



WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME II, ISSUE 2

Winter 2009
Hope Amidst Conflict

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WOW Review: Volume II, Issue 2
Winter 2009
Hope Amidst Conflict

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Introduction and Editor's Note

“Hope Amidst Conflict” provides a resonating theme in this issue of *WOW Review*. One purpose of literature is that of taking readers into stories where, despite the challenges, decisions, and outcomes, hope is always present as a source of resiliency, agency, and imagined possibilities. This issue of *WOW Review* provides glimpses of this theme across genres, reading levels, and contexts. What is most interesting in the titles reviewed here is the source of hope — a reminder that humans are surrounded by evidence of hope in their daily lives.

In stories that tell of lives affected by war, hope is found through many venues. In *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*, sunflowers symbolize the hope of survival while art provides the hope that Mari, a young Japanese American girl, needs within Topaz Internment Camp. Language and writing provides hope in *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*. In *The Shepherd's Granddaughter*, hope is found in family and in the potential future of the Palestinian people. *Iqbal* is a source of hope for the children working in the carpet factory as he encourages them to believe that freedom is possible and its source resides within them. Alfred Nobel established the Nobel Peace prize as a result of others' misuse of his discoveries regarding explosives. *Alfred Nobel: The Man behind the Peace Prize* tells of this award that recognizes hope for peaceful efforts around the world. *Not My Fault* presents scenarios about bullying and hopefully challenges readers to take responsibilities when they encounter such situations. *Guji, Guji* sends the message of hope that family, love, and loyalty to one's personal identity can affect challenging decisions of right or wrong. The central character in *Climbing the Stairs* finds hopeful support through books as she deals with the tension of compliance with traditional expectations of an Indian female in 1941. *Wanting Mor* shows a young girl's search for identity as hope is offered through her faith in Islam and her deceased mother's love. And, finally, *14 Cows for America* demonstrates hope through a herd of cows provided by a Maasai tribe to help heal the wounds of September 11, 2001.

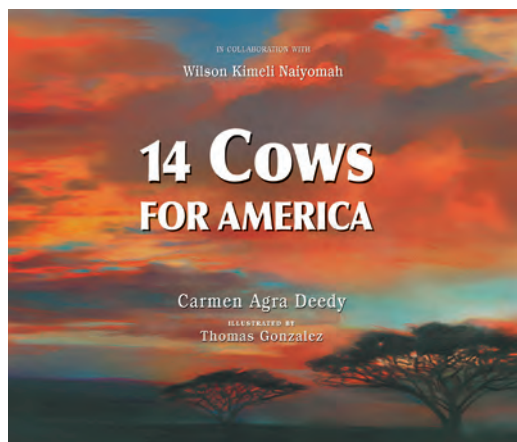
As you read these reviews and are inspired to read the titles that might be new to you, the optimistic perspectives within each book will hopefully ignite a new desire to share these international titles with readers of all ages. As this is only a sampling of the titles that might be gathered within this theme, we welcome your suggestions and additions. You can find submission guidelines on this site as well as resources for identifying cultural authenticity. If you have further questions about submissions or wish to notify us in advance of a particular title you are planning to submit, please e-mail Janelle Mathis.

Janelle B. Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

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14 Cows for America

Written by Carmen Agra Deedy in collaboration with Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah

Illustrated by Thomas Gonzalez

Peachtree, 2009

ISBN: 978-1-56145-490-7

...there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.

“To the Maasai, the cow is life.” The nomadic life of these once feared warriors depends on their cows as the herds sustain their survival. In this collaboratively told true story, the cow also represents hope for post 9-11 America as the Maasai people share their grief and give 14 cows as their symbol of comfort, peace, and life.

The richly earth-toned illustrations set the tone of community warmth, reflected in the joy of the faces in this small village in Kenya as one of their own returns from the United States. Kimeli is asked for stories about where he has been and though he has much to share, foremost in his mind is the story of what he witnessed on September 11, 2001 while in New York studying to be a doctor. The red and amber hues of the illustrations create a connection between the starkly opposite contexts of this peaceful tribe and the fiery horror of the story Kimeli tells. He asks blessings on his one cow that he is giving to America, and when the American ambassador arrives, unknowingly to receive these gifts, the number of cows has risen to 14.

Throughout the story, readers gain insights into the lifestyle of this Kenyan tribe. Specific words and gestures that go back to their warrior days are still part of daily life, although the gentle care they respectfully give their cows is constantly a point of emphasis. Both illustration and text portray the celebration of giving the cows to the United States ambassador through bold, colorful costumes, dances, songs, and sacred blessings. Thomas Gonzalez, the Cuban-born illustrator, shares that he included a twin tower image in almost every picture – two figures, spears, giraffes, shafts of light—to remind readers that all people are connected and “no matter how powerful you are, unexpected circumstances can come out of nowhere and totally change everything ... and that help often comes from people you don’t know” (Hahn, 2009).

