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WOW REVIEW

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Summer 2012

Representations of Contemporary Global Communities

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WOW Review: Volume IV, Issue 4
Summer 2012
Representations of Contemporary Global Communities

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Contributors to this Issue:

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK.
Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, OH
Avis M. Masuda, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, Hilo, HI
Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX
Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
Tracy Smiles, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR
Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
Kinga Varga-Dobai, Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, GA

Editor:

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Production Editor:

Richard Clift



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Introduction and Editor's Note

Many scholars of international children's literature, concerned about the media focus on war and disaster in global contexts, believe that children's and adolescent literature can provide insightful, authentic images of a range of contemporary global lifestyles and cultures. Another issue has been the dominance of folklore and historical fiction in the global literature being published for children and adolescents, which can create misconceptions of these global cultures as dated, rural, and traditional. Both the diversity and universality of diverse global communities are significant points of connection and conversation as teachers and learners position themselves to better understand the others with whom they share our contemporary world.

In some of the picture books reviewed here, children share the uniqueness of their daily lives and cultures as well as the universal experiences that can be part of any child's background. Anna is a child in Africa and many aspects of her urban African life, some very similar to urban lifestyles elsewhere, are woven into *Anna Hibiscus' Song*. Her search for how to express her joy in life is among the universal feelings to which a reader may connect. The same author has also told the story of a contemporary child in an African village in *The No. 1 Car Spotter*. While the hardships of a life in poverty may resonate with children, so will the humor and resourcefulness of characters in this early reader chapter book. *Meena*, a title that originated in Belgium, shares the fear and imagination of children—potentially mirroring adults—that leads to prejudice and bullying as three children believe an older neighbor to be a witch. *A New Year's Reunion* describes the excitement of a traditional New Year celebration in China tempered with the modern dilemma of families being separated for long periods of time due to the father's work.

Contemporary images of the global community have also been shared in previous WOW reviews of picture books, such as *Big Red Lollipop* (Rukhsana Kahn), *First Come the Zebra* (Lynn Barasch), *I am Thomas* (Libby Gleeson), and *My Name is Sangoel* (Karen Lynn Williams).

Some of the titles reviewed in this issue show adolescents who are facing family challenges during those critical years when identity is being acknowledged and shaped. In *The Grand Plan to Fix Everything*, Dini, just entering adolescence finds herself moving from the U.S. to India for two years due to her mother's new position. Despite her own Indian heritage and her idolization of a Bollywood star, she is faced with many changes in her new community. In *Orchards*, a Japanese American girl is sent to live with her relatives in Japan for the summer after the suicide of a friend and rumors about the involvement of her circle of friends in this tragedy. She learns about her Japanese heritage and customs from a supportive extended family as she deals with the potential outcome of bullying and cruel words that often are part of teen relationships. *Under the Mesquite* finds its protagonist dealing with situations of family loss, border issues, and the call for resilience in a story that will resonate with many despite geographical or cultural boundaries.

Other contemporary adolescent images described in previous *WOW Review* issues include: *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Wendy Wan-Long), *Our Secret Siri Aang* (Christina Kessler), *The Year*

of the Dog (Grace Lin), *A Step from Heaven* (An Na), *In Darkness* (Nick Lake), and *La Línea* (Ann Jaramillo).

While images of war are a typical portrayal of many international countries, children's and adolescent literature offers perspectives that transcend the nameless and faceless victims and survivors of these challenging situations. In contemporary literature, readers realize those involved as people having complex lives that have been disrupted and whose own strengths have enabled them to confront the challenges in positive, creative, and hopeful ways. *Now is the Time for Running* tells a realistic story with issues of racial violence, drug abuse, and illegal immigration in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Tempered with human emotions, this story involves the reader with characters in ways that are compassionate and uplifting as street soccer becomes a life changing game. *Under the Persimmon Tree* begins with a family torn apart by bombings in Afghanistan and follows the journey of a young girl to a refugee camp in Pakistan. There she develops a friendship with an American woman who began a school for the refugees. The relationships and resiliency described bring the reader into the lives of the characters but also raise issues of authentic portrayals of Muslim women.

Other contemporary portrayals of people affected by conflict within their homelands found in previous *WOW Review* issues include *Saving the Baghdad Zoo* (Kelly Milner Halls with Major William Sumner), *Wanting Mor* (Rukhsana Kahn), and *A Little Piece of Ground* (Elizabeth Laird with Sonia Nimr).

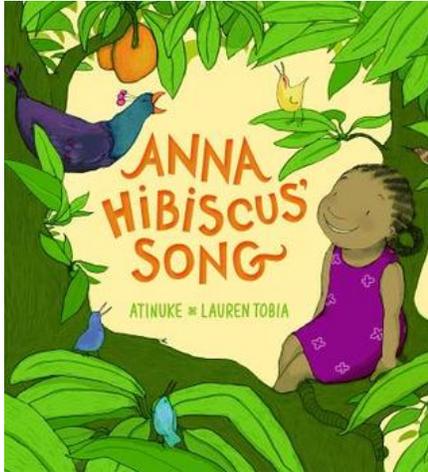
As teachers work to prepare young readers in a world where technology continues to shorten the path between global cultures, these titles point to the role of literature in preparing future citizens who will be expected to build relationships and make critical decisions within an international context.

Janelle Mathis

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Anna Hibiscus' Song

Written by Atinuke

Illustrated by Lauren Tobia

Kane Miller, 2011

ISBN:978-1610670401

This picture book tells the story of Anna Hibiscus, a young girl who has lived her entire life in Africa with her immediate and extended family. Her mother is Caucasian and the rest of her family Black. Anna finds herself bubbling with happiness but confused as to how she can express it. She is presented as connected to her culture and comfortable with who she is and

with her strong links to family members—her parents, her aunts and uncles. Her extensive extended family nurtures her connections to African culture. The array of diverse characters provides a holistic view of African people and a more authentic representation. Anna is a very happy child who is learning how to express herself. She visits each family member to ask how they express their happiness. She then physically tries each of their expressions in an effort to articulate her own but in the end decides that she can express herself by singing. The song she creates incorporates the ideas from her family.

