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WOW REVIEW

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VOLUME II, ISSUE 4

Summer 2010

Conflict in the Middle East and South Asia

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WOW Review: Volume II, Issue 4
Summer 2010
Conflict in the Middle East and South Asia

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Middle Eastern and South Asian Regions in Children's Literature

The Middle East and South Asia are inclusive of countries within the global community that have been in the forefront of current events, media, and literature in recent years. While the focus is often that of politics, conflict and natural disasters, the literature holds potential for greater insight into the people, culture, and events of this area. While conflict is one theme in this issue of *WOW Review*, it is contextualized to nurture greater understanding of the lives that are disrupted by war and the relationships that develop despite the conflicts. *The Boy and the Wall* (Youth at Large Center, 2005) and *Good Night Commander* (Akbarpour, 2010) offer a child's perspective on war through personal experiences. In *A Little Piece of Ground* (Laird, 2006), *Samir and Yonaton* (Carmi, 2000), and *Camel Rider* (Mason, 2007), unlikely relationships develop across cultures. Other themes are evident, however, in the books reviewed, such as the value of education in *Nasreen's Secret School* (Winter, 2009) and *Yasmin's Hammer* (Malaspina, 2010), the significance of storytelling in *Tiger Moon* (Michaelis, 2006) and hopeful new beginnings in *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006) and *Saving the Baghdad Zoo: A True Story of Hope and Heroes* (Halls, 2010). *Broken Moon* (Anteau, 2007) interweaves themes of empowered young women and exploitation. Several reviews indicate problems of authenticity and accuracy, reflecting the difficulties of authentically portraying the heart of a culture as an outsider.

Geographically, many readers are unaware of exactly what countries lie within the shifting boundaries of the Middle East and South Asia. World geography is constantly shifting and reforming. The map of the world has altered many times due to conquest and the break-up of larger regions that formerly belonged under one cohesive unit or country, for example Russia/USSR and India. The map of the Middle East has also been altered and rewritten due mostly to the global politics that lump together cultures and geographical areas that are found to be threatening through war, terrorism, and the Taliban.

Islamophobia seems to be one of the vital factors that have altered how the world views this region, including many previously unrelated countries. Pakistan and Bangladesh are examples of regions that in the past belonged to South Asia rather than the Middle East, but have recently been integrated into some maps as belonging to the Middle Eastern regions due to Islamic religious beliefs. The Islamic world becomes geographically fragmented after the region of Pakistan and countries such as Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Bangladesh are part of that fragmentation. That is not to say that this geographic demarcation reflects and accounts for all countries with Muslim population and stories written about them within those regions.

Another concern is that the Middle East and the Islamic world are often represented as having a culture. Culture is constantly evolving and is dependent on the various customs of regions and so there is variation in the manner in which people practice their belief systems. Keeping these concerns within religious beliefs and geopolitical regions in view, we decided to focus this issue to the regions of the Middle East and South Asia, including India.

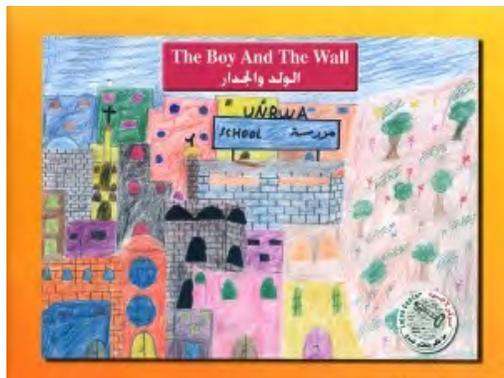
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The Boy and the Wall

Created by Youth at Lajee Centre in Aida Refugee Camp
Lajee Centre, 2005, 24 pp.
(no ISBN)

The writers and illustrators of this English/Arabic bilingual picture book are Palestinian refugee children in the Aida Refugee Camp near the city of Bethlehem in the West Bank. They created a story that focuses on a boy in a refugee camp whose experiences reflect those of many Palestinian refugee

children. The wall that led to this picture book was built in 2004 across the West Bank, home to more than a million Palestinians. This wall separates the refugee camp from the children's old village and the land where their grandparents used to harvest. The Palestinian refugees call it a separation wall.

In the story, a Palestinian boy recalls one spring when a high concrete wall was built next to his home. The construction of the wall brought threatening objects and people such as heavy machinery, guns, gas canisters, loud army jeeps and heavily armed soldiers. The children's playground is buried as the gray construction covers the springtime landscape. The new gigantic wall brings many concerns for the boy –his soccer field, places to pick flowers, his father's safety in commuting to work in Jerusalem, and his turtle's adjustment to a refugee camp. This hard-to-believe reality is conveyed through a poetic tone to the narration. Portraying the boy's experiences and thoughts through conditional statements reflects the boy's longing to go home, which is not physically far away from the camp, yet politically distant.

The narration continues with wishful expressions—"Perhaps I will become an onion patch, so that when the solders throw tear gas, my friends can be soothed by my onions." "If you become an onion patch," said his mother, "I will become the warm, rich soil in which you grow." The wishes of the boy and his mother show their hearts. They wish to be a flying kite, a fig tree to feed refugee people, musical pipes to bring people together, a mountain that can see over the wall, and an adventurous book for children. The collection of illustrations by young artists makes the book powerful and authentic. The story ends with the mother telling her son and perhaps all Palestinian refugee children, "I hope you will become whatever you want to be, but for now I am very glad that you are my little boy. Sit with me under our tree, and I will sing to you of Jerusalem."

The book producer, Lajee Centre, is an independent, Palestinian, non-governmental organization that organizes cultural, social, artistic and athletic activities for refugee youth in the Bethlehem area. More information about Lajee Centre is available at <http://www.lajee.org/>. This link provides newsletters, projects, books, art, and stories about refugee children. *The Boy and the Wall* is available to download at <http://www.lajee.org/english/doc/publications/boy.pdf> and there is more information on the book in relation to the separation wall on the website.

This book could be paired with novels about Palestinian children, such as *A Little Piece of Ground* (Elizabeth Laird, 2006), *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (Anne Carter, 2008), and *A Stone in My Hand* (Cathryn Clinton, 2010). These books portray Palestinian heritage and culture, and the co-

existence of traditions and confusing realities that deny them their homeland. Many of the protagonists in these books share the same longing for their life on the other side of the separation wall.