When Carmen Agra Deedy, who like Gonzalez is from Cuba, completed the text, she and Peachtree Publishers sought out Kimeli Naiyomah for his approval and to ask him to serve as a cultural consultant. Kimeli states that he was pleased to be asked to help make this story authentic in honor of his people and the lives lost on 9/11 (Lodge, 2009). His collaboration in the writing of this book includes an end note that speaks to the authenticity of this event. His own insights are significant to helping young readers understand the significance of this act of generosity as is the information that tells about the herds’ continued growth. They will never be slaughtered as a symbol of the shared pain and hope between America and the Maasai people.

Books to align with the theme of giving hope through helping include, *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Difference* (Kate Smith Milway, 2008), *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Claire Nivola, 2008), and *One Thousand Tracings: Healing the Wounds of World War II* (Lita Judge, 2007). Titles that pair well with the text to learn more about the Maasai are *First Come the Zebra* (Lynne Barasch, 2009) and *Facing the Lion: Growing Up Maasai on the African Savanna* (Joseph L. Lekuton & Herman Viola, 2003).

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Hahn, M.L. (2009). *14 cows for America* — Illustrator Thomas Gonzalez. <http://readingyear.blogspot.com/2009/08/14-cows-for-america-illustrator-thomas.html>.

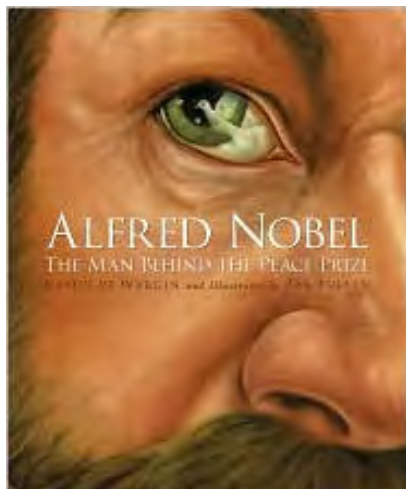
Lodge, S. (2009). *A gesture of generosity inspires picture book*. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6675038.html?&rid=>

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Alfred Nobel: The Man behind the Peace Prize

Written by Kathy-Jo Wargin
Illustrated by Zachary Pullen
Sleeping Bear Press, 2009
ISBN: 978-1-58536-281-3

So on that very day, Alfred Nobel, the man who loved literature and poetry and the art of discovery, left a legacy to be remembered for always...

The Nobel prizes are well known, having been awarded to recipients in all parts of the world. This book provides a glimpse of how these awards came to be. Alfred Nobel, with his father and brothers, discovered the explosive nature of nitroglycerin as they tinkered around in their workshop. The possibilities seemed endless if they could find a way to safely use it. Alfred envisioned the benefits such a product could bring to the world in building bridges, roads and railroads by blasting through rock. Gunpowder was used for these purposes as well as for military weapons, but it was not a safe or reliable product.

Alfred Nobel spent hours, days and years working to find a way to safely handle nitroglycerin. He created a wooden plug filled with gunpowder that made it safer to ignite and began selling the “blasting oil” in Sweden, but the unstable material exploded in their workshop while in production and killed five people including Alfred’s brother Emil. After much experimentation, Alfred used the form of dynamite and became extremely wealthy, however, his thinking that it would prevent war was wrong. He became depressed by the destructive ways his invention was being used and the association of his name with inventions that killed. This remorse over the outcome of his work was inspiration for creating the Nobel prizes — especially the Peace Prize.

Author Kathy-Jo Wargin has created a story that some may see as over-simplified, but that presents historical facts in a way that invites questions about this man and the award that bears his name. A list of Nobel Peace Prize winners is presented at the end. The information presented in this book aligns well with information found at www.nobelprize.org, a useful site for readers interested in more detail about this award. Along with this textual multi-faceted presentation of Alfred Nobel that can be accessed by primary grade readers, the illustrations by Pullen portray Nobel’s wonderment, loneliness, and studious facial expressions. Additionally, Pullen has included “scientific notes” to accompany some of the illustrations that explain the explosive processes of Nobel’s work.

This book offers multiple perspectives of how to look at one product and opposing views of its use and value — the hope that it would bring peace and improve the world and the actuality of its destructive nature. The Peace Prize was born of hope amidst conflict and continues to offer hope to this day. Other books that might accompany this title in teaching about people whose work is focused on peace are *Paths to Peace: People Who Changed the World* (Jane B. Zalben, 2006); *Peace*

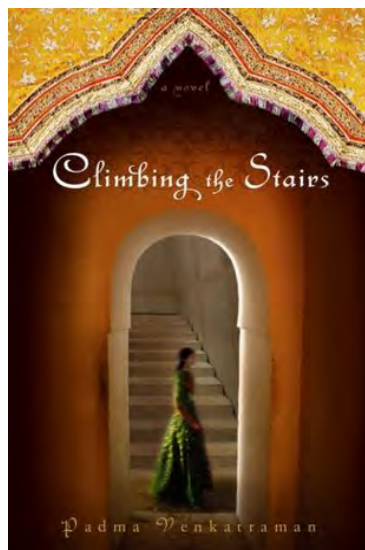
One Day (Jeremy Gilley, 2005), and *Great Peace Makers* (Ken Beller & Heather Chase, 2008). *When I Grow Up, I Will Win the Nobel Peace Prize* (Isabel Pin, 2006), translated from German, humorously tells of a child applying peaceful principles to his everyday life.

