

Hopes, Dreams and *Wishes* (2021): Understanding the Journey to the Future in Mượn Thị Văn and Victo Ngai's Award-Winning Picturebook

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Discipline

Literary Studies

Keywords

Utopianism / Post-colonialism / Multimodal / Picture books /
Children's literature

Doi

doi.org/10.61299/z96meKuwU239

Abstract

Wishes (2021), written by Muon Thi Van and with illustrations by Victo Nga, covers vast topics such as the loss of a home, travelling in dangerous circumstances, family and identity all within less than 75 words. Each page calls upon a shared universal wish, which translates notions of the future to young readers who are looking at the unknown. This article explores *Wishes* through post-colonial utopianism. Utopianism is a multifaceted concept in literary discourse, which allows current scholars to question more than just the idealistic visions it calls upon in readers. With a postcolonial fixture, this paper investigates how *Wishes* moulds itself to a Western, urban utopia, and how this presents a contradictory understanding of the Future, the City, and placemaking for young readers. Finally, this article uses a multimodal approach alongside close reading to investigate how text and image work together to expose (young) readers to a child's journey in *Wishes*.

After the fall of Saigon in the spring of 1975, the Vietnam War was won by the North Vietnamese forces and a humanitarian crisis commenced. Thousands upon thousands of Southern Vietnamese who opposed the communist party fled from Vietnam to save themselves from persecution (Bradley 2022; Halfond 2022). Some of this movement was organised with help by the Americans, allowing individuals to enter into neighbouring countries or journey all the way to the United States. Other movement was self-constructed: people desperate for safety embarked upon extremely dangerous journeys to get to places such as Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia. The Vietnamese who arrived in Hong Kong between the late 1970s up until the 1990s were coined “*boat people*”, as their journey often took place on riverboats not fit for the rough sea (Halfond 2022). They endured extreme weather, food shortages, and piracy to cross to ‘safe havens’ like Hong Kong.



Figure 1 (left): Vietnamese sailing boat 65 persons, 1978. Photograph by Les Bird (Bradley 2022).



Figure 2 (right): Cover illustration from *Wishes*, 2021. Illustration by Victo Ngai (Văn 2021).

Although only referenced in the author’s note, this treacherous journey is the backbone of the picturebook *Wishes* (2021). The cover, depicting the kind of boat the Vietnamese refugees boarded, focalises this journey in the narrative (see Figs. 1 & 2). A wooden boat carrying one too many people, downcast faces and the emotions involved in leaving behind one’s family for the unknown are all depicted. *Wishes* follows a young girl who watches her family pack up supplies in the middle of a dark and rainy night, walk to the shore, and line up behind a large group to sail away to a bright metropolis visible on the horizon. Despite only having 75 words, this picturebook shows the transition from sadness and despair to hope for a better future. It looks through the protagonist’s eyes to build up a utopianist outlook that

allows readers to question if the arrival destination was worth the perils it took to get there.

Originally an English picturebook written by Mượn Thị Văn with illustrations by Victo Ngai, it was translated to Dutch and awarded the 2025 *Zilveren Penseel* prize. This prize recognises a book's illustrations, clear from the jury's report: "*De illustraties zijn volstrekt eigen, atmosferisch en warm (...) de illustraties brengen die emoties over, zonder daarin te willen overweldigen* [translation: "*the illustrations are completely unique, atmospheric and warm (...) the illustrations translate the emotions without overwhelming the readers*"] (Letterenfonds 2025, 28). The *Zilveren Penseel* recognises exceptional works in children's literature, and their concluding comment in the report demonstrates the ability of this text to attract readers: "*de empathie die ontstaat verbindt ons met een belangrijk en universeel verhaal*" [translation: "*the empathy it creates connects us with an important and universal story*"] (Letterenfonds 2025, 28). Its power lies not only in the locality of the story, but in its dual ability to beacon the shared wishes of humanity. This comment, while positive about the text, raises queries. For, in a postcolonial world, where is this hope coming from, and towards what is it directed? There are various tensions at play in the narrative. From the changing rural and urban settings, leaving behind what you know for a future unknown in a different place, and considering if and how the protagonist can even wish for a future--while on the surface a mere picturebook, *Wishes* presents a dynamic place for questioning how a significant historical event is depicted for younger audiences. The purpose of this investigation is plural. Blending analyses of Victo Ngai's illustrations and Mượn Thị Văn's writing, I will explore what the future looks like for this young refugee family, what the city looks like to them and what it represents, and what this says about a postcolonial world which plays with utopian notions.