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Broken Moon

Written by Kim Antieau

McElderry Books, 2007, 192 pp.

ISBN: 9781416917670

Pakistani teen Nadira thinks she has nothing left to protect as her face is scarred and honor “soiled” after a brutal levying of village justice in contemporary Pakistan. A misdeed by one of her older brothers leads to a brutal beating and the loss of her virginity. Interestingly the older brothers are barely mentioned and they do not come to the rescue of the female family members or their youngest brother. Nadira later conceals her gender when slave smugglers take her youngest brother, Umar, and she follows him. Her purpose is to find an illegal camp for “camel kids,” boys trained as jockeys in the dangerous sport of camel racing. She is hopeful of

reuniting with her brother and adapts to her new environment disguised as a boy as she tries to find him. The setting initially includes two tiers of Pakistani society: the very rich and the very poor. Nadira comes to the city to hide and to work in a rich household. It is through this household that she decides to go to another country to find her younger brother. In the middle of the story the setting changes completely to an arid desert scene where Nadira becomes a leader of the other young boys as a male, insinuating that she could never be a leader as a girl.

This story is written in an interesting manner as a first person narrative, a structure that lends the story credibility for the audience. The story is expressed as a diary that the sister writes for her youngest brother referring time and time again to her misfortune and their present predicament as she undertakes the journey to find him. Both Umar and Nadira were given diaries by their deceased father—a red one for the brother with the words “Learn Wisely” and a green one for Nadira which says, “Remember Shahrazad.” It is Nadira who fills out both diaries as the story progresses.

This story feeds several stereotypes which are generated through presumptions and assumptions about the female figure in Muslim third-world countries. The use of the bold red color for a boy and the subdued green color for a girl in the diaries are examples of such assumptions as are the words written within them. Nadira is advised to follow Shahrazad, the mythological queen from the Alif Layla tales, who tricked her husband/king and remained alive through her imagination and stories rather than her wisdom. Umar is advised to “wisely learn,” an assumption that only a boy can undertake both of these actions within patriarchal societies. The Shahrazad metaphor is embedded within the story; wherever Nadira goes and in whatever situation she finds herself, the stories she weaves are her savior. As she closes the first entry in the diary, she says, “I dream of the two of us on the magic carpet, will you? We are flying far far from here” (p. 6). Somehow Muslims never seem to throw off the Aladdin/magic carpet image. Another problem is a reference to the King as holder of a recipe for “masala chai,” a tea that heals all ills. The story of the King is presented as if it is recent and ‘masala chai’ as a contemporary drink in Pakistan. Black tea/chai is a common drink in contemporary Pakistan, but not masala chai.

Nadira and her family are referred to as ‘small people’ who live in a ‘tiny house,’ with Nadira having ‘tiny hands’ so that the smallest bangle fits her hands rather than the large hands of the rich. Nadira works for a rich household but receives no pleasurable objects like bangles, only hand-me-down clothes. The author refers to Nadira’s mother as wearing silk saris in the village and when Nadira is provided with the opportunity to choose from hand-me-downs she picks up saris for her mother. A sari is a dress worn mainly in India or rich Pakistani households for formal occasions, so it would be culturally inaccurate to portray saris as regular dress for Pakistani villagers.

Ninety-seven per cent of Pakistanis are Muslims and religion has a presence in the everyday lives of the people, but there is no mention of the practice of the religion within this story. The internal voice of Nadira in the front matter of the book articulates the third world woman’s emotional and physical dependence on male family members and their oppression at men’s hands: “I will never have a husband, but I have the best brother in the world, your breath on my cheek—on my scar—felt like the breath of Allah.” This quote exemplifies an often misunderstood concept by western audiences of Pakistani/Muslim culture. By saying that it felt like “breath of Allah” the author is giving a physical persona to Allah/God which is against Muslim beliefs. Another misconception is found on page 52 where there is a reference to the shooting star. Nadira’s father explains this phenomenon as lost children who fall to the earth. Within Islam and Pakistani culture, a shooting star is viewed as a stone cast by angels to scare away the devil when it gets too close to paradise. When Muslims see a shooting star, they are supposed to say, ‘There is no power greater than that of Allah/God.’

The heroine’s name of ‘Nadira’ derives from Nadir meaning the lowest point, while Nadera is a common name for Muslims and means ‘rare’ or ‘dear.’ The crescent as a symbol is used throughout the book, especially to signify the scar left on Nadira’s face. The crescent is a symbol of Islam and is accepted as a new beginning or a rebirth. Also it faces the right side rather than the one in the book that is almost a horseshoe shape, facing down. To take a religiously revered symbol and project it in such a manner reflects a lack of research.

Nadira does get a marriage proposal at the end of the story from a young man who works as a gardener in the same rich household and has a limp. He is portrayed as having lived most of his life in England with a rich aunt. After breaking his leg in an accidental fall from a horse, the aunt loses interest in him. The author seems to be inferring that it was his life in England that brought on the proposal as no illiterate, backward Pakistani Muslim would accept her.

The story projects Nadira as “spoiled goods,” reflecting a view of women as having an object-like nature in the society: a thing rather than a living breathing person. The plot device of a third world Muslim female figure changing gender to become male in order to take action in a Muslim society is a common trend in other books, such as the Breadwinner Trilogy by Deborah Ellis. The cover of this book has Nadira as a veiled young girl who is not looking directly at the audience. The image of a veiled woman observing ‘purdah’ is read by most Westerners as synonymous with oppression and the rape of innocents. Some of the generalizations that are often taken as facts about third world Muslim females are that she has ‘needs’ and ‘problems,’ but not ‘choice.’ As soon as Nadira ‘chooses’ to undertake the journey to save her brother and later declines the marriage

proposal, she becomes a living, breathing, heroine, portrayed as unlike the norm within the Pakistani society for Western audiences. It is through the Western standards of feminine identity/agency and societal/patriarchal oppression that each of the characters within many books portraying Muslims is weighed.

The author is an American who lives in the Pacific Northwest. She has never visited Pakistan. There is a marked absence of an endnote or author notes that would have provided a better understanding of the basis from which the author created this story. This type of story about sexual oppression and slavery is common in books set in the Middle East and Pakistan. If Amazon.com is explored with key words like ‘oppression of women,’ ‘slavery’ and ‘Muslim women,’ many titles pop up, mostly written by western women, some claiming to be insiders to the Muslim cultures they are writing about. The author does articulate her gratitude at the beginning of the book saying, “Thanks to Asma Yasmine Shafi for answering my questions about a girl’s life in Pakistan.” She does not provide further details about the content of the conversation, as if merely placing this at the beginning of the novel explains that all within the tale is true.