Anna is a joyful character and a willful little girl whose experiences in a family, culture, and country both connect to and differ from those in western countries. Anna's mother is presented as Canadian and Anna has a grandmother who lives there. In other stories of her adventures, Anna visits her grandmother and sees Canadian snow for the first time. Atinuke draws on her own family experiences in writing the Anna series, most of which consist of beginning chapter books. Her own mother is from the U.K. and her father is from Nigeria.

Even though the illustrator is not from the culture she depicts it well. The simple but expressive illustrations show Anna and her family as comfortable with each other and their African lifestyle. Her white mother seems to have integrated into the black family and African culture. The illustrations present an uncomplicated lifestyle set in local mango trees as well as the cars and buildings of urbanized Africa. The beginning and ending images are that of a sprawling cosmopolitan city with roads, cars and airplanes. The book opens to an image of the day and closes with the same image at night to represent the passage of time in the life of Anna Hibiscus. The story thus creates a connection between the urban and the rural realities of Africa.

Atinuke was born in Nigeria and spent her childhood in both the U.K. and Nigeria, and now lives in Wales with her family. Her books draw on her ancestry from Yoruba culture, England and Wales as well as the more ancient origins of Spain, Portugal and China to tell stories from the world of folktales and contemporary life. A major critique of her books is that they create a "generic" image of African life and culture rather than depicting Africa as a continent that includes a large diversity of specific peoples, regions, and lifestyles. Her texts usually begin with a statement that repeats over and over, "Anna Hibiscus lives in Africa. Amazing Africa."

Atinuke, however, is adamant in presenting her characters as African in general and not belonging to a particular region of Africa. She chooses to construct a “generic” Africa because of the limited available texts that mirror African cultures. She wants children from a variety of African cultures to be able to find themselves reflected in her books instead of the books being tied to only one specific culture within Africa. She believes that most children’s books reflect images in the media and provide a sensational view of the continent with a focus on AIDS, poverty, hunger, genocide, and violent unrest. Her desire to depict a normal household with normal everyday experiences seems reasonable given the many problematic images of Africa. She does provide an urban setting within her text. This is Atinuke’s first picture book based on the experiences of Anna; her previous books on Anna are short chapter books.

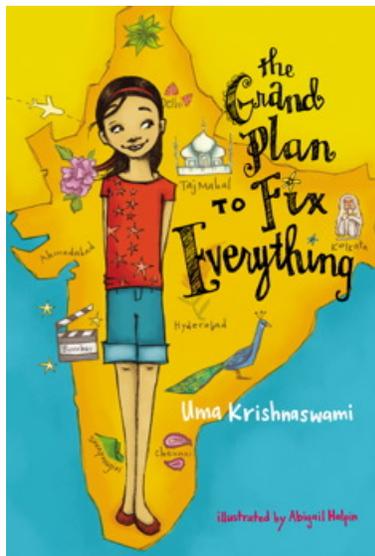
The same thematic threads as this story can be found in other books based on the same character, such as *Anna Hibiscus* (2007), *Good Luck Anna Hibiscus* (2011), *Hooray for Anna Hibiscus* (2008), and *Have Fun Anna Hibiscus* (2011). Other novels that focus on and portray Africa as an integral part of the characters are *The No 1 Car Spotter: Best in the Village-Maybe in the World* by Atinuke (2011) and three books by Baba Wague Diakite: *The Hatseller and the Monkey* (1999), *I Lost My Tooth in Africa* (2006), and *A Gift from Childhood* (2010), which are set in Mali. One possibility is to pair Atinuke’s books with books set in specific African countries and cultures so that children don’t develop the stereotype of a generic Africa with no differences across the vast continent.

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

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The Grand Plan to Fix Everything

Written by Uma Krishnaswami

Illustrated by Abigail Halpin

Atheneum Books, 2011, 266 pp.

ISBN: 978-1416995890

There it is again, that thing that most people would call coincidence. Lal prefers to think of it as kismet. Some people would say kismet means fate, but really it is a far more beautiful idea—it is the idea that in spite of all the obstacles, some things are meant to be. (p. 119)

This contemporary realistic fiction novel focuses on eleven-year-old Dini's journey from Maryland to Swapnagiri, India and her experience of writing a movie script and finding a Bollywood movie star, Dolly. The protagonist, Dini, and her best friend Maddie are big fans of Dolly, watching her movies and listening to her singing. They are excited about attending a Bollywood dance camp, but then Dini's mother, a physician, announces that the family is moving to India for two years for a clinical position. As a fan of Bollywood movies, Dini should be excited about moving, yet the fact that she cannot locate the little town, Swapnagiri, where they are to live on a map worries her. Most of all, it is hard for Dini to leave her best friend, Maddie. The inevitable journey begins with a stroke of good luck as, on the way from the airport, a Quali (van) driver tells Dini's family that the Bollywood star, Dolly, is in Swapnagiri. Dini is excited and repeats one of Dolly's lines from a movie, "Kismet ki baat hai. . . It is just a matter of kismet, which some people think of as fate, but it's so much more. It is about things that were just meant to be, like Dolly being in Swapnagiri" (p. 54).

The entire story focuses on the theme of "kismet," the meaningful meant-to-be, which may look like a coincidence but is something deeper. There are a wide range of characters in the book—Quali drivers, movie producer, baker, postman, new neighbor, school principal, mechanic, goatherd, cottage manager, and even monkeys—who contribute to "the kismet" that leads to Dini meeting Dolly and helping her with a problem. The story is unique in a sense that the number of characters and their individual stories appear to be too random to grow into a coherent story until near the end. Finally all of the multiple characters participate in unpacking the entangled miscommunications and misunderstandings. Due to the complications of multiple characters that weave into a final resolution, this book is one that may need re-reading and literature discussion.