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Climbing the Stairs

Written by Padma Venkatraman

Putnam, 2008, 256 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-39924-7-460

Set in British India, in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai), with the panics and anxieties of the Second World War as its backdrop, this novel unfolds over the duration of a year beginning in August 1941 with the celebrations of Lord Krishna's birth. Vidya, whose name means knowledge, is a young fifteen-year-old girl who lives with her parents and brother Kitta in Mahim, Bombay. Free-spirited, strong-willed, and unlike most girls her age, Vidya is not inclined towards marriage; instead, she dreams of going to college. She is encouraged by her father, a progressive thinker, until tragedy strikes and the family is forced to

move to Madras (now Chennai) to live with Thatha's family. Vidya is forced to comply with traditional expectations of feminine behavior and perform household chores rather than spend her time reading books. She finds a secret way to escape the dismal household when she discovers the library. She transports herself to distant lands within the pages of novels and engages in deeper understandings of life through her readings of Eastern philosophical thought.

In this coming-of-age novel, Vidya grows and matures through her interactions with her aunts, in her sensitivity towards her mother, through her confused emotions about the boy she falls in love with and eventually marries, and finally, in her attempts to understand Kitta's reasons for wanting to enlist in the British Indian Army. Vidya is simultaneously the protagonist and narrator of the story for it is through her perspective that the various events and happenings unfold. Through lush descriptions interspersed with Tamil words, the novel paints a poignant picture of love, loss, faith, freedom, and dignity. To learn more about the plot and its evolution from the author's perspective, visit <http://www.climbingthestairsbook.com>.

Although the novel is set in British India, the underlying tone is undoubtedly South Indian. The author draws from her own cultural roots as a Tamil Brahmin from Chennai and intersperses historical facts with traditional beliefs and practices. The characters are based on real people from her extended family and the story is peppered throughout with linguistic and caste markers that identify Vidya and her family as Tamil Brahmins. Caste practices of supposed Brahmin superiority and purity are skillfully portrayed through the characters in Thatha's household and especially in the treatment they mete out to the servants. The festivals of Karthigai and Pongal are also specific to the Tamil people. Even in her culinary descriptions — the sambhar trickling down one's fingers, the pakku that is eaten after meals, and the steaming idlis, to name a few — Venkatraman accurately describes the foods specific to Tamilian households.

The juxtaposition of contrasts in the novel is also striking. The freedom experienced in a nuclear family is contrasted with the lack of privacy in a joint family household. The progressive thinking of the first few chapters is conflicted with the traditional and narrow-minded bigotry of the later chapters. The rising cosmopolitanism and tolerance of Bombay is situated in stark contrast to the

stifling conservatism of Madras. This is especially evident in the descriptions of the two schools that Vidya attends at different times in her life. Gender roles are clearly delineated in that the women were expected to perform chores and be knowledgeable about all things domestic, whereas the men were allowed more freedom and access to knowledge pertaining to the outside world.

In sum, Venkatraman's debut novel is a culturally rich portrait of the everyday practices of a south-Indian middle class family written along the lines of ethnography. One note of caution is that India can neither be conceived nor understood as a unified theoretical construct because of the vast and complex diversities of her peoples. Whereas Brahmin families from other parts of southern India might share some similarities with Thatha's family and household practices, it would be imprudent to generalize them across the board. Two other novels that explore similar themes are Mitali Perkins' *Secret Keeper* (2009) and Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner* (2009).

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Guji Guji

Written & illustrated by Chih-Yuan Chen

Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 2004

ISBN: 978-1-929132-67-6

This tender story begins with an egg rolling unnoticed into the nest of Mother Duck while she's reading. When the eggs hatch, Mother Duck has three ducklings and an odd-looking duckling (a crocodile) named Guji Guji, after his first spoken words. Mother Duck loves all four of her ducklings and teaches them how to swim, dive, and waddle. Soon afterward three crocodiles appear and try to convince Guji Guji he's not a duck but a crocodile like them. After providing Guji Guji with irrefutable evidence, such as his blue-gray body, sharp claws, and pointed teeth that they also possess, the crocodiles convince Guji Guji

to bring the ducks to the bridge to practice diving while the crocodiles wait below with mouths open wide. Guji Guji comes up with a plan to trick the nasty crocodiles and protect his family. When the crocodiles run away, the ducks celebrate and Guji Guji continues to live with them as a "crocoduck."