Buying and selling humans and sexual violence are an integral, albeit, subliminal, part of this story. For example, Nadira observes that, “the “older boys attacked the smaller boys the way those men in the village attacked me.” The author takes these issues and places them front and center without concrete evidence and research. Pakistan, being a Muslim country, does not allow “village justice” or the gang rape of a young innocent girl for any reason. The author’s efforts to adapt the plot to adhere to the broadest audience as to the age range results in vague, puzzling language about the incidents. Sympathy for its imaginative, empowered heroine and connections to real-world exploitation may leave teens within the U.S. outraged.

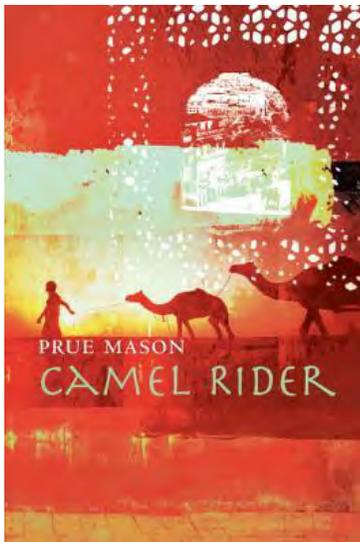
The same thematic thread of poverty is found in *Beneath My Mother’s Feet* (2007) by Amjad Qamar. Patricia McCormick depicts buying and selling of humans in *Sold* (2006), while the Shabanu Trilogy (*Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, *Havlei*, and *The House of Djinn*) by Suzanne Fisher Staples, and Deborah Ellis’s Breadwinner Trilogy (*The Breadwinner*, *Parvana’s Journey*, and *Mud City*) take up the issues of female oppression in present day Islamic patriarchal societies.

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Camel Rider

Written by Prue Mason
Charlesbridge Publishing, 2007, 172 pp.
ISBN: 9781580893145

Adam and his family are from Australia and live in a compound with other foreigners who work in a present day fictional city of Abudai in the Middle East. He has an Indian servant 'Chandra' whom his sister mimics. When there is an attack and war breaks out, all expatriates try to escape; Adam, whose family is away from the compound, runs away from other families in an effort to find his lost dog. Alone and without resources in the desert, Adam meets Walid, an abused camel boy from Bangladesh, who has been bound and left to die by his cruel masters.

Adam ends up saving him by cutting the ropes that bind him. In trying to find their way back to Abudai, they come across Walid's ruthless masters and corrupt Bedouins who negotiate a deal and try to return Adam to his parents for the 10,000 dollars that has been promised as reward money.

The book is a first person narrative from the viewpoints of both male characters, with the chapters alternating between the perspectives of Adam and Walid. The font and the dialogues are modified drastically as the chapters move from one character to another. The first chapter is Adam's and the reader is exposed to standard English with no confusions in the grammatical structures of the dialogues, not reflecting an Australian accent or any alteration in the diction. Walid's perspective in the second chapter provides a completely different vision from that of the organized Middle Eastern world that Adam lives in. The setting and the dialogues alter completely and are strange, ungrammatical and confusing to an English speaking audience. After the characters meet in chapter 8, most of the dialogues are from Adam's perspective with only a few garbled ones from Walid. By using this strategy the author seems to be trying to reflect dialogues spoken in another language. But any language must be grammatically sound within the structure of that language or dialect so the question arises—Why project Walid's language in a ludicrous manner? Further, the content of the dialogue from Adam's perspective projects a self-assured young man who is intelligent in comparison to Walid, who comes through as crazy and animal-like when he says "I sniff the morning air" (p.17) and Adam thinks, "He looks like a toothless monkey" (72).

The book's title is confusing as this is more of Adam's tale than the 'camel rider' Walid. Walid is described as a dirty monkey-like person who is small and ends up ruthlessly killing a goat and trying to take Adam's money. He also rides a camel well and 'spits like a champion.' Adam, on the other hand, gives Walid money and his Swiss knife, loves animals and hates it when Walid kills the goat. He comes through as decent, level headed and courageous.

Arabic words are used incorrectly by the author who claims she has lived in Dubai. Most commonly she confuses Islamic terminology in Allah Akbar 'God Great' with "God Is Great" Allah ho Akbar. Salaam alayku is presented as Alaykum as-salaam which is the response to the previous "peace be upon you." Walid is a respected name for Muslim males even though the book says that

it is not a name at all. Dish dash is a “Thawb/garment” and is called a dishdasha within some regions. Babu is “mister” in Urdu, not “father” in Arabic.

Even though the author may have had good intentions in writing a story that speaks about the universality of friendship conquering difference, the manner in which she has written this book is questionable as the portrayal of both the characters and their cultural differences is too far removed from each other. The Eastern characters are projected as invariable needy and Western characters as upright and as saviors. The author is Australian and has visited the Middle East many times. She writes for The School Magazine in Australia and is an editor there. She has also written in a children’s magazine in Dubai U.A.E.

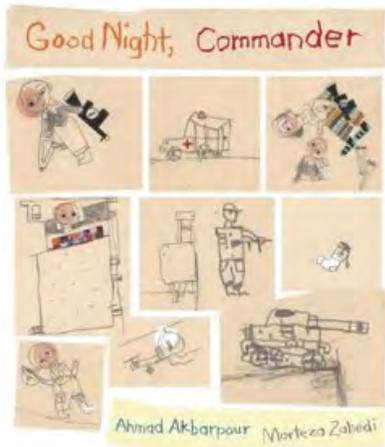
The same thematic threads can be found in *Samir and Yonatan* by Daniella Carmi (2002) where a Muslim and a Jewish boy learn to get along with each other, overcoming societal distrust, and in Elizabeth Laird’s *A Little Piece of Ground* (2006) where several Muslim boys band together with a Christian boy to create a place to play soccer within war torn Palestine. There are numerous picture books on the Middle East, for example, *Sami and the Time of Trouble* (1995) and *The Day of Ahmad’s Secret* (1995), by Florence Heidi, Judith Gilliland and Ted Lewin, that project the concerns of illiteracy and war in present day Middle East. Betsy Lewin’s *What’s the Matter Habibi?* (2004) and Jonathan London and Ted Lewin’s *Ali, Child of the Desert* (1997) are problematic in depicting contemporary Middle Eastern countries as frozen in the past.