The Grand Plan to Fix Everything informs its audience about changes in modern India through Dini's journey. For example, Mumbai is noted as the most popular city in India and is recognized as the former Bombay. Also the book reminds readers that India is a

nation with rich diversity in language, nature, and regions through the different characters. “Vanakkam,” says his wife in Tamil, “Here in Swapnagiri, just by listening to people around her, Dini is learning a third language, after Hindi and English” (p.177). “People think India is all hot and dusty. But here is Swapnagiri and it is singing out to Dini to come take a look at it” (p. 82). “Very fine buses here in Swapnagiri, madam,” Veeran offers, “on time and all. Not like the big city, where everything is one big mess” (p. 99). Another important insight of the book regarding India is that the author does not just use a well-known city like Mumbai to create an authentic context; she positions the story in a small town like Swapnagiri without exoticizing it as a mystic far away place. She introduces also provides an understanding of time in relation to the U.S. “Dini wonders what time it is in Maryland right now this minute. It’s two in the afternoon here, and the sun is bright and beamy quite unlike what Dini is feeling. . . it’s nine and a half hours difference” (p. 91).

In the U.S., children’s literature of South Asian cultures tends to focus on traditional cultural practices with a focus on old traditions and customs in many realistic fiction books about India and South Asia. Additionally, traditional tales frequently dominate collections of this literature. For example, folklore icons such as monkey god, snake, elephants, and tigers and traditional icons like sari, diwali, wedding ceremonies, and henna often appear. Such iconic dominance can create stereotypical cultural understanding. Thus, illustrating Indian-American and Indian culture around contemporary childhood themes, such as pop cultures, celebrities, mass media, friendship and peer pressure, underscores connections to universal contemporary childhood experiences as relevant within India. The narrative does not focus on seemingly exotic animals like monkey and peacocks, but on events involving local wildlife, such as raccoons and bunnies, in a similar perspective as readers might find in many areas of the U.S.

Another theme within the story is agency and dream. Dini demonstrates what it is to honor one’s passion and dream. Dini is serious about writing a script respecting her passion and interest in Bollywood movies. It is matter of constructing agency to witness a child who casts her idolized Bollywood star for her future movie and continues working towards her dream by taking notes, imagining, writing, and believing in “the kismet.” Focusing on the contemporary interest of a child who happens to be an Indian-American brings universal connections to the book. At the same time, these universal connections to childhood and agency are set within the unique cultural setting and lifestyle of a small village in India.

The author Uma Krishnaswami was born in India and is one of the significant authors whose books focus on universal cultural experiences instead of only portraying the traditional cultural values of India. Many of Krishnaswami’s books have balanced cultural portrayals between old and new through the embedded cultural values and mindset that reflect contemporary life where communities, emotional connections, ecological and cultural locality, and internal diversity are centering factors. Yet Indian

heritage is interwoven with contemporary reflections. The illustrator, Abigail Halpin, adds a rich contemporary personality through her illustrations.

This book could be read alongside books about journeys of enhancing cultural identity and sense of place—*Naming Maya* (Uma Krishnaswami, 2004), *Habibi* (Naomi Shahib Nye, 1997), *What the Moon Saw* (Laura Resau 2006), and *Tea with Milk* (Allen Say, 1999). In *Naming Maya* the protagonist travels back to Chennai, India and learns to cope through the support of family. *Habibi* is a story of relocating in Jerusalem where Palestinian relatives and Jewish friends help the protagonist to rediscover her culture—a process that becomes personally complicated due to historical complexity. *What the Moon Saw* finds the main character visiting her father’s land, Oaxaca, Mexico, yet her grandparents are the ones who support her learning about herself. *Tea and Milk* features a Japanese-American protagonist experiencing cultural shock and adjustment in moving back to Japan.

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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Meena

Written by Sine van Mol

Illustrated by Carianne Wijffels

2011, Eerdman

ISBN: 978-0802853943

Klaas, Christa, and Thomas are convinced that Meena, an older woman who lives on their street, is a toad-eating, blood-drinking witch. They fear her, and this fear fuels their imaginations as they create stories about her, taunt her from a distance, and even write “witch” on the sidewalk near her house. When they eventually see a little girl entering her house, they take action by creating warnings for the girl and sending a threat to Meena, thinking they are saving the girl’s life. Even as the young girl claims Meena is certainly not a witch but is her grandmother, they respond with doubt and are slow to accept the invitation to come closer and partake of Meena’s cherry pie. Despite the earlier childlike and abusive responses of the children, Meena treats them kindly, as a grandmother might be expected to act, and a friendship is seemingly formed at the story’s end. The universal childhood experience of creating stories in response to fear of the unknown is evident in this picture book. One doesn’t have to be from Belgium, the country of origin, to recognize the humorous, realistic experience of these children when their imaginations go awry. With a well-positioned lesson in the dangers of fear guided by prejudice, *Meena* is a book that holds connections for children globally.

Besides the similarities of childhood experiences across cultures, one also is reminded of the similarities of traditional tales, frequently those sharing the European tradition, that include the image of witches. And while the belief in witches enters the fantasy realm that is often considered outside discussions of authenticity, key to the authenticity of this book is the notion of childhood (or even adult) imaginations imposing stories and situations on local scenarios in hopes of creating an explanation for the unknown. Embedded in such mind play are universal themes of bullying, prejudice based on fear of the unknown, and the stereotypes given to elderly people who are perhaps different in how they appear, talk, and act. All these themes are easily identified in society.

Meena’s delightful illustrations are colorful and expressive depictions of the children and their bullying antics. Carianne Wijffels has used two different styles to tell this story. “When accentuating a character or object, Wijffels employs painted and cut paper, cheerful buttons, thread and other media in layered, compositions; the supporting roles are rendered in single-color outlines” (<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sine-van-mol/meena/>). Both humorous and emotionally packed, the images on each page are placed strategically on white background giving a postmodern emphasis to the children’s engaged emotions and the objects of their fear.

Both the author and illustrator of *Meena* live in Belgium. Sine van Mole has written several books for children since 1990 and has a special interest in children and the problems they face. Corianne Wijffels teaches art and has collaborated on two other books with van Mole in Dutch: *Emilio and Motje*. *Meena* was published in Belgium in 2010 and published in the US in 2011.