Children's literature offers rich spaces for analysis about socio-cultural norms and values. From depicting familial relations to societal events, it is in the balance of illustration and text that world structures are built for younger audiences. For this reason, this exploration uses a multimodal analysis method, which assesses the collaboration of various visual elements, from font, sizing, focus, texture and more, to understand how text and image collaborate in a narrative (Serafini 2015). I will also use close reading alongside multimodality, to ensure that the nuances in the text are understood in tandem with the images. This combination of methods additionally allows scholars to see if text and image supplement one another, replace, or merely exist alongside each other, which influences the way (narrative) information is conveyed to the reader.

The need for understanding children's literature is great, as the way in which the world is depicted for young readers plays a significant role in how their outlook on the world is developed (Nikolajeva 2013). If images hold such value in children's picturebooks, then we, as scholars, should consider those illustrations as sociocultural signifiers that affect us and evoke "*the social, political and cultural contexts in which they are viewed*" (Serafini 2015, 420). In *Wishes*, purposeful choices are made to demonstrate the future wishes of the travelling family. As Ngai comments in the artist's note, a challenge was to "*exercise restraint, to translate the emotions as honestly as I can, without the bright colours, elaborate compositions, or other stylisations and embellishments behind which one can hide many insecurities*" (37). The artist's approach considers how this story can be presented to the young readers in a raw, unfiltered form. However, in reading this, I wonder if this is true for the utopianist narrative arch of the book.

This journal's theme of 'Future Cities' must be broken up and defined before diving into the core of this paper. To start with the latter, this paper acknowledges the complexity of defining 'cities', as it may adhere to functional, physical, social, statistical, geographical and other conditions (Veckalne and Tambovecva 2023). For the scope of this paper, cities will primarily be seen as modern urban hubs whereby the physical manifestation of the city is clear through image representation (i.e. buildings, closeness, etc) and easily identifiable for younger readers. However, as Veckalne and Tambovecva (2023) write, it is challenging to see the urban in only one context, similar to defining the rural. As such, in this context-dependent sphere of definitions, urban and rural are seen in relation to each other and will be continuously defined at the hand of the book's text and imagery.

The second core concept of this journal's theme, 'future', is defined through utopianism. In the general sense, utopia is considered to be an ultimate dream place. Although it may look different for various individuals, it refers to the manifestation of one's fantasies, a safe haven full of wishes. The characters in *Wishes* are travelling away from their home towards, hopefully, a utopian place. Yet, when considering utopianism through a key scholar such as Ernst Bloch, the idea of this future and better place becomes complex. In his foundational text *The Principle of Hope* (1995), the German scholar wants to "*teach humanity to learn hope, as opposed to the vortex of fear that leads into and is dominated by nihilism*" (Roberts 1987, 94). For Bloch, utopia is not a blueprint for society, or a place to sail towards, but instead a fluid concept. Utopianism allows people to imagine futures and build hope whilst critiquing the perceived limits of sociocultural lines. In his text, Bloch builds up the notion of the anticipatory consciousness, which

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is the human capacity to orient itself towards the future, to be grounded in reality yet build imagined possibilities. As he writes in his introduction, “*we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness*” (par. 8). Rather than fantasy or wishing, the anticipatory consciousness is an active agent that reframes a person’s outlook on the future. Like a telescope, it scans for different possibilities which can manifest in various ways, from daydreams to political revolutions as well as children’s texts (Kellner 1976).

