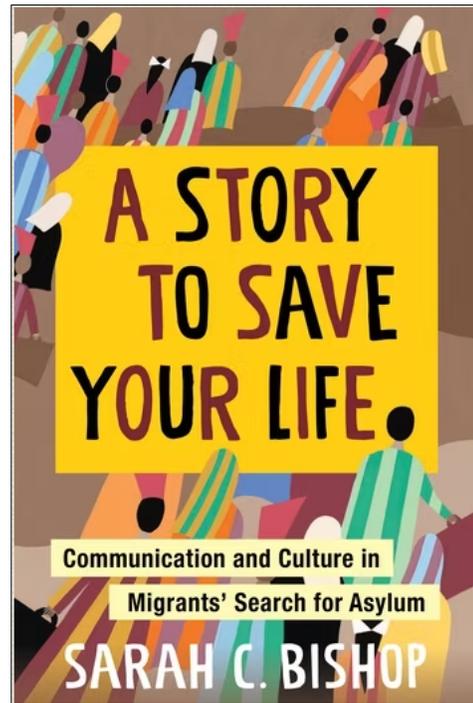


Sarah C. Bishop, **A Story to Save Your Life: Communication and Culture in Migrants' Search for Asylum**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 280 pp., \$32.00 (paperback).

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It is one thing to hear about a migrant caravan on the news, but it is another thing entirely to hear their journey in their own words. Sarah C. Bishop's book, **A Story to Save Your Life: Communication and Culture in Migrants' Search for Asylum**, highlights not only the precariousness and unpredictability of the United States' immigration system but the reliance upon narrative storytelling in the system to successfully be granted asylum. Bishop weaves together the undeniably crucial role of verbal and nonverbal narrative storytelling in determining the success of asylum by plunging her readers straight into the heart of migrants' stories. Building on her expertise as a communication and a migration scholar, Bishop deftly argues for a more careful analysis of the role of storytelling in the asylum system, arguing that "culturally-bound storytelling norms negatively and unevenly affect case outcomes" (p. 11). As the stories and analysis throughout the book make clear, this outcome is not simply a legal determination but a decision that could mean the difference between life and death.



Situated in the larger literature of communication studies and migration studies, Bishop's work makes a necessary intervention in its goal to "interrogate the power and limitation of narrative" (p. 11). Bishop's careful analysis turns an eye to a subject not often thought of as narrative driven: the asylum process in the United States. The only thing consistent about the U.S. immigration system is its inconsistency. The rules and regulations are ever-changing, evident in the Trump administration's cruel Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as Remain in Mexico, as well as policy fluctuations from the COVID-19 pandemic and the current Biden administration. The immigration court exists in the United States under the executive branch, meaning it is exceedingly susceptible to shifts in political attitudes. With a sense of justified urgency, Bishop details that "asylum is in a state of crisis" (p. 189) through the stories, data, and narrative she weaves. Given these ever-changing rules, and the widespread political rhetoric that aims to dehumanize migrants seeking safety in the United States, Bishop's work is timely, necessary, and most important, human centered.

As a narrative analysis, the book itself is a masterful work of narrative storytelling. Each of the six chapters is followed by a brief oral history from different actors involved in the U.S. asylum system: a former U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agent, an immigration attorney, an asylum officer trainer, a

psychologist, a former immigration judge, and a detained asylum seeker. The chapters themselves are imbued with information from extensive interviews, with court observations and narrative analysis to complete Bishop's methodological approach. The work takes the reader through a semichronological analysis of the asylum process, starting by introducing the system, detailing the inner workings of the legal process, and highlighting the little-studied aspect of the failed asylum cases. Throughout this process, Bishop continuously reiterates the pieces of narrative building that retain a high level of significance for the success of asylum seekers.