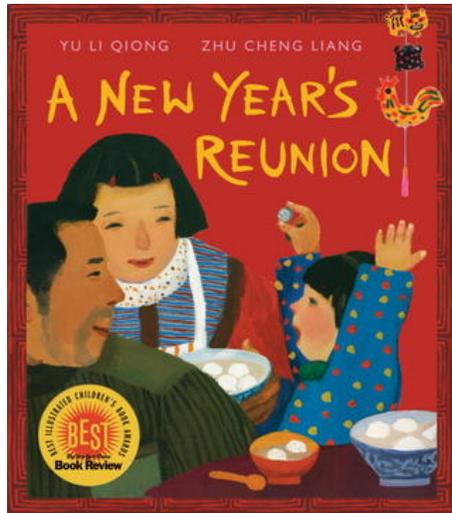
One theme that can be elaborated upon is that of relationships with the elderly, more specifically with grandparents. Paired with such books as *I Love Saturdays y domingos* (Alma Flor Ada, 2002), *Grandma's Records* (Eric Velasquez, 2001), or *My Nana and Me* (Irene Smalls, 2005), the varying relationships of children and the elderly provide a natural context for discussions about the value of such friendships. A focus on the theme of fear based on stereotypes and bullying might find this book paired alongside *Enemy Pie* (Derek Munson, 2000), *Say Something* (Peggy Moss, 2004), or *The Rag Coat* (Lauren Mills, 1991).

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

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A New Year's Reunion

Written by Yu Li-Qiong

Illustrated by Zhu Cheng-Liang

Candlewick, 2011

ISBN: 978-0763658816

This realistic fiction picture books illustrates a contemporary lifestyle that is supposedly nontraditional yet common for many families in China where family members live apart due to job conditions and meet one or two times a year during national holidays. New Year's Day, as a national family event, holds for its participants a special gratitude for

the reunion of family in addition to the excitement of celebrating a tradition in China. Layers of meaningful joy during this holiday week are portrayed through a young girl, Maomao, and her family and their memorable four days of the New Year.

Maomao lives with her mother because her father works in a construction job that is far away and so he can only come home once a year during the New Year's celebration. On the first morning of New Years Day, Maomao's family gets up early and makes sticky rice balls. One of the balls is the lucky one with a hidden coin. Maomao's mom cooks and serves "piping-hot sticky rice balls" and Maomao bites into the fortune coin ball. Maomao puts the coin away in her pocket for safe-keeping and heads to New Year visits. On the second day, Maomao's father repairs their house because he cannot help his family while he is gone the rest of year. Maomao joins her father and has a great time with her dad on the house roof. On the third day, it snows "really hard!" and Maomao's neighborhood friends have a snow fight and make a snowman. When she comes home late, Maomao finds that her fortune coin is gone. Even though she goes back to the courtyard searching for her coin, she has no success. Maomao's disappointing night is eventually saved when the lucky coin is found. The following morning, her father packs to leave and Maomao gives her fortune coin to her father saying, "Here, take this. Next time you're back, we can bury it in the sticky rice ball again!"

New Year's Day is one of the most well known traditional holidays celebrated by Chinese in the U.S. The glamorous look of splendid traditional dances, firecrackers, and exotic Chinese food often is the focus for the mainstream audience. This book invites readers into the context of New Year's Day to rethink the meaning of a traditional holiday that has evolved to meet social and economic needs while fulfilling its traditional role. While previously family gatherings at the New Year were meant to be a reunion among relatives and extended families, contemporary New Year reunions have evolved as one of the few occasions that a nuclear family might reunite because of their daily work requirements. Thus, the carnival aspects in New Year's Day are depicted as almost secondary in this book.

The family tie is the priority rather than celebratory performances like dragon dances and firecrackers. What this book draws attention to is waiting, reuniting, and celebrating New Year's Day together. It celebrates a once-a-year visit with a father and smaller scale domestic

different challenges in their lives, yet have similar encounters with peers and teachers. Melody's experiences of using speech generation and learning to advocate for herself could also be compared and contrasted with those of the male character, Martin Phoenix, in rituals, which seem to be similar and yet unique among each Chinese family in this book. For example, Maomao and her friend, Dachun's family use a red envelope for fortune blessing while Maomao's family uses the fortune coin. Although this is a small indication, recognizing such diversity within a culture is important. Sharing about the fortune coin and red envelope during a New Year's visit may seem to be an exotic practice to audiences in the U.S., but what is highlighted in the story is Dachun's sharing about their family being together. Getting up early to make a special lucky rice ball and preparing meals around the tradition of holiday foods shows an authentic home culture observation of the New Year. The family spends those precious three or four days not only involved in loud New Year's rituals but also to fix and paint their home and symbolically show the true meaning of a New Year's family reunion. Maomao's bonding time with father on the house roof, something her mother does not usually allow, shows how New Year's Day is even a more special day for Maomao.

Although the New Year's Day is the focus of the story, the themes are family love, patience, and growing up through experience. In the end, Maomao finds her coin and gives it to her father asking him to bring it back for the next New Year's. This illustrates a surprisingly mature and understanding young girl who, despite her young age, signals to the audience that she might be experienced already in many annual good-byes with her father. Perhaps that explains why "Daddy is very quiet. He nods and hugs me tight." as he listens to the advice from his daughter. In addition to the universal theme of family love, nontraditional lifestyles, and changing holiday practices, unwritten implications of the contemporary nature of a town in China are richly portrayed throughout the illustrations. There are no stereotypical depictions of people as all looking alike. Instead, there are various contemporary hairdos, stylish padded jackets, leather boots, colorful fruits on the table, a modern backpack, types of pets, fashionable kids' outfits, and stuffed animals and dolls on beds. These contemporary illustrations show cultural authenticity in Chinese society today and in the town where the family lives.

The fact this book was written for audiences in Taiwan or China reminds readers of the implied audience's reality and awareness of New Year's Day in China today. In the U.S., many of our depictions of global countries are historical, not contemporary, and provide a folktale-look of an antiquated China or stereotypical illustrations of people in poverty in China of the past as the typical representation of Chinese culture. This story was published in Taiwan in 2007 and an English translated edition was published in the United States in 2011. The illustrator, Zhu Cheng-Liang and the author, Yu Li-Qiong are both native Chinese and educated in Nanjing, China. Their note states, "The family in this book is a fictional one, but there are in reality over 100 million migrant workers in China, many of whom work hundreds or sometimes thousands of miles away from home, returning only once each year, for just a few days, at New Year's." This insight speaks in a contemporary voice about the significance of New Year's Day and perhaps is an indication of social issues in the widening gap between the rich and poor in China.