This modern fantasy carries a strong message of family, love, and identity, regardless of differences in outside appearances. When Guji Guji realizes that he indeed is a crocodile, not a duck, he goes through inner conflict in deciding who he truly is and where his loyalty and heart lie. Ultimately, he chooses the love and hope that his duck family offers, not life with the mean crocodiles. In addition to the message of family love, the story will resonate with readers as they remember times they have agonized over making difficult decisions.

The author/illustrator Chih-Yuan Chen was born in Taiwan and continues to live and work there. He became interested in illustrating children's books at the age of 19 and has published numerous other stories, many of which have been translated into other languages. His other books include *On the Way to Buy Eggs* (2003), *The Featherless Chicken* (2006), and *Artie and Julie* (2008).

The illustrations are done in muted browns and grays with highlights from other colors. They are created by combining rubbings, cut paper, and watercolors. The front and back endpapers show Mother Duck walking, followed by three ducklings and Guji Guji. Chen also includes information in the illustrations not mentioned in the written text, such as Guji Guji's pull-toy and the birds that follow the crocodiles.

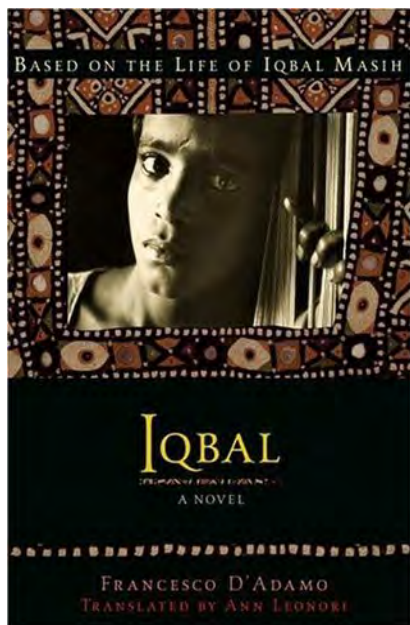
Guji Guji would work well in text sets on family, love, or identity. These might include *The Odd Egg* (Emily Gravett, 2009) and *Elephants Never Forget!* (Anushka Ravishankar, 2008).

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Iqbal

Written by Francesco D'Adamo

Translated by Ann Leonori

Atheneum Books for Young People, 2005, 120 pp.

ISBN: 0-689-85445-5

Since we shared the same fate and the same kind of life, you'd think we children would feel united, but instead we quarreled and separated into little groups (p. 25).

The children sold into bondage at a Lahore, Pakistan carpet factory work from day to day with only hope ... hope that they will eventually pay off the family debt. They are expected to work without question and that one day, magically, they will be free. One day, a new worker — thirteen-year-

old Iqbal Masih — joins them, and he informs them that the debt is never canceled. With this information comes conflict. Should they trust this new worker, or should they continue on as always? Iqbal, through his knowledge and his example, shows the other children that the hope of freedom resides within them, and not the man who has enslaved them. Through his courage and his understanding of the corrupt system that sold them into bondage, Iqbal encourages Fatima, the text's narrator, to believe in hope and that freedom is something she can and should seek.

Iqbal is an inspiring story based on the real life of Iqbal Masih, a boy who escaped Hussain Khan's Carpet Factory to seek out the help of the Bonded Labor Liberation Front, and thus produced the freedom of the children with whom he worked. An inspiring young man who spoke for the rights of children across the globe, Iqbal was honored for his efforts and then murdered in his own village once he returned from the United States. Considered a "docu-novel," *Iqbal* is as much a biography as a novel about the young man who brought child labor issues in Pakistan to the notice of the world. A text suitable for middle school students, *Iqbal* is an appropriate introduction to the issue of child labor and the abuse of children around the world. Although Iqbal was murdered, there is only foreshadowing of his tragic ending at the close of the text. His story will engage young people, and will create a venue for more questions and research into the issue of child labor across the globe. This text also shows young readers that activism for the human rights of all people can begin at any age.

What may need to be explicitly addressed with young people is that child labor is practiced in a variety of ways the world over, and is not just a practice in Pakistan or other non-Western countries. Young people might also wish to explore modern day Pakistan and discover that it is a diverse, modern nation, and the lifestyles of Pakistani children are as varied as other young people's anywhere. One text that would supplement this account is the *Modern World Nations book, Pakistan* (Samuel Crompton, 2006), which depicts the diversity of Pakistan and its people.

