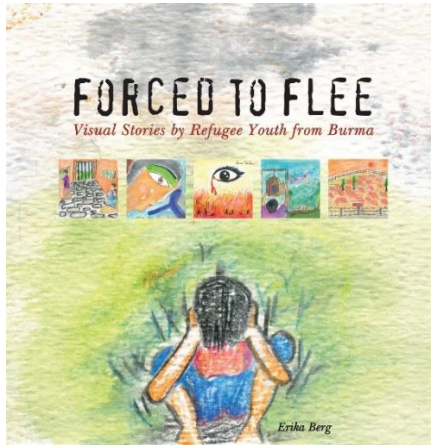


## **FORCED TO FLEE** **Visual Stories by Refugee Youth from Burma**

### **Q&A with Erika Berg**



**Q: How did you start working with refugees?**

**A:** In 2000, I began teaching English to Vietnamese refugees in Seattle—initially for selfish reasons. I was searching for a babysitter for my soon-to-be adopted Vietnamese baby girl, someone who could help me raise Seki Thu biculturally. In addition to lucking upon Nanny Thuy, I learned that every refugee has a haunting, humbling and awe-inspiring story to share. Despite suffering devastating losses and heartache, my refugee students somehow managed to remain hopeful, determined—even grateful. I felt like I had discovered my calling. After hearing one too many stories of injustice, I traded in my 24-year publishing career for an opportunity to work with refugees full-time.

**Q: What is the difference between refugees, asylees, migrants, IDPs and stateless people?**

**A:** **Refugees** are forced to flee their country of nationality due to a well-founded fear of ethnic, religious and/or political persecution. In comparison, **asylees** are seeking or have been granted political asylum. **Migrants**, including undocumented migrants, work or attend school in a neighboring country. Often, they too have been forced to flee their country of origin. **Internally displaced persons (IDPs)** also are forced to flee their homes, however they continue to live within their country's boundaries. **Stateless people** are not recognized as citizens by any state; they have no legal identity.

**Q: How did you become involved with Burma?**

**A:** In September 2007, my attention was riveted by video footage of never-ending columns of saffron-robed monks streaming through the streets of Burma. Unexpectedly, the military junta had removed all fuel subsidies, causing food prices to skyrocket overnight. Moved by the people's despair, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks took to the streets in protest, chanting the *Metta Sutta*, a prayer of loving kindness. A week later, machine-gun toting soldiers swarmed the streets. Foreign news crews were banned. The Internet was shut down. Dusk-to-dawn curfews were enforced. Monasteries were raided and monks vanished. Feeling helpless, I searched the Internet for an opportunity to help, locally. I discovered that a rally for Burma was scheduled to take place in downtown Seattle the following weekend. That's where Seki and I first met leaders of our region's community of refugees from Burma, now dear friends.

**Q: Given recent democratic reforms, how much outside help does Burma still need?**

**A:** A lot! In 2011, the country's military junta ceded power to a quasi-civilian government that has begun to implement democratic reforms. However, in many resource-rich ethnic minority—that is, non-Burman—areas of the country, human rights abuses have continued unabated. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kachin, Shan, Rakhine and Rohingya still live in IDP camps. More than 120,000 refugees, primarily

ethnic Karen, still live in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. More than 200,000 Rohingya still live in refugee camps along the Bangladesh-Burma border. About 100,000 largely undocumented Chin migrants still live along the India-Burma border, at risk of deportation. Despite democratic reforms and ceasefire agreements with most ethnic armies, many ethnic areas continue to be occupied by the Burma Army. Villagers continue to be forcibly displaced, robbed of their land, livelihood and freedom.