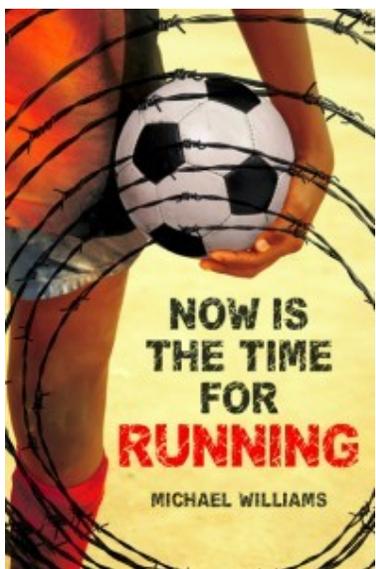
This book could be read alongside *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (Ginnie Lo, 2012), *Bee-Bim Bop!* (Linda Sue Park, 2008), and *To Share One Moon* (Ruowen Wang, 2008) to explore the theme of enhancing family ties around food. Family participation and food preparation are dynamically orchestrated in these books. The theme of family reunion and separation can be explored across different contexts with *Sitti's Secrets* (Naomi Shahib Nye, 1994), *From North to South* (René Colato Laínez, 2010), and *Visiting Day* (Jacqueline Woodson, 2002).

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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Now is the Time for Running

Written by Michael Williams

Little, Brown, 2011, 233 pp.

ISBN: 978-0316077903

Deo and his friends are playing soccer on a dusty field in modern Zimbabwe when Mugabe's soldiers arrive. The commander's announcement to the villagers, "You voted wrongly in the election. You were not thinking. That is why the president sent me here" (p. 16) signals a massacre that changes Deo's happy but meager life into a nightmare of death and violence. He flees the wreckage with his older mentally disabled brother, Innocent, and a leather soccer ball stuffed with worthless Zimbabwe bills for the distant promise of safe haven in South Africa. As they join others in fleeing to safety, Innocent's unpredictable behavior proves dangerous, yet also saves their lives. Told in fourteen-year-old Deo's first person voice in a present-tense narrative, this harrowing tale follows the brothers as they crawl beneath barbed wire, wade through the crocodile-infested Limpopo River, run through a nature preserve full of hungry hyenas and lions, find work on a farm, and eventually make their way to the townships outside Johannesburg and Cape Town. Instead of a safe haven, they live on the streets in constant fear of attack as unwanted refugees by desperately poor South Africans who view them as a threat. When Innocent is murdered in a riot, Deo loses hope and sinks into a life of drug abuse and gangs. His life changes when he is recruited to join a team to play street soccer and is given a chance to compete in the Homeless World Cup.

The difficult depictions of violence and harsh conditions are balanced with the tender relationship between Deo and Innocent and the fast-paced descriptions of soccer matches that frame the beginning and end of this story. The novel is suspenseful and gripping, while also managing to be deeply compassionate with characters that readers come to care deeply about. This complicated novel deals with difficult social issues such as military rule, the exploitation of illegal immigrants, racial violence, and drug abuse, but it is also an uplifting and compelling coming-of-age story rooted in real events.

The novel was originally published in South Africa under the title, *The Billion Dollar Soccer Ball* (2009). The author is a white South African who writes plays, musicals, operas, and novels and manages the Cape Town Opera. He is also a civil rights activist and published the young adult novels, *Crocodile Burning* (1994) and *The Genuine Half-Moon Kid* (1992), both set in South Africa. A photograph of a man burning to death in the 2008 South African uprisings that targeted "foreigners" led Williams to interview three refugees from Zimbabwe. Williams says that their stories of their journey to Cape Town inspired this novel. An Author's Note at the end of the book provides more information on the 2008 xenophobic attacks on refugees in South Africa and the Homeless World Cup. An educator's guide is located at http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/_assets/guides/EG_9780316077903.pdf.

This novel could be paired with other recent books on Zimbabwe, such as *Out of the Shadows* by Jason Wallace (2011), focusing on the beginning of Mugabe's rule in the 1980s, as well as books on South Africa, such as *This Thing Called the Future* (J.L. Powers, 2011) and *Out of Bounds: Seven Stories of Conflict and Hope* (Beverley Naidoo, 2008). Another connection is soccer, especially soccer in South Africa, as depicted in *Goal!*, a picture book by Mina Javaherbin (2010) and *Soccer World: South Africa* by Shawn Braley, David Rosenberg, and Ethan Zohn (2010). A picture book that would be a good pairing with this novel is *The Composition* (Antonio Skarmeta, 2003), set in Chile and also involving a soccer ball and military oppression. Finally, the book could be paired with other stories of refugees who face violence, racism and discrimination around the world, including the United States, such as *Ask Me No Questions* (Marina Budhos, 2006), *Return to Sender* (Julia Alvarez, 2007), *A Long Walk to Water* (Linda Sue Park, 2010), *A Time of Miracles* (Anne-Laure Bondoux, 2010), *The Bite of the Mango* (Mariatu Kamara & Susan McClelland, 2008), and *Journey of Dreams* (Marge Pellegrino, 2009). Immigration and refugees are a much debated topic worldwide with the passing of harsh immigration laws and vigilante groups patrolling borders and waters.

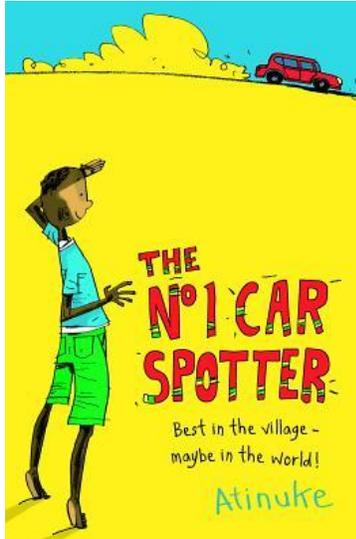
This heartbreaking and hopeful novel is both bleak and inspiring. The novel was named to the award list, 2012 Notable Books for a Global Society, because of the way in which it connects readers to the larger struggles of people in crisis around the world.