Appropriate complements to this text would include both fiction and informational texts. Because the issue of child labor is historically and geographically extensive, young people can read both historical and place-based texts that include child labor in the United States. Texts such as *Kids at Work*: Lewis

Hine and the Crusade against Child Labor (Freedman & Hine, 1998) and *Child Labor Today: A Human Rights Issue* (Herumin, 2007) are just a couple of informational texts that could be used in a unit on child labor, along with texts on the Triangle Factory, coal mining, and migrant workers in the United States. *The Breaker Boys* (Hughes, 2004), *Counting on Grace* (Wintrop, 2007) and *I am a Taxi* (Ellis, 2008) are fictionalized accounts addressing child labor as well. Another text appropriate for a unit on what children have done throughout history would be *We Were There, Too: Young People in U.S. History* (Hoose, 2001), which presents the impact young people have had in the events of the United States.

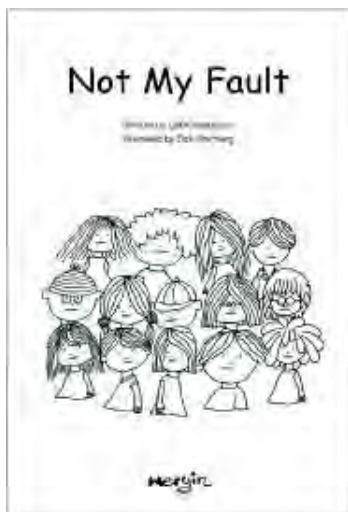
Francesco D'Adamo lives in Milan, Italy. *Iqbal* is his third book for young people, but the first of his books to be published in English. Using extensive research on Iqbal Masih, D'Adamo has produced a fictionalized account of Iqbal and his quest of freedom for students in the younger grades. Little is known about Ann Leonori, who translated this text from Italian to English, but reviewers from sources such as the Horn Book, Booklist, and School Library Journal comment on the smooth translation as well as the simple, elegant prose. Leonori has worked to make sure that the translated text reflects the accuracy of Iqbal Masih's life in a documentary style that still allows for rich dialogue and reader engagement.

Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

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Not My Fault

Written by Leif Kristiansson

Illustrated by Dick Stenberg

Heryin Books, 2006

ISBN: 978-0-9762-0566-1

This short thought-provoking book is a collection of reasons students give to justify their lack of action when a classmate is bullied: “It had nothing to do with me!”; “I couldn’t stop the bullies all by myself.”; “I didn’t hit him first ... it wasn’t my fault.”; “I always thought he was weird anyway.”; and “He should have shouted for help!” As the book ends, readers are left to contemplate the question “Does it have nothing to do with me?” That question is followed by six photographs about war, pollution, and death,

emphasizing the need for readers to take personal responsibility beyond local occurrences of bullying.

The book is done entirely in black and white illustrations, with a white cover and black endpapers. Black ink drawings of the children are in the background of each page while the student speaking and the bullied child, crying and drawn smaller, are placed forward. The children’s legs are not shown in the drawings, which should also generate rich discussion.

Not My Fault was originally published in Copenhagen, Denmark. Author Leif Kristiansson is Swedish and likes to explore issues related to knowing and understanding self in his writing. Illustrator Dick Stenberg’s work frequently appears in newspapers and magazines in Europe.

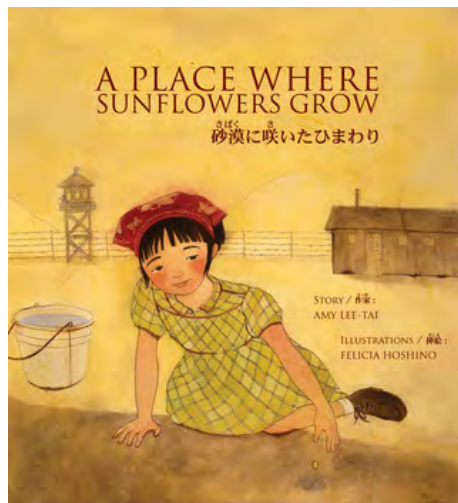
The theme “Hope Amidst Conflict” resonates in the book as readers are challenged to consider their responses in difficult and tense situations and ways of taking action in future encounters. While consideration should be given on whether or how to use *Not My Fault* with younger children, it would work well with other books on bullying such as *Wings* (Christopher Myers, 2000), *Say Something* (Peggy Moss, 2004), and *Just Kidding* (Trudy Ludwig, 2006).

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A Place Where Sunflowers Grow

Written by Amy Lee-Tai

Illustrated by Felicia Hoshino

Children's Book Press, 2006

ISBN: 978-0-89239-215-5

It is 1942 and the U.S. is at war with Japan. Approximately 120,000 innocent Japanese Americans are sent to live in internment camps. Mari, a young Japanese American girl, wonders why her family is forced to leave their happy flower-filled home and belongings in California to relocate to a tarpaper barrack in Topaz, Utah. Mari has many questions about why she must live in this windy, dusty place along with other Japanese Americans, but she is afraid to ask.