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Good Night, Commander

Written by Ahmad Akbarpour

Translated by Shadi Eskandani and Helen Mixte

Illustrated by Morteza Zahedi

Groundwood, 2010

ISBN: 9780888999894

A young boy is playing war in his room, conveying his plan to avenge his mother's death by fighting the imaginary enemy. He is brave in his commands to his imaginary army and confronts the enemy with bold words—until he meets a soldier with one leg, just as he has. Confronted by a picture of his mother who occasionally speaks to him, the book

makes it clear that this young victim of war has not lost compassion for others. He shows his own wooden leg to the enemy soldier on crutches and even lets the enemy try on the leg as he imagines that the soldier has also lost his mother. This child's perspective is a powerful reminder of the price that children pay as a result of war and the hope for peace from a child's perspective.

First published in Farsi as *Shab be khayr farmandeh* in 2005 by UNICEF Iran/Children's Book Council of Iran, *Good Night Commander* is illustrated with simple drawings that could well be those of a child. Looking down upon the room in which the boy plays, the reader sees soldiers, guns, tanks, an ambulance, and crutches among the sketches of furniture, light bulbs and a furnace. The flat pencil drawings are shades of tan with occasional accents of red. As the story takes place, the illustrations help create a context that well could have been reality during the war between Iran and Iraq, 1980 – 1988, or during any war. With a brief introduction to this war and the two countries involved, the reader shares one evening in this home where a child is making sense of his life without his mother and his leg, and with a changing family structure due to a new stepmother.

The high regard for *Good Night, Commander* is obvious in its selection by the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities list. Its author, Ahmad Akbarpour, has won the National Book Award in his country, Iran, and his book *The Emperor of Words* (1381 Iranian Calendar) was on the IBBY 2006 Honor List. The illustrator is the recipient of the Noma Concours Encouragement Prize in 2006 and an Honor Diploma award at the Bologna Illustrators' Exhibition in 2009 as well as numerous other awards for his more than twenty books.

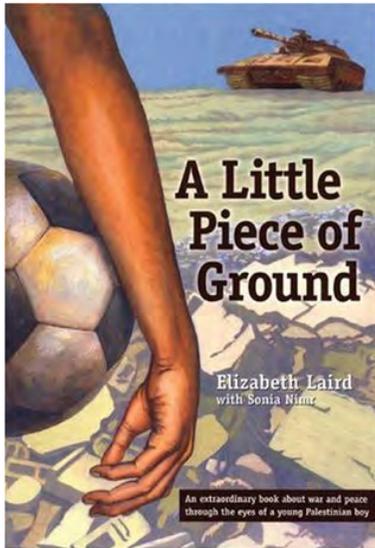
The thought-provoking theme of the price that children pay in times of war can be extended through other picture books, such as *Silent Music* (James Rumford, 2008), *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Mary Williams, 2005), *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Karen Williams, 2007), *The Cat with the Yellow Star; Coming of Age in Terezin* (Susan Rubin & Ella Weissberger, 2008), and *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (Hana Volavkova, 1994). This book can also be discussed with chapter books such as *Under the Persimmon Tree* (Suzanne Fisher Staples, 2005);

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A Little Piece of Ground

Written by Elizabeth Laird with Sonia Nimr

Illustrated by Bill Neal

Haymarket Books, 2006, 216 pp.

ISBN: 9781931859387

The image on the book cover—a soccer ball held in someone’s arm—gives the impression of a common children’s book with a sport theme. Looking at the book more closely, unexpected details become evident, such as a military tank aimed arm holding the ball. Furthermore, broken pieces of concrete and bolts create a mountain under the soccer ball. The clues indicate that the child holding the soccer ball on the book cover is living in the middle of a war or invasion. The book title, *A Little Piece of Ground*, reflects the Palestinian hope for its own piece of ground.

This story is about three boys and their families during the Israeli occupation of Ramallah on the West Bank of Palestine. The Israeli military subjects the West Bank town to a siege in responding to a Palestinian suicide bombing. Karim is a 12-year-old soccer-loving boy who is proud of his Palestinian heritage. Karim’s best friend Joni attends a private Christian school, but their families are close to each other. Hopper is a new friend who has a very different background from Karim and Joni. Hopper had lived in a refugee camp and his father was killed while he was in Kuwait for work. Hopper’s older brother, Salim, is in Jerusalem prison accused unfairly. In the beginning, Karim is drawn to Hopper by his suspicious yet heroic persona, but most of all, playing soccer together draws them closer to each other. Later Karim introduces Hopper to Joni. Despite Karim’s awkward concerns about the discord between Hopper and Joni, they become good friends. Although the curfew controls under occupation are discouraging and hard, Karim and his friends have a delightful time playing soccer.

One day the three boys find paint cans and make a Palestinian flag by painting rocks. They lay their rocky flag on the new soccer field that they created on an unused patch of ground, naming it ‘Hopper’s ground.’ However, the Israeli military demolishes Hopper’s ground. Hopper and Karim are found outside during curfew and are shot by Israeli soldiers. When Karim, suffering from a gunshot wound, is about to die, his big brother Jamal appears and takes him to a hospital. Karim’s survival spreads throughout the town and enhances Karim’s Palestinian pride. He comes home safely and reunites with his friends. Hopper’s brother, Salim, is also released from the Jerusalem prison. Karim’s two friends have different socio-economic status and religious and cultural backgrounds, yet their friendship offers universal connections to readers. The value of truthfulness is portrayed through three boys whose families share the common concern of safety.

The author, Elizabeth Laird, says that she is a life-long adventurer. She was born in New Zealand in 1943 and grew up in South London. Laird has global teaching, traveling, and living experiences around the world — Malaysia, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Palestine. Although Laird’s first visit to Israel was in 1968, she learned about the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees while she lived in Beirut, Lebanon during the civil war there. Laird is the author of *Kiss the Dust* (1991) and *Lost Riders* (2008). She lived in Iraq and her experiences with Kurds in Kurdistan and London gave birth to *Kiss the Dust*. *Lost Rider* is written about her experiences with young

Pakistani camel jockeys while living in Rahimyar Khan, Pakistan. Her website <http://www.elizabethlaird.co.uk/index.html> provides her blog and interviews in which she talks about her life and the experiences behind her books. Her website enhances reading her books because each book has a unique story from the author.