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson , AZ

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The No. 1 Car Spotter

Written by Atinuke
Walker, 2010, 112 pp.
ISBN: 978-1406320770

A great deal of children's and adolescent literature about Africa is being published, but most of it falls into two categories: books that tell myths, folktales and fables representing traditional stories and more recently, books recounting stories from violent, war torn villages and refugees.

Nigerian storyteller Atinuke offers a different narrative about Africa in her charming novel *The Number One Car Spotter*. Like her Anna Hibiscus books, this early reader chapter book is set in contemporary Africa. The novel centers on Oluwalase Babatunde Benson, a boy who lives in a small African village between the forest, the river, and the main road into the city. Everyone calls him No. 1 because he can spot and identify cars coming toward the village before anyone else. While the men of the village celebrate No. 1's ability to spot cars, the women of the village feel spotting cars does not have much value, so he is put to work collecting firewood, hoeing fields, and herding the cows and goats. No. 1's father works in the city and sends money home. No. 1 is clever and a problem solver who comes up with inventive solutions to problems that arise in the village, like turning an old Toyota Corolla into a wagon so villagers can take their produce to the market, providing his Auntie Fine-Fine with a beauty makeover, and helping his sickly grandmother get the medicine she needs.

This book has much to offer its readers, including endearing characters, interesting plot lines, and accessible text in the form of a chapter book with sketches that animate the characters and events for the reader. Additionally, embedded in the novel is cultural, social, and geographical information and opportunities to experience present-day children living in Africa. However, one of the most inviting features of the novel is the rich and culturally specific language. The following excerpt is an example of Atinuke's keen ear for language,

There are some few people in our village.

My best friend, Coca-Cola, lives in one compound with his old grandmother, newborn sisters, Sunshine and Smile, and his mother, Mama Coca-Cola.

My sister's best friend, Nike, lives in another compound with her elder brothers, Emergency and Tuesday, and her father, Uncle Go-Easy.

Beke, Bisi and Bola, the small children, live with their mother, Mama-B, and Auntie Fine-Fine.

There are other people in other compounds, but these are the people who know me well. (p. 9)

Atinuke is a professional storyteller. Although she now resides in Wales, she grew up in Nigeria and in Great Britain. Through her writing she seeks to share the Africa of her childhood. Further information about Atinuke and about her reasons for writing about “generic Africa” can be found in the review of *Anna Habiscus* in this issue of WOW Review.

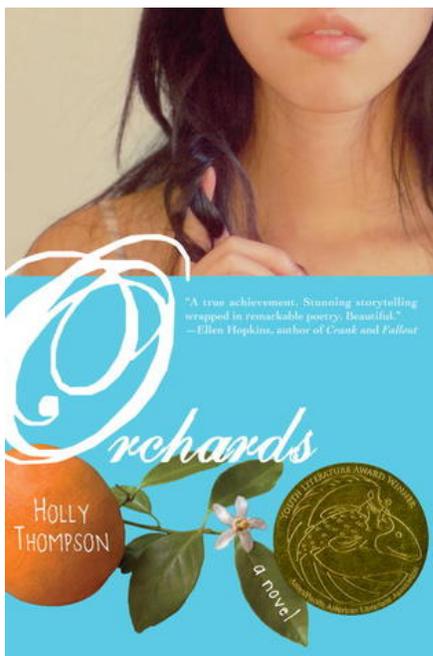
No. 1 Car Spotter is a book that can potentially invite explorations of family, social and economic systems, and critical inquiries into literature about Africa. The novel alludes to the hardships of living in a poor village, but the stories focus on everyday victories, humor, and artful representations of the characters’ daily way of life. Other books that would pair nicely with *No. 1 Car Spotter* are *Goal!* (2010) by Mina Javaherbin and illustrated by A.G. Ford and *Beatrice’s Goat* (2004) by Page McBrier and Loni Lohstoetor. Set in a dry South African township, *Goal!* is about a boy named Ajani, who wins a brand new soccer ball and plays an “epic” game with his friends on the dusty streets. *Beatrice’s Goat*, set in Uganda, is about a young girl living in poverty whose life is changed when the gift of a goat significantly impacts the economic challenges of the family and she able to fulfill her dream of going to school.

Tracy Smiles, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR

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Orchards

Written by Holly Thompson
Delacorte Press, 2011, 325 pp.
ISBN: 978-0385739788

Orchards is an exquisitely written novel in verse that lends a personal, insightful look into the thoughts of thirteen-year old Kana Goldberg, a half-Japanese and half-Jewish American teenager. As the novel opens, readers immediately sense Kana’s angst at being sent to her mother’s family in Japan for the summer to work in the family’s mikan orange groves. Kana feels she is being “exiled to my maternal grandmother, Baachan, to the ancestors at the altar and to Uncle, Aunt and cousins I haven’t seen in three years—not since our last trip back to Japan for Jiichan’s funeral” (p.9). In the first few pages, we discover that Kana’s friend, Ruth,

has committed suicide and her parents decide Japan is the best place for her to deal with her friend’s death. The traumatic incident shocked the community, prompting talk and gossip about the clique of eighth grade girls that form Kana’s circle of friends.

The author creates a sense of being inside Kana’s head throughout this difficult time in her life— we are able to hear her thoughts as she copes with trying to understand Ruth’s death and feel her painful guilt at the impact of the clique’s actions. Kana “talks to” Ruth and reflects back on the actions, words, and events leading up to Ruth’s suicide as her way of working through her grief and guilt. Throughout the early chapters of the novel, the reader senses the heavy presence of Ruth in Kana’s mind. Feelings of blame, anger, and frustration resonate in her thoughts. However, as she assimilates into the responsibilities of working in the mikan groves, becoming part of what she calls the “farm rhythm” (p. 29) and with the love and support of her Japanese family, Kana works through the pain of not being able to prevent Ruth’s suicide and the constant questioning and wondering “*should I have?*”

Kana’s Japanese family presence is strong, especially that of her strict, but loving grandmother. The interactions between Kana and Baachan, along with her developing friendships with her cousins, help us understand her Japanese self and her Jewish American self. Flashbacks weave the story of her parents’ struggle with her grandparents’ acceptance of an interracial marriage. The novel is infused with snippets of Japanese language and customs. Kana must catch up to her family’s speaking fast and constant Japanese, not the half-English, half-Japanese ‘Japlish’ that she is used to with her parents and younger sister. Upon arrival she must light incense at the altar in the family home to pay respects to Jiichan; she adheres to the order of bathing in the shared family tub, with the elder males always going first. We get a glimpse into obon rituals that honor those that have died. Kana learns to accept and appreciate these customs as a way of life and as a

means to eventually help her move on. The novel is further enhanced by the simple artwork that captures artifacts of Japanese culture. A picture of a mikan orange frames each chapter's title. Simple woodblock-like prints portray different aspects of Japanese culture, such as chopsticks, bento boxes, terraced mikan fields, Mount Fuji, paper lanterns, and origami.