Despite her unhappiness and her doubts about whether sunflowers can grow in the hot, dry desert, she plants a handful of seeds outside her new home. Upon the insistence of her parents, who are artists, Mari obediently attends art class at the Topaz Art School. Once there, she cannot find inspiration for her art. She struggles with life in the camp, from the noise in the mess halls to the lack of privacy in the bathrooms. With encouragement from her parents and art teacher, Mari perseveres and draws pictures of things that made her happy before coming to Topaz. Through her art Mari finds the courage to ask her father more questions about why they are forced to live in Topaz. She meets a friend named Aiko in art class. Together, they face their fears of living in a place plagued by dust storms, surrounded by barbed wire fences and watched by guardsmen with guns. In the end, Mari's artwork suggests she learns to live within the barbed wire walls. She draws a picture of her family's barrack in Topaz, herself with her friend Aiko, and most significantly, the sunflowers that finally begin to sprout.

Based on her mother's personal experiences in an internment camp, Lee-Tai brilliantly weaves the thread of hope into a life full of hardship and injustice to show readers how the Japanese Americans persevered in the internment camps. Many Japanese American readers appreciate the presentation of Lee-Tai's text, written in both the Japanese and English languages, however some Japanese American readers comment that the simplicity of the story almost minimizes the pain and hardship experienced by the internees. Others of Japanese ancestry feel that the author's attempt to subtly raise difficult issues related to injustices from a child's perspective is somewhat problematic without the depth of details to fully support the complexity of those issues. For example, Mari's question to her father about why her family is detained in the internment camp when they have done nothing wrong is left unanswered in the story. The beauty and value of this powerful story is that young readers can understand that the sunflowers symbolize the hope that humans will persevere and survive despite dire circumstances. This story can be paired with the picture book *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki (1993), to explore how Japanese Americans found hope within conflicts caused by war.

Several Japanese Americans with family members who lived in the internment camps applaud the illustrator, Felicia Hoshino, for her realistic and insightful illustrations. The depictions of Japanese Americans are accurate and well-suited to the time and place. Hoshino cleverly uses color to create

characterize Mari as a spirited young child full of hope by drawing a red bandanna on her head and dressing her in bright colors amidst the muted and dull colors of the background.

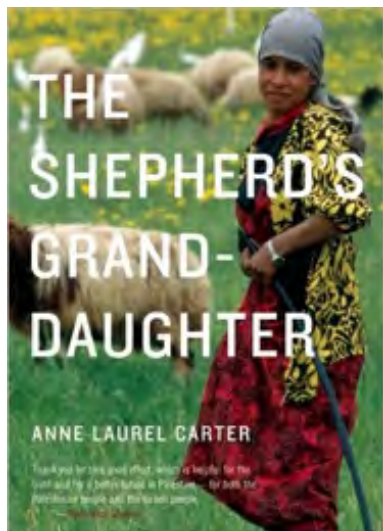
This story was awarded the Jane Addams Peace Association Book Award and is definitely a story to be shared with young readers.

Michele Ebersole, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI

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The Shepherd's Granddaughter

Written by Anne Laurel Carter

Groundwood Books, 2008, 211 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-88899-902-3

"One day, if I don't come home from school, tell them I'm fighting the Israelis."

"What about school? Becoming a scientist?"

"Freedom is more important."

A realistic novel set in Palestine, *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* presents some of the conflict that currently exists between the Israeli government's policies and the Palestinians residing in Palestine,

however, within this conflict is hope. Hope in family, hope for the future, and hope for the people who live within Palestine. Told through the character of Amani, a young Palestinian girl, the story highlights individual perspectives in respect to land ownership, governmental control, and historical circumstances that influence the present.

Amani is the granddaughter of a shepherd, and all she has ever wanted to do is follow in her grandfather's footsteps. When she reaches adolescence, her grandfather, the patriarch of her family, decides that she can accompany him as he cares for the sheep. As she works with her grandfather she learns what she needs to do so that one day she will be able to become the family shepherdess. Caring for the sheep and their needs for grazing, she becomes more aware of Israeli development on what has traditionally been the land of her people. This infringement not only creates hardship for her flock's livelihood, but also disrupts the psychic livelihood of her family and neighbors. She learns that there is no easy way to determine a right and wrong side; however, she finds there are a plethora of perspectives that include her grandfather's entreaty to learn to pray without anger, her brother's passion for Palestinian freedom, and her own desire to raise her sheep in safety.