In 2002, Laird visited occupied Gaza and Ramallah. She had a chance to learn about Palestinian's living environments and situations while she led workshops for Palestinian writers. On her website, Laird reflects on her experiences in Palestine, "I was appalled by the circumstances in which people were living, and became aware that we in the west know very little of what life is like for Palestinians living under military occupation." Laird's effort to maintain sensitivity for cultural authenticity and accuracy in *A Little Piece of Ground* is reflected through her co-authorship with Sonia Nimr. Nimr is a Palestinian archaeologist, storyteller, writer and translator who lives in Ramallah. Laird's work is a good example of quality work by a cultural "outsider." She is not a Palestinian, yet her researcher perspective reflects her thoughtfulness as a writer. Laird lived with a Palestinian family to research the area. In her interview with National Public Radio (NPR), she says, "The task of the novelist is to be truthful to the story. What I tried to do in my book is to be as true as possible to what is like to be a Palestinian child today" (NPR, 2003).

This 216 page long novel includes occasional illustrations that are realistic and powerful in portraying experiences in Ramallah and provoking emotional reactions. They also reflect a criticism of the book—that it portrays a one-sided point of view and is "propaganda" (NPR, 2003). Laird responded to this criticism, "I think this is an interesting criticism. I wrote a book called *Kissed the Dust*. And it is about a Kurdish family who escaped from Iraqi Kurdistan and interned in Iranian refugee camp under very harsh conditions. They haven't ever said to me that I should have showed the point of view of the Iranian's guards in the camp... But there is no point in making a sentimental attempt to show half-truth when whole truth is there in front of me." The interviews of Laird and critiques of *A Little Piece of Ground* are provided at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1450994>.

This book could be paired with Laird's other books in which she explores cultures through children's voices in Iraq, Ethiopia, and Pakistan—*Kiss the Dust* (Puffin, 1994), *Lost Riders* (Macmillan, 2010), and *The Garbage King* (Macmillan, 2004). *The Garbage King* is about homeless children in Ethiopia. Laird interviewed the Ethiopian street children in Addis Abada for this book.

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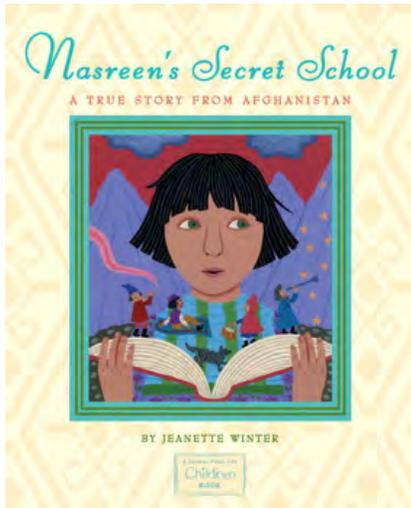
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Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan

Written/Illustrated by Jeanette Winter

Beach Lane Books, 2009

ISBN: 978-1416994374

Nasreen lives with her parents and grandmother in Herat, Afghanistan. Unable to attend school because of Taliban rule, she spends her days alone at home. When soldiers take her father away, Nasreen's mother decides to go search for him, even though women aren't allowed on the streets. With both of her parents gone, Nasreen doesn't speak or smile. Aware of a secret school for girls, her grandmother decides to enroll Nasreen. Day after day, she sneaks Nasreen through the streets to the school but Nasreen still

does not speak or smile. When the school reopens after the long winter recess, a classmate whispers, "I missed you," and Nasreen speaks her first words when she whispers back, "I missed you too." The bond of friendship frees Nasreen to open her heart and share about her life. Gradually, Nasreen begins to smile and learns to read and write, which opens up learning for her. The story ends on a note of hope as Nasreen's grandmother comments, "the soldiers can never close the windows that have opened for my granddaughter."

Narrated by Nasreen's grandmother, this story is about courage and resilience in the face of fear and loss as Nasreen tries to make sense of her world. The book opens with an Author's Note that provides background on life in Afghanistan before the Taliban's rule and the dangers that still exist since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. It also highlights the courage of girls, families, and teachers who continue to work to keep the schools open.

Winter's illustrations are framed with wide white margins on the page, offering readers a window into Nasreen's world. The illustrations are composed of simple shapes that pick up colors of the Afghan region but reveal complex meanings that support and enhance the written text. Darker skies early in the story reflect Nasreen's sadness and fear and turn bright towards the end to represent the hope and joy she experiences through learning. While the written text never mentions what happened to Nasreen's parents, their probable fate is evident in a later painting.

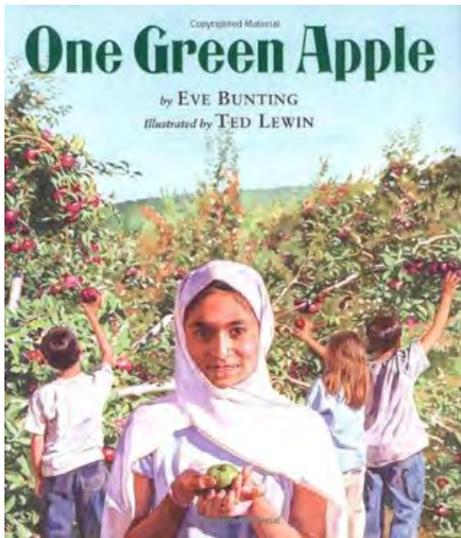
Born in Chicago to parents who emigrated from Sweden, Jeanette Winter has researched, written, and illustrated several other biographies that bring her subjects to life rather than merely reporting details. These include *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (2005), *My Name is Georgia* (2003), and *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* (2008). In a text set on schooling and learning, *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* would work well with *Listen to the Wind: The Story of Dr. Greg & Three Cups of Tea* (Greg Mortenson & Susan Roth, 2009), *Josias, Hold the Book* (Jennifer Elvgren, 2006), and *Armando and the Blue Tarp School* (Edith Fine & Judith Josephson, 2007). *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* would also pair well with *Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan* (Tony O'Brien & Michael Sullivan, 2008) which beautifully captures the faces and voices of children living in today's Afghanistan.