The impact of bullying, cruelty, and harsh words that cut deep are deftly woven into an eloquent novel that captures the essence of a teen surviving and coping with many forms of grief, loss, anger, hope, fear, blame, love, and regret. The verse lends itself to a quick, but powerful read; the novel is packed with events that keep readers turning the pages. *Orchards* is a novel that one wants to return to again after the last word. The contemporary issues that conflate teen relationships have universal significance for all teenagers, regardless of race or ethnicity. *Orchards* received the APALA 2012 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and is a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection.

Holly Thompson lives in Japan although she is originally from the New England region of the U.S. She states, "My books often reflect the crossing of cultures amid my family, among my students, and within the communities in which I find myself immersed" (<http://www.hatbooks.com/>). Holly teaches creative writing at Yokohama City University, and her fiction is often set in Japan and Asia. She is able to speak to universal human experiences as well as unique cultural practices of this area of the world as seen in *Orchards*.

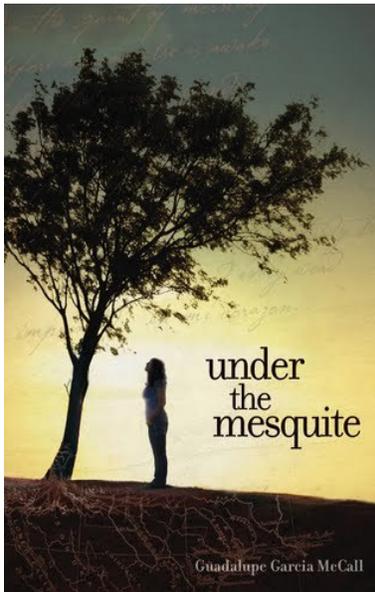
Orchards pairs well with another of Holly Thompson's works, an edited volume called *Tomo: Friendship through Fiction—An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories*. *Tomo* is a compilation of 36 tales gathered as contributions to the relief effort for victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. They feature stories of Japanese and half-Japanese teenagers growing up, woven into tales of mystery, love, friendship, ghosts, science fiction and history, both in contemporary and historical times. Together, these books invite conversation with teen readers on issues that surround their lives as they engage in the process of growing up.

Avis M. Masuda, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, Hilo, HI

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Under the Mesquite

Written by Guadalupe Garcia McCall

Lee & Low, 2011, 224 pp.

ISBN: 978-1600604294

Waiting for la Muerte to take Mamí is like being bound, lying face up on the sacrificial altar of the god Huitzilopochtli, pleading with the Aztec priest, asking him to be kind while he rips my heart out. (p. 157)

Coming of age is often difficult and the subject of many young adult novels. *Under the Mesquite*, however, complicates this focus by presenting readers with Lupita,

whose mother is fighting cancer and whose father has given up everything to search for a way to regain his wife's health. Eventually, he leaves his children with Lupita to take Mamí to a clinic. Lupita navigates her first year of high school, her friends' ill-conceived concern, and her growing anxiety over her mother's health while writing of her emotions in ways recognizable to adolescents regardless of geography or social context. Living in the border town of Eagle Pass, Texas, Lupita must also attempt to raise her younger siblings—seven in all—with few resources. A poignant story that will appeal to those who read for character development, *Under the Mesquite* gives readers a glimpse into the culture of those who have lived on both sides of the US-Mexico border while also creating a universal experience around issues of family and loss.

Written in free verse, this novel draws upon the rich border culture of the Southwestern United States. Sprinkled with Spanish and containing a glossary for support in the language, this is a great text to be combined in a unit on self-reliance, family loss, and the need to let go even as we want to hang on. This book could be paired with others such as *Make Lemonade* (Virginia Euwer Wolff, 2006), *Between Shades of Gray* (Ruta Sepetys, 2011), *Out of the Dust* (Karen Hesse, 1999), or *Crossing the Tracks* (Barbara Stuber, 2011). The combination of these marvelous novels would make a great unit on resilience while also taking readers to different geographical locations and time periods. All are written with sensitivity and attend to the issue of loss with great care.

Under the Mesquite contains themes about the importance of family, the significance of geography, the richness of language, the value of poetry and writing, and the implications of loss. Perhaps a quiet book, it still resonates with a love for family, friendships, and community.

Author Guadalupe Garcia McCall was born in Mexico and moved to Texas as a young person. She is a poet, and lives in San Antonio, Texas. More about the author and book,

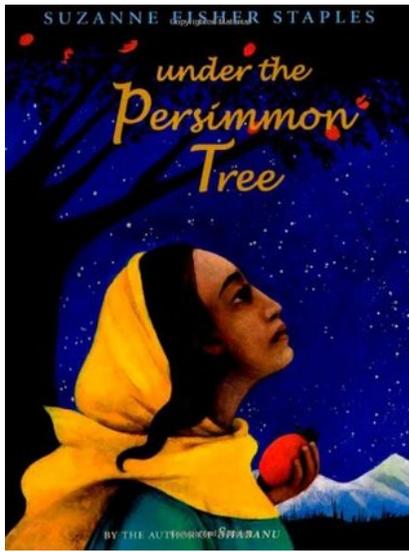
which won the 2012 Pura Belpre Award, can be found on her website: <http://guadalupegarciamccall.com/> . This book was also named a 2012 Notable Book for a Global Society.

Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, OH

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Under the Persimmon Tree

Written by Susan Staples

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, 288 pp.