Told with clarity and compassion, *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* is a middle grade novel that allows readers to ponder how hope can exist within conflict, and how people working together can create peace and safety where sometimes governments fail. A rich plot line reveals well-developed characters who wrestle with their own flaws as well as the flaws of others. This text presents one of the world's ongoing cultural and historical conflicts in terms that honor those who are seldom represented in Western texts. A way to introduce young people to the conflict between Palestine and Israel, *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* can be paired with texts such as *Checkpoints* (Marilyn Levy, 2008) and *Real Time* (Pnina Kass, 2004). In terms of a theme that addresses hope within conflict, other texts that could also be used include *Ask Me No Questions* (Marina Budhos, 2006), *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Mary Williams & Gregory Christie, 2005), and *Iqbal* (Francesco D'Adamo & Ann Leonori, 2005). Readers interested in texts that also explore the plight of children in times of conflict might read *Children at War* (P.W. Singer, 2005), *Shattered: Stories of Children and War* (Jennifer Armstrong, 2003), and *Zlata's Diary* (Zlata Filipovic, 1994).

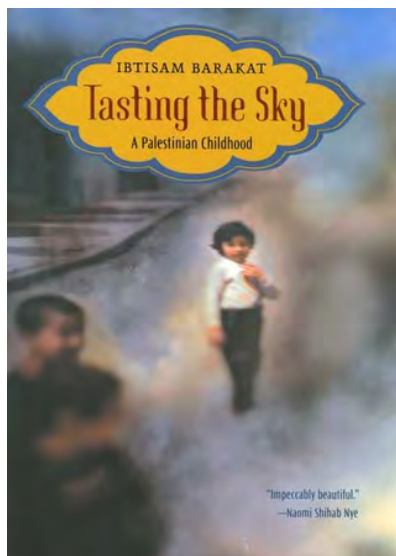
Anne Laurel Carter is a teacher-librarian in Toronto, Canada, who studied Hebrew, worked on kibbutzim in Israel multiple times since 1971, and lived with Palestinian families while researching this novel. She also taught in Ramallah and traveled extensively as a young woman. With insights that many readers will not have in respect to the question of a sovereign Palestine, Carter allows the reader to ponder the concept of borders, both real and artificial.

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Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood

Written by Ibtisam Barakat

Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007

ISBN: 978-0-374-35733-7

In writing Tasting the Sky I give my story to the world in the hope that no others ever lose their home, and that the world would lend them a hand if they fell.

This moving memoir provides an intimate, first-person look into the lives of a Palestinian family during the Six-Day War of 1967. A message of hope prevails throughout: Hope of a young girl who

discovers refuge in letters and language; hope of a nation struggling for peace and justice; and hope that the rest of the world can understand the human element represented in this ongoing global struggle.

Filled with sensory images, rich in metaphors that resonate with the reader long after the book is complete, *Tasting the Sky* provides an authentic insider's perspective of the lives of those affected by war as well as the daily life of Palestinian people in 1967. While most people have heard of the struggles involved over the past century regarding the "Holy Land," understanding the relationships among the people who inhabit these struggling countries is not frequently presented in such an insightful way. This memoir serves literature's role of helping to humanize global events. As the author revisits her childhood, her wisdom as an adult helps readers understand the actions and emotions of the young child we befriend in the book and why her story is important to readers today.

Alef, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, represents the power of language throughout the book to sustain her when she is separated from family, friends, in an orphanage and in a refugee camp. In a concluding chapter set in 1981, Barakat states, "Written on my heart, is all that I lost — my shoes, a donkey friend, a city, the skin of my feet, a goat, my home, my childhood — shattered at the hands of history. But my eternal friend Alef helps me find the splinters of my life ... and piece them back together." Growing up in Ramallah and obtaining a degree from Birzeit University in the West Bank, Ibtisam Barakat is a bilingual author, poet, and college teacher who has shared these splinters of her life in a powerful story that speaks of hope, healing, and global understanding.

Several resources mentioned at the conclusion of this memoir that can be paired for classroom use are *The Flag of Childhood: Poems from the Middle East* (Naomi Shihab Nye, 2002), *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* (Stephanie Tolan, 2006); and *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (Deborah Ellis, 2004).

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Wanting Mor

Written by Rukhsana Khan

Groundwood Books, 2009, 192 pages

ISBN: 978-0-88899-858-3

This book is about the universal themes of the search for identity, self-understanding, and coming of age through the story of a young girl, Jameela, in an Afghani village and in Kabul. The events of the story encapsulate the trajectory of the protagonist's life from a confused, lost child to a confident young woman. The story is set in 2001, after the U.S. invasion and the influence of Taliban tyranny. Jameela is born with a cleft lip that she hides behind a Porani (head covering). The porani comes through as a metaphor of her identity as a Muslim as well as her protection. Her faith in Islam and her mother's love sustain her throughout the story. The reader feels the presence of the mother even though she dies as the story opens in a

dusty, remote village where food and support are scarce after war on terrorism has taken a severe toll on human and economic life. Mor means Mother in Pushto, one of the dialects spoken in the northwestern region of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The first chapter is heart wrenching in its depiction of a child's grief as she loses the one constant factor in her life — her mother. Her life has been unstable ever since she was born due to the constantly unpredictable nature of the circumstances surrounding her home land. Her father decides to move to Kabul for a better life the day after her mother dies and sells all that is dear to Jameela, including her mother's clothes. He loses the money in gambling, drugs, drinking, and debauchery in modern Kabul. They are later kicked out of a household of his "friend" in Kabul when he is caught in a compromising position. He then decides to marry someone he seems to have met while his daughter was working at his friend's house. Jameela is forced to work as a servant/slave in her own home and every household she goes to but remains determined to do good. She accepts that her face will never be her fortune as people look away as soon as they perceive her deformity. The climax of her unfortunate events is when her father abandons her in the middle of the Bazaar because her stepmother cannot stand her budding understanding and friendship with her son.