**Q: What role has the government played in the country's democracy movement?**

**A:** Today, Burma's government is comprised of genuine reformers, pseudo-reformers and a hardline faction that has overtly resisted democratic reforms. Afraid of losing their grip on the country, hardliners have stood by as the Burma Army has continued to perpetuate human rights abuses in ethnic areas. They have also stood by as ultra-nationalists have inflamed fears of threats to the majority religion, fostering a climate of prejudice and impunity. As 90% of the population is Buddhist and the Sangha is widely revered, few politicians have dared to challenge extremists and risk losing future votes. The book's epilogue, "Bridging Divides," addresses these issues. The youths' visual stories illustrate that until Burma's military-drafted 2008 Constitution is overhauled to reflect and protect the best interests of the people, rather than the best interests of the Burma Army, genuine democracy will remain an elusive dream.

**Q: Where did your visual storytelling workshops take place?**

**A:** The workshops took place along the Thai-Burma border, along the India-Burma and in Delhi, along the Bangladesh-Burma border and in Burma, the U.S. and Canada. More specifically, in refugee camps, a shelter for children who had been trafficked, orphanages, boarding houses, clinics, monasteries, churches, offices, community centers, a city dump, schools, textile factories, libraries, homes and open fields. The more diverse the venues, the more diverse the issues raised by the youths' visual stories.

**Q: Why did you focus on the stories of refugee youth?**

**A:** There is something extraordinarily powerful about a refugee child painting his/her experiences in the universally understood language of narrative art. Free of adults' judgments and generalizations, which tend to politicize issues and polarize opinions, visual stories painted by and about youth *humanize* issues. Drawn into the youths' inner worlds, we gain a child's-eye view of what it feels like to be forced to flee one's homeland and live in exile, haunted—and often empowered—by traumas of the past. Each time I curate an exhibit of refugee youths' visual stories, I am struck by how, no matter where viewers stand politically, their hearts and minds are opened. Children are natural bridge-builders and peacemakers. Integrated throughout the book are photographs of many of the youth painting their visual stories.

**Q: Were all of the visual stories in *Forced to Flee* painted by youth?**

**A:** Actually, several of the visual stories in the book were painted by former political prisoners, including champions of Burma's 8 August 1988 student-led, pro-democracy uprising (commonly referred to as the "8888 Uprising") and an exiled leader of Burma's 2007 monk-led "Saffron Revolution." Thanks to their willingness to share their personal experiences, historical events that youth were not alive to experience first-hand are brought to life for readers/viewers.

**Q: What surprised you most about the youth who participated in the workshops?**

**A:** I have two different answers; one for the refugee youth whose visual stories are featured in the chapters of the book, and another for the interethnic/faith youth inside Burma whose visual stories appear in the book's epilogue, "Bridging Divides." **Refugee youth:** At the start of each workshop I would tell the youth, "I need your help." Most youth questioned why anyone would care about their stories. However, the more they reflected on the extraordinary challenges they had overcome, the more their self-confidence and solidarity grew. Over the course of each workshop, the youth came to realize that genuine reconciliation in a divided society depends upon uncovering the truth and reaching a shared understanding of the past, however painful. Moreover, no one is better qualified to speak to the need for peace than those who have been denied it. **Interethnic/faith youth:** Had I not known that they had grown up under a military regime, that up until two years earlier their government had systematically repressed and oppressed its people, I never would have guessed. Our interethnic/faith visual storytelling workshops took place in Rangoon and Mandalay, where most workshop participants had access to the Internet and were able to pursue a civic education online. Growing up continually reminded of the *need* for democratic reforms, these youth groups seemed to have a better understanding and appreciation of human rights and democratic principles than young people in the U.S. who were born and raised in a democratic society.

**Q: Why visual stories?**

**A:** There were many reasons. Visual stories are inclusive. They can be painted by, as well as understood by, anyone in the world—regardless of nationality, age or educational level. There is less of a chance of the visual storyteller's inner critic inhibiting self-expression. Upfront, youth were reassured that they weren't participating in an art workshop; our focus was on storytelling, sharing stories only they could share. The meaning of a visual can be grasped in a fraction of a second, far more quickly than text; it has a greater chance of engaging viewers, especially when accompanied by a caption that helps interpret the image. Visual stories are more likely to evoke an emotional response and be shared on social media. When painted by a refugee child, there is an immediacy, a greater sense of urgency to the issues raised. Finally, the youth could share their story without disclosing their identity, if they preferred. Some youth signed their painting with their full name. Others used their first name only. Still others used a pseudonym. It was important for youth to feel in control of how much or little of their identity, like their story, they revealed.