ISBN: 978-0374380250

Similar to *Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind* (1989), *Under the Persimmon Tree* relies on themes frequently discussed in the representation of Middle-Eastern subjects in realistic fiction books— in this case, Afghani and Pakistani women—such as veiling, cultural traditions, physical and emotional pain, disguise and seclusion. Marketed as an eye-opening novel about war-torn Afghanistan, and following the tradition of veiled Middle-Eastern women displayed on the cover page, the events of

the story are presented from the perspective of two characters: Najmah and Nusrat, aka Elain. Najmah is a young Afghani girl who travels from Afghanistan to Pakistan after Taliban soldiers kill her mother and her younger brother. Nusrat is an American who moved to Peshaver following her Afghani husband who desired to work in an Afghan clinic. She opens a small school for refugee children in post 9-11 Pakistan where her path intersects with Nusrat's. Embedded in their storylines, Staples uses the trope of being disguised as a boy as an *authenticating detail* about the lives of Afghani women and girls. In order to stay safe during her travels, Najmah cuts her hair short and dresses up as a boy. Upon her arrival to Peshavar, Najmah's path intersects with Nusrat's, whose American name Elain was changed after her marriage and the two people share their struggles, losses and hopes.

Through Nusrat's character, Staples introduces several interrelated discourses that become dominant in the narrative. The book reinforces the western savior discourse portraying Nusrat as an American woman who renounces her Western name and family in New York, and commits her life to changing the lives of Afghani children, particularly girls. Her given name, Nusrat, is a direct reflection of this characteristic; Nusrat meaning *Help*. Consequently, her role in the book, as the woman who has agency and is able to help others, sets her apart from the other female characters; for example, Najmah, who becomes a victim in need of help and saving. Through these oppositions, Staples creates binaries between the female characters and their perceptions of life and cultural values. Even though she left her original name behind and chose a new family, through her thoughts and actions she still represents an American presence, repeatedly privileging Western values as opposed to the values respected by Afghani women.

One example is the treatment of the issue of veiling that produces the burqa as an obstacle and the image of the Muslim woman as a victim. Similar to other books written by Western authors about Afghani women, the burqa has a negative value, described by Staples in this third-person narrative: "In the cool autumn weather, Nusrat forgets how suffocating the folds of the burqa's synthetic fabric can be in hot weather, and how

peering through the crocheted latticework eyepiece can feel like looking through the bars of prison” (p. 21). Nusrat later describes a scene in which her sister-in-law is almost arrested by a Taliban soldier for not wearing her burqa properly. Through these descriptions, the author objectifies the experience of wearing a burqa and creates a distance between the experiences of women who read the book and the women the book is written about and further reinforces the Us/Other binary opposition between Western and non-Western subjects.

The Us/Other binary is evident in Nusrat’s relationship with the other women and her own students. Even though Nusrat changed her name when she moved to Pakistan and submitted herself to the country’s dress code, she is described as more open-minded than, for example, her mother-in-law. While Nusrat waits for her husband to return from Mazar-i-Sharif where he works at a hospital, she opens her house for children who have lost their parents and teaches them, among other things, about astronomy and science. The author describes Nusrat as “being after the mind” (p. 76) of the children whom she considered lost without education. Nusrat sees herself as the person who has to turn “their time of greatest need into a time of opportunity” (p. 77). Her students, among which there is an older widow, are portrayed as transformed by Nusrat’s help and guidance and as gaining hope from her, “I didn’t know what would become of Amina and me until I came to the Persimmon Tree School. Now I know what will become of me. I will become a teacher like you” (p. 175). When Nusrat finds out that her husband has most likely died during a bombing, she decides to move back to America. She hopes to take one of her students with her, Najmah, the other main character of the book, to offer her a better life. From Nusrat we learn that women in Afghanistan age quickly from bearing children, and often die before they turn forty-five years old. Nusrat offers Najmah an alternative, moving to America where she can become a lawyer, a doctor, or anything she wants. Although Najmah refuses to leave Afghanistan, the author closes the book with Nusrat’s hope to return some day and build a school in honor of her husband and to help girls and young women like Najmah.

In parallel, however, Staples also uses her American character to critique Westerners’ inability to comprehend the complexity of life and culture in women’s lives in Afghanistan. Nusrat’s character reinforces the Western/non-Western woman binary opposition, but through her actions the author also critiques Western misconceptions about the role of tradition in Muslim women’s lives. When Nusrat encourages her husband’s family to celebrate a meteor shower at her house, Sultan and Jamshed, the male family members, instantly agree while Asma and Fatima, her sister and mother-in-law, refuse to participate because, in the old tradition, the falling of a meteorite is a bad omen. In order to critique Nusrat’s Western perspective and inability to understand the complexity of traditions in Muslim women’s lives, the author points out that she is surprised by the two women’s reaction, because they are “well-educated women” (p. 49). This remark implies that Nusrat only finds value in the principles and beliefs of Western education. When Fatima explains that being educated does not have anything to do with the respect of traditions and that, in spite of their being silly, she still respects the myths she was raised with, Nusrat argues until Asma finally changes the subject. This segment of the story could be interpreted as a critique of Westerners’ inability to comprehend the complexity of culture and tradition in women’s lives across cultures. Nusrat in this sense fulfills a double role: as a person who cares for the fate of the Afghani women, she embraces the role of a savior

and reinforces the Western/non-Western woman binary oppositions. In parallel, however, her inability to identify with their life experiences and her return to America also suggests that her work in the Muslim world could not bring about significant changes.

Suzanne Fisher Staples worked in journalism positions in Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka with United Press International, and in Washington, DC. She also worked in Asia on a literacy project in rural areas where she was “captivated by the stories of the people of the Cholistan Desert on the border between Pakistan and India” (<http://suzannefisherstaples.com/about-suzanne/>). Her books are framed around her love for and knowledge of the countries where she has lived and worked. Staples has won numerous awards for her books.

Other books that discuss similar themes of cultural intersectionalities and aim for more complex character portrayals of Middle-Eastern subjects are: *Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan (2009), *Where the Streets Had a Name* by Randa Abdel Fattah (2008), *Three Cups of Tea, One Man’s Journey to Change the World—One Child at a Time* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin (2009), and the non-fiction *Extraordinary Women from the Muslim World*, by Natalie Maydell, Sep Riahi and Heba Amin (2007).

Kinga Varga-Dobai, Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, GA

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