Prisca Martens, Towson University, Towson, MD

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One Green Apple

Written by Eve Bunting

Illustrated by Ted Lewin

Clarion, 2006

ISBN: 9780618434770

Eve Bunting has written numerous children's books, and her work has been recognized through several awards. Some of her books tell stories about immigrants in the United States, such as *So Far from the Sea* (1998), *A Day's Work* (1994), and *Smoky Night* (1994), a 1995 Caldecott medal winner. *One Green Apple*, a 2006 Arab American National Museum Book Award winner, also tells a story about an immigrant girl, Farah, although Bunting does not specify what country Farah comes from. Bunting herself is an immigrant,

born in Ireland in 1928 and immigrated to the United States in 1958.

One Green Apple begins with Farah's riding on a hay wagon to the apple farm on her second day of the school. Farah feels different from the other children in the wagon even though she wears jeans and a T-shirt. Farah does not speak English and wears the dupatta, a headscarf and so feels that she does not belong to the group. At the apple farm, children are asked to pick one apple to make apple cider. When Farah put a green apple into the cider machine instead of a ripe red apple, some children worry that her green apple will ruin the taste of the cider. However, they discover that the green apple blends in and makes delicious apple cider. Farah also senses that, like her green apple, she will blend with other children in her new country.

The metaphor of the apples blending to make cider can be seen as signaling hope for Farah's adjustment in a new country or as supporting the idea that immigrants need to give up their own culture and blend into American mainstream culture. This interpretation is problematic, but can be used to provoke a discussion of the issues related to a cultural melting pot perspective on immigration. Teachers can talk about understanding and appreciating all cultures.

Bunting does not provide much information about Farah and her country. Readers can only guess that Farah might be from a Muslim country since she wears a dupatta. However, this book does not intend to teach about a Muslim country or culture. Through Farah's narration, Bunting invites readers to listen to Farah's inner voice and feel how difficult it is to be different from others.

Talking about immigrants in a society may be a difficult topic for children to understand and discuss. *One Green Apple* may assist children in putting themselves in immigrant children's shoes and discussing how they feel and think about those children. However, the discussion does not need to be limited to talk about immigrants, but may be extended to discuss being different from the majority. If teachers plan a unit for Muslim families in the United States, *Coming to America: A Muslim Family's Story* (Bernard Wolf, 2003) may be paired with *One Green Apple*.

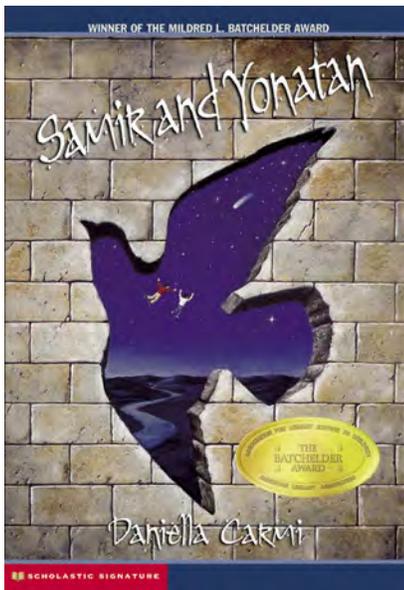
Along with Bunting's soft yet powerful story, Lewin's illustrations capture Farah's silence, thoughts, and emotions. Lewin's exceptional art work appear to be still pictures. Besides Farah's subtle facial expressions, Lewin depicts the other characters' facial expressions as well through double spread illustrations and close-ups. His realistic illustrations help readers easily imagine what the characters are thinking. Farah's small but happy smile at the end of the book leaves hope, cheer, and warmth in readers' hearts for Farah. Both Eve Bunting and Ted Lewin are strong candidates for an author or illustrator study for children to explore. More information about Ted Lewin can be found at www.tedlewin.com.

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Samir and Yonatan

Written by Daniella Carmi

Translated by Yael Lotan

Scholastic, 2000, 160 pp

ISBN: 9780439135047

Samir, a young boy from the occupied West Bank of Palestine, still mourns the death of his younger brother, Fadi. He has crushed his knee in a bicycle injury and is forced to remain in an Israeli hospital for knee surgery. He finds himself in a hospital room with six Israeli children towards whom he feels bitterness since he holds resentment to their people for his brother's death. His father has shrunk into a cone of silence and his mother must work two jobs to support the family and so Samir suffers alone in the Israeli hospital awaiting surgery from an American surgeon.

This book, written for readers ages 10 and up, is an excellent resource for discussing bitterness and conflicts regarding race and culture. Originally written in Hebrew in 1994 by Daniella Carmi, *Samir and Yonatan* was later translated by Yael Lotan into English. It was written for children from the Middle East, but children of all ethnicities can relate to the agony of being scared and alone among those they believe to be their enemies. This is a slow paced novel, but this slow pace gives the reader time to absorb and relate to the boy's range of feelings. The story is a narrative told in first person by Samir. His thoughts take the story back and forth from the past to the present, remembering the curfews in his home town where he left behind a friend, Adnan.

Scared and alone at this first time away from his home, he waits not knowing what will happen next while he tries to understand the other six Jewish children in his hospital room. His anxious wait is extended due to his fever and then to the sealing off of various territories. During his time with the other children, Samir begins to see the heart of each child and learns acceptance, compassion, and, most of all, forgiveness. Ludmilla, one of the other patients, refuses to eat. Samir attempts to help her by saying his secret magic words under his covers. Razia, the other girl, is fearful of her father, but when she is protected by her new friends, he visits and the two re-unite. Yonatan's fascination and knowledge of the stars intrigue Samir. Yonatan helps Samir find escape through a computer game as they travel through space to a place of peace and forgiveness.

Daniella Carmi is a native of Tel Aviv and studied Hebrew and philosophy at the University of Jerusalem. *Samir and Yonatan* was awarded an Honorable Mention from UNESCO for Children's and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance (1997), the Berlin Prize for Best Children's Book in Translation (1997), the Silver Quill Award (Germany, 1997), the Batchelder Award for Best Translated Book by the American Library Association (2001), and the Italian WIZO Prize (2003).

Carmi has written several other books for children and young adults, including *The Explosion on Ahalan Street* (1985), *Porcupines in Efrata Street* (1988), *Samir and Jonathan on Mars* (1994), *To Be the Daughter of a Gypsy* (1996), *Bianca the Ghost* (2001), *A Lady Hippopotamus on the Roof* (2001), *A Journey on a Scooter* (2003), and *Me and the Whale* (2008).