In this line of thought, the idea of a utopia is replaced and geared towards *utopianism*, where active practice of imagination is a driving force. This agentic quality allows for writing about utopias and future places to move away from generic, colonialist writing, to one that moves towards postcolonialist experimentation. Bill Ashcroft, a postcolonial-utopianist scholar and editor of his volume *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016), writes that “*postcolonialism is marked by ‘an expansion of the imagination rather than an expansion of territory’*” (qtd. in Banerjee 2023, 2). This line of thinking, in expanding the imagination, is also seen in other literary areas, such as through Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). It is the act of reimagining and rethinking, of having awareness of one’s orientation in time and space, that can change one’s perspective of (future) social interactions. In connecting postcolonialism to utopianism, the static and structured worldview associated with colonial periods are opened up and expanded to allow for broader thinking, reaffirming Bloch’s idea of fluidity in utopianism. It shows the site of tension and play where past and future places clash in society and are remediated through imagination and the sounds of unheard voices.

Postcolonialism marks the ‘post-colony’ period not just in time, but in the way in which the continuous effects of colonial power dynamics are shaped by voices who speak up for migration, slavery, occupation and diaspora. Postcolonialism grapples with the aftershocks of colonisation and how society thinks and talks about it now, where investigations into the potential and agency of futurity are significant (Banerjee 2023). It allows us to ask ourselves, who can consider the future? Where is this future going to take place? Such questions help in returning to the case of *Wishes*, where, in the wishes of the objects and elements, the family is seen as helpless agents, muddling through the landscape. In their place of origin and whilst on the riverboat, they lack any sense of agency and succumb to the forces around them. However, this takes a turn in the climax of the narrative. The picturebook opens with illustrations of the family packing up their things in the midst of a rainstorm. The women prepare food, the children



Figure 3: *Old man in spread* from *Wishes*, 2021.
Illustration by Victo Ngai (Văn 2021).

are woken up in the middle of their dreams, and the elderly man is seen digging up hidden suitcases in the back yard (Fig. 3). The family leaves in a downcast, sad atmosphere, the shadow of the unknown following them to the shores. Looking multimodally at the narrative demonstrates a visual pattern. In the opening spreads, the rural and isolated environment of the family's origins is depicted in earthy and muddy colours. Rain streaks over the pages in stark, white lines; there are puddles all around and the dark night quiets the edges of the illustrations, isolating the images. The text itself is softened into the background of the image, allowing the designs to speak for themselves, only supplementing by highlighting a universal wish. In the narrative, this rural environment is associated with this sense of tension and fear, which brings about a lack of control. See, for instance, Figure 4, where the family is haunted by the twisting and winding of gnarly branches. In this spread, the present tense is associated with a dark atmosphere, where the wish is small and off to the side of the spread, and the focus is on the downcast family. What is noticeable in this image, is the light coming from the part of the page that the path is leading towards—as if it is coming from a source off the page, and thus in the future of the reader's

experience. Through these details, Ngai is able to build up suspense in the narrative, associating presentness with anxiousness and perhaps even fear. In the family's isolated walk along the winding path, the book's creators are setting up a clear juxtaposition between the rural and the present, and a future place where there may be lighter days. In this sense, the text motivates the Blochian utopianist outlook in the reader: there is an active call for practice of imagination, in order to hope for a better outcome for this downcast family. Despite depicting a bleak scene, the connection to wishes and the possibility of hope in the future through the light triggers the anticipatory consciousness within the reader to orient itself to a positivist outlook for the future.

The idea of futurity plays an important role in the narrative development in *Wishes*. Almost all of the wishes in the text are written in the third person



Figure 4: *Family walking in the night from Wishes*, 2021.
Illustration by Victo Ngai (Văn 2021).

and are object-oriented. This creates a universalist tone in the text, allowing the text and image to distance themselves in the reader's experience. For instance, the following lines are examples which separate the protagonist's journey from what the objects wish for.

"The bag wished it was deeper" (8-9).

"The light wished it was brighter" (10-11).