**Q: Who is the audience for *Forced to Flee*?**

**A:** ***Forced to Flee***'s primary audience is anyone interested in Burma and/or those forced to flee violent conflict and persecution in their native land: refugees, asylees, IDPs, (many) migrants and/or stateless people. The size of this audience exploded in 2011 when Burma's military junta ceded power to a quasi-civilian government and the international media began monitoring Burma's struggle for democracy, led by human rights activist-turned-politician Aung San Suu Kyi. The book has also drawn those moved by the power of the youths' paintings to raise awareness of refugee and human rights issues, inspire support for refugees and promote peaceful coexistence among Burma's diverse ethnic and religious groups. I have also been pleased by the outpouring of interest from educators and parents who feel their students and children have a lot to learn from children who can't afford to take for granted what's most important in life.

**Q: How did you decide on the organization of *Forced to Flee*?**

**A:** The 196 visual stories in the book are clustered around thought-provoking questions I posed to refugee youth in more than 40 visual storytelling workshops. They were sequenced to chronicle the youths'

journeys, including—in some cases—being resettled in a third country. In chapters 1-5, the visual stories cluster around “Why were you forced to flee?”, “What do you remember most about your journey to safety?”, “What was it like to live in exile?”, “What do you miss most about your native land?” and “What is your dream for the future?” For the epilogue, “Bridging Divides,” youth painted their answers to “What commonly divides communities in conflict?”, “How can trust be nurtured between communities in conflict?” and “What does ‘peaceful coexistence’ look like to you?” The book concludes on a positive note, illustrating the “Hopes & Dreams” of refugee youth and offering readers opportunities to help in the “Bridging Divides” epilogue, the “Ways to Help” appendix and the book’s dynamic website, [www.burmavisionsforpeace.org](http://www.burmavisionsforpeace.org).

**Q: What issues are illustrated by the youths’ visual stories?**

**A:** The youths’ visual stories illustrate all of the issues that have forced refugees to flee Burma, including forced conscription of child soldiers, forced labor, land confiscation, forced relocation, exploitation of natural resources, extortion, political prisoners, torture, oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, ultra-nationalistic attitudes favoring Burman Buddhists and promoting discriminatory laws, lack of or unaffordable health care and education, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, media censorship/intimidation, arbitrary arrest/detainment, corruption, sexism, sexual harassment, rape as a weapon of war, landmines, extreme poverty and Burma’s inherently undemocratic 2008 Constitution.

**Q: What do you hope the book and companion website will accomplish?**

**A:** By sensitizing readers/viewers to the challenges and aspirations of refugees (everywhere), I hope the book will promote a shift in public perceptions of refugees from financial burdens to courageous bridge-builders, worthy of our respect and compassion. By concluding the book with the “Hopes & Dreams” chapter, the “Bridging Divides” epilogue and the “Ways to Help” appendix, which is expanded upon in the “Ways to Help” section of [www.burmavisionsforpeace.org](http://www.burmavisionsforpeace.org), I hope the book will empower readers to answer Aung San Suu Kyi’s plea, “Please use your liberty to promote ours.” By engaging widely-respected ethnic leaders in the book’s development, I hope the book will serve as a powerful advocacy tool. By donating 100% of the royalties from the sale of the book to dedicated refugee and internally displaced youth leaders, representing Burma’s most marginalized and oppressed ethnic communities, I hope the book will promote a more inclusive democracy movement in Burma. Most immediately, I hope that the process of reflecting on, painting and bravely sharing their life stories has been healing for workshop participants and encouraged them to pursue the myriad ways in which they envisioned themselves bridging ethnic and religious divides and cultivating peaceful coexistence in Burma. Burma needs their help, and ours.

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