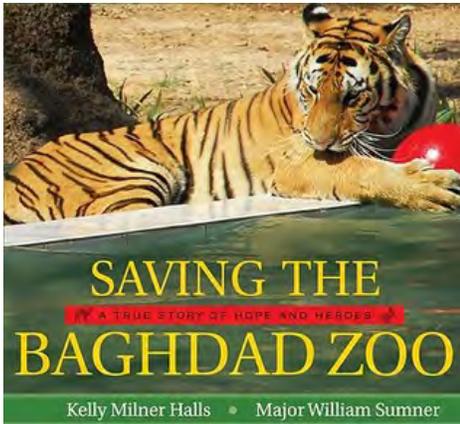
Texts that would be excellent companions with the theme of tolerance include: *A Little Piece of Ground* (2006) and *Kiss the Dust* (1994) both by Elizabeth Laird; *Habibi* (1999) by Naomi Shihab Nye, and *A Stone in My Hand* (2010) by Cathryn Clinton.

Ragina Shearer, University of North Texas and Calhoun Middle School, Denton, TX

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Saving the Baghdad Zoo: A True Story of Hope and Heroes
Written by Kelly Milner Halls with Major William Sumner
HarperCollins, 2010, 64 pp.
ISBN: 9780061772023

“Things were blowing up all around us. We were fighting a war. But in this one place, at the zoo, we could fix something. We could do something good for the people we were trying to help. Right there in the middle of a war was this beautiful green park with grass and trees and lakes. It was an oasis in a shattered, concrete world” (p. 61).

People are not the only victims of war. Major Sumner served in the US Army 354th Civil Affairs Brigade and went to Baghdad in April 2003 with the stated mission of helping to restore cultural heritage. Asked to look at a small zoo, he discovered it was one of the largest in the Middle East and, along with three palace zoos and other animal collections, contained valuable animals with no food and water. Amidst fighting and looting, people from many countries worked in a cooperative way to save the animals and eventually restore the zoo. Through photographs and well created non-fiction text, the story of the challenges faced by these determined individuals with a love for animals will touch the hearts of all. The soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division initially took responsibility to care for the animals—those not stolen for black market sale or used for food since most animals had escaped military fire. With help from the Iraqi zoo staff, who also were given care and support for their families, other organizations eventually entered the scene, providing support through food, medical supplies, and other professional assistance. Because of the efforts of many, the Baghdad Zoo now stands as a cultural oasis of hope amidst conflict.

Divided into chapters according to some of the most interesting rescue stories, readers meet Lumpy, the camel who was transported during sniper fire; Saedia and Samir, bears with distinctive medical needs; Brutus, a new lion father; Mandor, a respected Bengal tiger who was joined later by companions from the U.S.; horses, the unique symbol of the Arabic culture; and other smaller animals such as pelicans and dogs. Each animal offers lessons in animal care, special needs, characteristics and personality, potential danger when not cared for properly, and significance to the Iraqi culture. Adding to the authenticity of the events as told by participants in the efforts to save the zoo are side bars with facts about the various animals and their lifestyles, information about the region itself, and a brief explanation of the war. Learning about the animals that are valued by Iraq teaches much about culture and portrays the joy that the zoo and animals bring to the people, creating a connection with people in other countries. The stories are filled with emotional events for the soldiers and specialists in animal care. As readers share these stories relayed by participants to the author, including a letter from Major Sumner to readers, they experience greater insight into the effects of war for a community as well as greater appreciation for the work to sustain a zoo in any country.

Of importance also is the focus on the collaboration between American military and Iraqi people as Major Sumner emphasizes the need to give the Iraqis the lead role and ownership in their zoo whenever possible, relating the cultural efforts to support and not control by the soldiers. As the reader comes to know the key players in saving the zoo, they will be interested in an end page that

describes where each person is now and, in some cases, gives a website to follow up on his/her work. “The future is uncertain in many Iraqi communities. Battles are begin fought. But inside the giant gates of the Baghdad Zoo, hope endures” (p. 58).

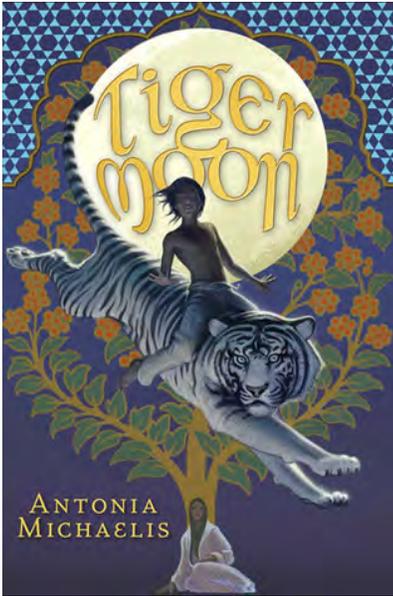
The rescue of animals in other countries in situations that call for a global response is often a way that children can realize similarities in their lives and those of people in other countries who care about animals. Other titles with this focus include *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* (Isabella and Craig Hatkoff and Dr. Paula Kahumbu, 2006). This title, along with the two other books about Owen & Mzee, describe an animal rescue following the Tsunami in December 2004. *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine & a Miracle* (Brian Dennis, 2009) relates yet another tale of animal rescue during the recent Mid-eastern conflict. *Knut, How One Little Polar Bear Captivated the World* (Craig, Julianna, Isabella Hatkof and Dr. Gerald Uhlich, 2007) tells how the Berlin zoo cared for a baby polar bear.

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

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Tiger Moon

Written by Antonia Michaelis

Translated by Anthea Bell

Amulet, 2006/2008, 448 pp.

ISBN: 9780810944992

“Be quiet, be quiet, be quiet. You don’t understand at all. It doesn’t matter what’s true and what’s a fairy tale. That’s not what matters. The dividing lines aren’t as straight and simple as you think” (p. 299).

Told as a story within a story, *Tiger Moon* is a fairy tale about the power of naming and the potential of story to create reality. In both stories, the characters—human and divine—change their names and

disguises as they journey through this incarnation and tell and retell stories that bring hope and ultimately freedom. When the main story opens, the stunningly beautiful Safia, whose name means “virtue,” has been sold and is to be wed to a rich merchant with seven other wives. On the night they consummate their marriage, Ahmed Mudhi will discover Safia is not a virgin; he will then have the right to kill her.