The believable character of Jameela is woven as a Muslim girl and a daughter, who is essentially a pious person. Her character is shown in direct contrast to the negative characters of other women and her father. The evil nature of her stepmother and Agha Akram's (the butcher) wife, who convinces her husband to put Jameela in the orphanage, off-set the pious character of a Muslim girl whose faith holds her together against all odds. The weak personality of her father and his friend in Kabul is scaffolded by the stronger Muslim male characters of her stepbrother and Agha Akram, the kind-hearted butcher who helps her when she is abandoned in front of his shop.

Jameela's strength is her religious belief that she falls back on in making sense of all that is new to her such as her father's drinking and irresponsibility. She realizes the difference between right and wrong even as she is surrounded by wickedness. The education that she receives in the orphanage and the

actions of the U.S. army seem to be Jameela's saviors. The influence of the foreigners (U.S. soldiers) is shown negatively through the over modernization in women's clothing. The blind following of revealing western clothing and behaviors to the extent of drinking alcohol and corruption is shown as a reaction to Taliban departure and subsequent western influence brought in by the U.S. soldiers. The general mistrust of Americans is strongly portrayed but their ability to fix things is also accepted as they arrange to transform Jameela through repairing her upper lip and to help the orphanages get better plumbing and sanitary conditions. The reason behind so many children in the orphanages is down played. The social and the political "disasters" of national import are underplayed in comparison to the personal everyday experiences of the characters in this book.

References to religion are strong and woven into the very fabric of the narrative. Islamic feminism is brought to the fore many times during the story in how men show respect to Jameela when she goes out properly dressed. The choice of how a woman covers herself is depicted as varying from woman to woman with decision making resting on the women, including Jameela when she decides how to spend her future life as a teacher. Unlike other novels set in this region of the world, the child protagonist is shown as accepting the conformity demanded by religious norms and restrictions.

The story and the character development lose momentum after Jameela goes into the orphanage and her struggles are influenced by peer pressure and her intolerance towards a poor little girl, Arwa, who is "dirty." This character transformation negates the humble and gracious protagonist who, in the beginning of the story, accepts everything and all people she meets. She is nauseated by the girl and does not try to do anything about her response until late in the book. The time frame is also confusing for the events at the beginning of the story. For example, shortly after the death of Mor the narrative unexpectedly states that it has been a month since her death. Jameela changes from a very young child into a woman in a seemingly short time span.

The author has written multiple picture books about Muslims set in regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. She is a Pakistani, who settled in Canada when she was three. She consulted with her sister-in-law who is from Afghanistan for this book. Several issues of authenticity in this book include her confusion of the clothes of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wives with clothes worn by Jameela which were essentially Afghani not Arabian in any way (p. 137). She also uses references to a hadith (sayings of the Prophet) that are confusing (p.146) and talks about the negative aspect of following the foreigners to the point of jumping off of a higher place to certain death. In an interview the author elaborates on the manner in which she became inspired to write this story through narratives that came to her from the orphanages that she sponsors in those regions (see her interview at <http://www.semicolonblog.com/?p=7729>).

The story touches on authentic aspects of Afghani culture that are representative of the society through the inclusion of negative and positive Muslim characters. Attention is given to the agency of Muslim women and the power of choice and education. This book does not seem to reinforce many common stereotypes of Muslims in the Middle East even though the backdrop is dated. The intended audience in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries are exposed to diversity within the society, which encompasses the middle class and the very poor as well as contrasts between varied characters, who are good and evil. It is authentic in the incorporation of religion in everyday

life. The author has fashioned a seamlessly authentic portrayal of men, mothers, and girls which does not negate the religious foundations of their lives.

This novel can be read along with research on ways of life of Afghani people and Islamic religion. Variations of some of the same thematic threads can be found in other novels set in Afghanistan and Pakistan by authors outside and inside of the culture including *The Breadwinner* Trilogy by Deborah Ellis, *Beneath My Mother's Feet* (Amjed Qamar, 2008), *Iqbal* (Francesco D'Adamo, 2003), and *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind, Haveli, The House of Djinn*, and *Under the Persimmon Tree* (Suzanne Fisher Staples 1989, 1995, 2008 & 2005).

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