"The clock wished it was slower" (14-15).

"The sea wished it was calmer" (20-21).

"The sun wished it was cooler" (22-23).

In this writing style, Văn uses the wishes to unite readers who may be unfamiliar with the fears associated with this refugee journey, with those who have lived or are living through them. The wishes are only contextualised through the imagery, so it is in this pairing that the relevance of the refugee journey becomes clearer. Every child inherently wishes their good dreams last longer and that their environment is a happy, stable setting. Hence, the text allows readers to understand the wishes, whilst the illustrations localise it to the perilous journey the characters embark upon. Although this combination is something the *Zilveren Penseel* panel praised (Letterenfonds 2025), this writing style balances on a knife’s edge. The other side of the edge is the pitfall of utopianist texts: simplifying the complexities of hoping, utopia, and the future in this postcolonial world.



Figure 5 & 6: *Rescue and arrival illustrations from Wishes, 2021. Illustration by Victo Ngai (Văn 2021).*

After storms have raged and died out, it is in the sunrise over a new day that the young girl looks out and spots a large ship that sails towards them. The travellers on the fishing boat are lifted onto the ship and brought to shore, where a bright metropolis is laid before them. The layering of hands in Figure 5 builds up the image of a stable support system, of a solid rescue mission. It also alludes to the idea of a larger community, of a group of individuals ready to welcome the small family into the city. In this sense, the city is defined through the people it has and how they introduce themselves. This is an interesting characterisation, as it reciprocally defines the rural space the family left behind as one that is more isolated, that lacks the same community size that is reflected in Figure 5. Moreover, a sense of calmness spreads over the previously tense atmosphere of the narrative as more light filters onto the image, through both a brighter sun and the use of white dress, alluding to peace and safety. These elements pair the community with a safe feeling, making the city an approachable place with a support system.

In Figure 6, the physical idea of a utopia is most obviously presented in the book. The mother, cuddling her two children whilst looking out at the reward of their arduous journey, allows for a denouement in the story. The significance of this choice is great—as mentioned earlier in the article, picturebooks are powerful objects that may contribute to a child’s world view. In connecting text and image, the narrative builds up a juxtaposition in the isolation and darkness of their rural environment that is relieved by the helping hands of people from the city. These final spreads depict the arrival at a city as a utopia. It is still a place in the future, as they have not yet arrived, but one they can look towards, can assign as their place of refuge. However, this representation flattens the post-imperial thinking that drives critical thought about futurity and place-making.

If one considers Vietnam in the second half of the 21st century, the imperial and political turmoil is an extremely relevant nuance when understanding *Wishes*. Yet, with an optimistic ending geared towards a metropolis, the book’s assumptions risk neutralising the tensions that come from the sociohistorical context. More importantly, it flattens the colonial history by emphasising the euphoric feeling of salvation. For, as the protagonist states in the final spreads of *Wishes*, as she and her family are being saved, “*And I wished...*” (28-29), “*I didn’t have to wish...*” (32-33), “*anymore*” (34-35), as she is in a place where she already *has* all of her wishes. In not having to wish anymore, the text also considers who is doing the wishing: although the implication exists that the girl does not have to wish for anything because she is in a new place where she has everything she needs, one can

also read it as an interrogation into the girl not having a place to wish for, or not being able to wish for things (as they will not come true). As a children's book, the didactic illusion is that *all's well that ends well*, but when placing the book in context, a turbulent human experience is called into question.



Figure 7: Closing spread illustration from *Wishes*, 2021.
Illustration by Victo Ngai (Văn 2021).