Safia calls herself Raka, which means “full moon.” While awaiting a certain death, Safia/Raka meets a supposed-eunuch servant named Lalit. In the tradition of the Persian storyteller Scheherazade, Safia/Raka nightly spins a fairy tale for Lalit about how a 16-year-old boy becomes a hero in order to rescue a princess from a forced marriage, a marriage that is scheduled to take place on the next full moon. According to Safia/Raka’s story, Krishna has drafted Farhad, a common thief, to rescue his daughter from the demon king. To accomplish this, Farhad joins forces with Nitish, a sacred white tiger whose name means “Lord of the Right Way,” and steals a precious jewel, the bloodstone, that Farhad will ultimately use to bargain for Krishna’s daughter.

Along the way, Farhad is pursued by a scoundrel who is out for the bloodstone and changes his nationality and name at each of their meetings. As he grows from a careless criminal to a hero on a mission of love, Farhad, too, changes his name to reflect each of the incarnations of Vishnu, one of the five primary forms of God in the Hindu tradition. In *Tiger Moon*, naming does matter; names bring with them powers and limitations. Like these characters, readers may come to believe that by changing how we name ourselves and others, we can change the course of our lives.

With memorable, poetic prose, Michaelis seamlessly weaves the two stories and brings them together for a satisfying, fairy tale ending. Hindu religion and culture are stitched into this adventure love story with well-drawn characters. Throughout the book, characters speak wisely about the power of stories to sustain people. As one character says, “Our fields are thirsty for rain, but our hearts are thirsty for stories. Come, sit by the fire and tell us yours” (p. 174).

Tiger Moon, originally written in German, was first published in Germany, and translated into

English by Anthea Bell. Author Antonia Michaelis lived in southern India for one year during which time she taught English, arts, and acting. Readers who are unfamiliar with the Sanskrit epics may benefit from building their background knowledge in order to reach a deeper understanding of the relationships between the humans and the deities in this book. *Tiger Moon* earned a 2009 Batchelder Honor Award.

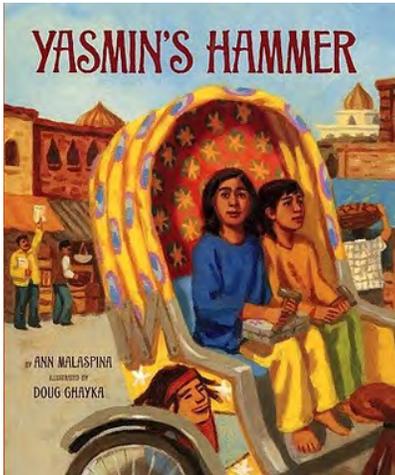
This young adult novel can be paired with others framed by traditional literature and enriched by the story within a story motif. In *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (2009), author and illustrator Grace Lin tells the story of a young girl who joins up with a flightless dragon on her quest to change her family's fortune. Lin propels Minli's journey forward by weaving in stories with Chinese folk and fairy tale motifs. In *Here Lies Arthur* (2008), Philip Reeve retells the Arthurian legends by changing the characters' names and adding subplots that illuminate some of the mysteries in the legend of King Arthur. Reeve tells this story from the perspective of Myrddin's (Merlin's) slave girl/boy, Gwyna/Gwyn, who learns to tell all of Myrddin's stories and in the end, creates stories of her own. All three authors, Michaelis, Lin, and Reeve, succeed in reframing traditional myths, tales, and legends into fresh stories that capture readers' imaginations while they connect them with cultural and literary traditions.

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Yasmin's Hammer

Written by Ann Malaspina

Illustrated by Doug Chayka

Lee & Low, 2010

ISBN: 978-1600603594

Yasmin, along with her little sister Mita, hammer away chipping bricks in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. These chips of bricks are used to build the rickshaw roads and buildings of Dhaka. The two young girls must help their family by chipping bricks each day. With the money the girls make, the family is able to fill the rice bag and repair the roof. Hopefully, one day soon their father will even have

enough money to buy his own rickshaw and the girls will be able to go to school.

Yasmin's family did not always live like this. She can remember the time not long ago when they lived outside of the noisy city in a peaceful little village. In their village home Abba farmed rice fields and Amma wove baskets to sell as she watched over Mita. Yasmin helped Abba in the rice fields, and often she would ride the family's mohish (cow) into the river as she laughed and played. But today, after riding through the streets of Dhaka with their father the girls settle in for another day of chipping bricks. The sisters raise their hammers though their shoulders ache and swing away at brick after brick. The red dust flies and chokes them. Yasmin watches over her little sister as she swings her aching shoulder and dreams of the day she can do anything she wants to do once she has learned to read.

Ann Malaspina wrote this heart wrenching, yet inspiring book after sorting through news reports and information from organizations working against child labor to help young Bangladeshi children. Inspired by visits to South Asia when writing a book about Mahatma Gandhi, her extensive research includes UNICEF relief efforts to remove children from these brick yards and place them in schools. While writing this book she consulted with several Bangladeshis who read her manuscript to check for authenticity and enhanced the story with detailed suggestions. These Bangladeshis live either presently or formerly in Bangladesh and hold various professional occupations such as a professor at a Dhaka university and leaders of programs for women and the poor in Bangladesh.

The illustrations in this book were researched through travel books and travel photos. Doug Chayka, in an interview, stated that in his extensive photo research, "I was inspired by the diverse textures and colors seen in Dhaka, and I also wanted to capture the bustle and density of city life there" (<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/yasmin.mhtml>). The oil-on-canvas paintings reflect the imagery of the setting in this story.

Malaspina has written several other fiction and non-fiction books of international interest. Her research has provided information for books, such as *Tsunamis* (2010), *Lebanon* (2009), *The Ethnic and Group Identity movements: Earning Recognition* (2008), *Critical Perspectives on Globalization* (2006), *Chopin's World* (2008), and *The Chinese Revolution and Mao Zedong in*

World History (2004). This variety of informative writings provides the groundwork for the perspectives she shares in Yasmin's Hammer.

Other books with a similar theme of resilient children include: Natalie Savage Carlson's *Family Under the Bridge* (1989) about a destitute Parisian man who lives under a bridge and homeless children who become a family; Pam Munoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* (2002) about a young, wealthy Mexican girl who makes her way to the United States and a new life after many family tragedies; and Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* (2004) the story of a young motherless boy who goes on his own in search of his father.

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