Without an introduction to situate the reader, Bishop jumps into extensive narratives of individuals seeking asylum in the United States. Asylum success is nearly solely dependent on the ability to narrate effectively, and even "having a viable story is not enough, nor is being able to write it down—one must also be able to tell it" (p. 10). Because "the asylum process hinges on the nature and form of all kinds of verbal and nonverbal communicative exchanges between asylum seekers and government personnel" (p. 11) including culturally bound storytelling norms and the psychology of telling—and retelling—trauma, these layers of narrative storytelling take on a significant weight in an individual's life. Through detailed communication analysis and interview data on the varying ways asylees navigate the harrowing process and seek to attain legal credibility, Bishop demonstrates that the "current legal system exacerbates these communicative challenges rather than mitigating them" (p. 33).

Building from the first three chapters, the book's strength is amplified in the slight shift that accompanies the second half of the book. Bishop introduces readers to her grounding theory for the research, laying out arguments based on Stuart Hall's (1994) encoding and decoding theory as well as work from James Carey (1992) that highlights the significance of nonverbal communication (pp. 93–95). The final two chapters then move the conversation to two key areas understudied in critical scholarship and popular discourse surrounding asylum. In chapter 5, Bishop keenly counters the narrative that asylum seekers can just stay home, arguing that "only when home becomes a viable and safe option can people really enact the right to remain" (p. 119). The issue of deterrence is overlooked, and Bishop dedicates the entire chapter to analysis of all the facets at play including government campaigns, interpersonal messages, news media discourse, and messaging types. The book's final chapter offers insight into the stories of deportees when forced to return home. Bishop astutely highlights the lack of narrative, especially in the public discourse, surrounding migration deterrence and what happens after deportation. Highlighting the lack of data and storytelling around this aspect of the asylum process, Bishop's final chapter echoes her title: "Detailed documentary evidence about the lived experience of post-deportation difficulties has the potential to save other potential deportees' lives" (p. 176).

This work employs a mixed methodology, relying heavily on oral history interviews with actors across all aspects of the immigration process to foreground the stories of asylum seekers themselves. The extensive interview work—58 oral histories over a three-year span—is impressive and well-rounded in its sources, depth, and broad reach. Bishop devotes a large portion of the postscript to acknowledging her positionality to this research, the challenges and nuances necessary to this work, and the role of scholar advocacy within broader academia. Noting that, while a longtime migration scholar, she is not an immigrant herself, Bishop states that "no research design is neutral, and my work has benefited immensely from the generosity of scholars who have been explicit about their social positions and ethical choices rather than

rendering them invisible in the works they produce" (p. 184). It is evident that Bishop sees her work as aiming to reach beyond academia's silo and into a public audience.

However, finding that balance of reaching both an academic and public audience is a difficult one in practice. The author immediately captures the reader with a stirring narrative hook and continues to weave these personal stories throughout the book. For the academic reader, while Bishop cites relevant scholars in the field toward the beginning of the book, the most explicit theoretical grounding does not occur until the fourth chapter. This is where an introduction, even a small one meant specifically for a scholarly audience, would provide a prudent foundation. Her work strengthens the bridge between scholarship on communication, culture, and migration, building on communication scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and scholars focused on immigration such as Laura Smith-Khan, Jeremy Slack, Agnes Woolley, and Walter Kälin. The public audience may not immediately connect with the technical work, particularly on Hall's (1994) encoding and decoding, but the book is ultimately an accessible (and urgent) narrative that invites readers beyond academic circles into its storytelling.

Communication scholarship needs more work like this. The key strength of this work is not only its focus on narrative in content but in the writing and structure itself: it is elegant, narrative-driven work. Within individual chapters and the book's arc as a whole, Bishop builds a narrative that offers compelling human stories and critical communication analysis. This book argues that "a person who cannot communicate what they have endured has virtually no chance at a successful case, and the chances of success very much depend on the nuances of a person's communicative ability" (p. 42), making a compelling, intriguing, and effective intervention in our understanding not only of the U.S. asylum system but in the intertwining role of communication, culture, and narrative.