The final spreads show that the city is bright and ready for the family's arrival, a utopia for them to be safe from the sociopolitical tensions of their place of origin. This message is a controversial place to end, particularly when considering the conditions of arrival in a new city. This is reaffirmed on the last page, seen in Figure 7, where the girl is lowered to the ground, feet just not touching the ground and a sense of lightness in her eyes. She has not arrived yet, but as she looks up towards the buildings in front of her, curiosity radiates from her. There is a sense of the Blochian anticipatory consciousness here: the girl orients herself towards the place where she can manifest her utopianist future. However, in this orientation, there is a removal of the utopia. Blochian utopianism calls for constant imagination, yet in the story, there appears to be a conclusion of the aforementioned imagination. In that sense, the girl is merely looking at the city with anticipation, in her arrival losing the allusion of utopianism. There is no more imagination, no more wishing, which removes the option for a sense of utopianism to occur.

When considering futurity, it appears that the book relays a simple message. On the one hand, the relationship between the rural environment and futurity seems daunting and uncertain. On the other, the urban space is associated with a brighter energy, denoting an improvement from her place of origin. No longer pelted by rain or facing life-threatening conditions, the final spreads associate themselves with images of saving, of relief, and most importantly: freedom in a city. In this way, when considering the concept of ‘cities’, the book appears to characterise it here through its physical manifestations, and layer all its additional components on it. A city can be a great place, from the communities it fosters, landmarks it represents and opportunities it creates. However, the controversy in this definition is two-fold. On the one hand, this definition reduces the value of the rural space, which, defined in relation to this urban, could be seen as the opposite. Understanding the city space through this text is problematic, as it reduces the rural space to a limiting, darker place. Secondly, this message is a significant disservice to the young readers who learn about the experiences of refugees who arrive at new destinations.

In a postcolonial-utopian approach, it is important to think about what the book leaves unaddressed, what future the book ignores. As Bloch considers in his writing on utopianism, the utopian place should be taken more figuratively than literally. One should not need to look at the metropolis to see utopia; rather, upon arrival, the mind should be open to considering what other utopianisms they can look towards, work towards. For, in reality, the city is rarely friendly to those who have no place in it. Utopia is not a place of arrival, but a notion of imagination. Although Hong Kong welcomed the first political refugees from Vietnam, when thousands upon thousands sailed in on their overloaded boats, refugee policies needed to be tightened and tensions rose in the region (Stankrauff 2023). Tending to the mass of tired and weary individuals costs resources, something cities do not always want to give way to strangers. Moreover, refugee camps are “*midway-to-nowhere*”, a place where “*boredom, uncertainty and helplessness*” reign over this state of limbo (Chan & Loveridge 1987, 746). In the book’s ending, a false hope is created that is not fully grounded in the reality of the aftermath of arrival in a new city as a refugee. It gives the illusion that the future can only be built in a metropolis, despite that communities, support systems, buildings and opportunities may all also occur in other environments. Perhaps the author’s goal is to allow for a sense of escapism in the text. Even so, an opportunity to build a future for those who need a safe place seems oversimplified in this narrative.

The postcolonial world grapples with the lasting effects of European colonisation. Turbulent political systems, identity formation and placemaking are all core elements of this. In connecting this to a sense of utopianism, the result shows how the navigation of the post-colony society can be prompted by imagination and agency. This train of thought, however, is oftentimes lacking in *Wishes*. In thinking about future cities, it seems that Văn's and Ngai's message is that the future lies *in* cities, an easy message for children to pick up on. However, the simplification of the arrival of refugee's in a city paired with the relegation of the post-colonial urban place to utopia flattens the complexities that postcolonial thinking encourages individuals to consider. Children's literature is definitive for young readers and needs to be treated cautiously. Ultimately, as Elizabeth Thomas relates to Edward Saïd in her research on children's literature, "*if today's children grow up with postcolonial education, and if they are encouraged to understand and appreciate racial/ethnic difference, that would tremendously expedite the progress towards a globalised postcoloniality*" (Thomas 2016, 115). Despite the power of *Wishes* to share a story of hope that, as the *Zilveren Penseel* jury emphasised, allows young readers to empathise and connect with it, it is important to go against the grain and explore the tensions of the book in the sociohistorical context it was written about. Even then, for a children's story about a mass wave of immigration in the late twentieth century, it is *beyond* relevant for both today's, and the future's, people and cities.

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