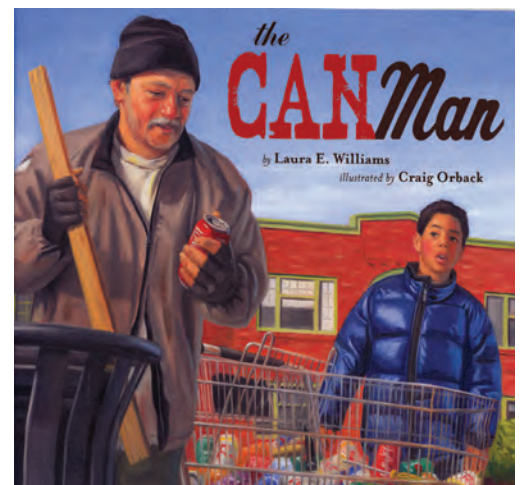


bond with the kids, who look out for him while he teaches them to read. Through a twist of fate, Cooper finds the old man again, and he is able to help his new friends and their mom get back on their feet while he returns to his old home. Cooper's is a sweet tale of friendship.

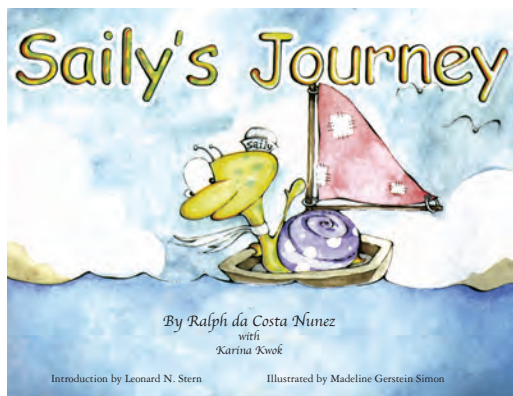
Voyage to Shelter Cove, by Ralph da Costa Nunez with Jesse Andrews Ellison; illustrations by Madeline Gerstein Simon (*White Tiger Press, 2006). In an undersea tale that addresses both homelessness and environmental concerns, we meet Serena the seahorse and Herman the hermit crab. The two journey with friends to a place called Shelter Cove when their home reef is threatened by developers. In Shelter Cove, each friend sets and pursues a goal for the future. *Voyage to Shelter Cove* introduces us to whimsical sea creatures in a fantastical ocean setting. An activity book is available.



The Can Man, by Laura E. Williams; illustrations by Craig Orback (Lee & Low Books, 2010). When Tim wants to save up money for a skateboard, he gets an idea from the clanging sound of the Can Man down the street: he'll collect cans and cash them in, just like the homeless guy does. But by the time Tim has amassed enough cans to redeem, he has met the Can Man up close, and his perspective has shifted. Laura E. Williams treats her characters with respect and kindness, and readers will be inspired to consider their own preconceptions and to reach out to others.



Saily's Journey, by Ralph da Costa Nunez with Karina Kwok; illustrations by Madeline Gerstein Simon (*White Tiger Press, 2002). After Saily the snail unexpectedly loses his shell, the resulting adventures with a spider, a seagull, crickets, and other snails make his search for a new home a true hero's quest. *Saily's Journey* incorporates themes of homelessness, bullying, the dangers of the streets, self-acceptance, and the



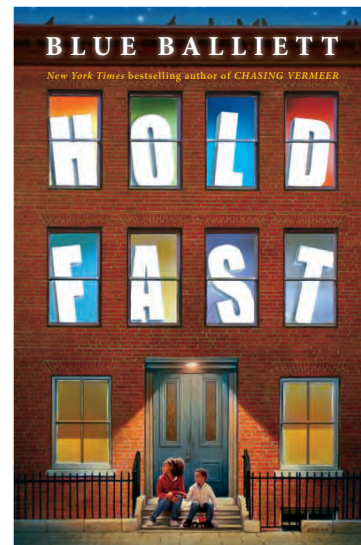
meaning of true friendship. The story is framed in a classroom setting—Saily is a character whom students in the book read about—so there is a set-up for discussion at the conclusion of the book.

A Family of Five or Six, by Pat Van Doren; illustrations by fifth- and sixth-grade students at Carrollwood Day School in Tampa, Florida (HEAR US, Inc., 2008). After losing their home in a storm, Michael's family of six is split: his father is missing and he, his mother, and his three siblings live in a tent, surrounded by other displaced families. While he deals with the realities of homelessness—washing clothes in a shelter on the weekends, using tiny tubes of donated toothpaste, even trying to make a game of "camp out" to fight the sadness of living in a tent—Michael never stops hoping that he'll find his father and that the family of six will be together again. Students provided the touching illustrations for this novel.

A Place of Our Own, by Pat Van Doren; illustrations by Wanda Platt (HEAR US, Inc., 2008). This is the second story about the life of Susan, the girl from *Where Can I Build My Volcano?* Now she is older, and she and her mother are moving from the transitional shelter to a place of their own. Susan's ease with her situation, gratitude for the help she has received, and compassion for the people in the shelter shine through in this satisfying full-circle tale.

For older readers (ages eight and up):

Hold Fast, by Blue Balliett (Scholastic Press, 2013). On the South Side of Chicago, the Pearl family is thrown into a nightmare when the father, Dash, disappears. They face the shelter system during a bitterly cold winter, and 11-year-old Early is determined to find her father, giving the book a mystery element. *Hold Fast* draws from the critically acclaimed *New York Times* best-selling author Blue Balliett's own time spent volunteering in Chicago's shelters. In this powerful, emotional story filled with rich detail, Early comes up with a solution to homelessness that all kids can work on ... maybe even in the real world.



Gracie's Girl, by Ellen Wittlinger (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002; published as an e-book, 2012). Bess is starting sixth grade, and this year she wants to stand out and be popular. She resents the time her parents make her spend volunteering at a shelter kitchen and the secondhand clothes that litter her living room when her mother organizes the community rummage sale. But then Ellen meets Gracie, an old woman who is homeless, and her eyes open to issues larger than herself. Ellen Wittlinger's characters—Bess, her parents, her brother, and her friends—sparkle with humor and humanity. Their voices and actions ring true as Bess discovers compassion within herself. ■

