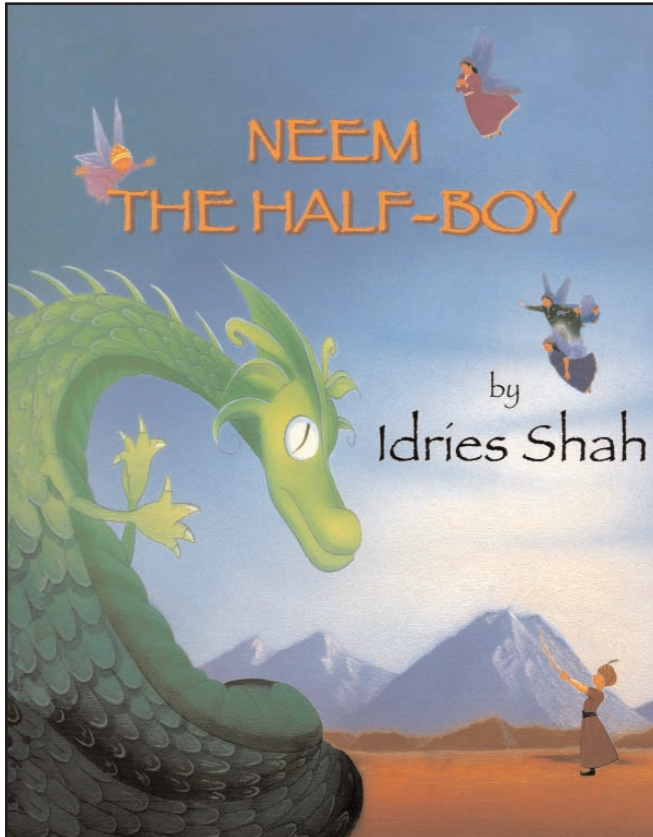




HOOPOE BOOKS FOR CHILDREN  
MANUAL FOR PARENTS & CARETAKERS



to accompany

## Neem the Half-Boy

written by  
**Idries Shah**

**“These teaching stories can be experienced on many levels. A child may simply enjoy hearing them; an adult may analyze them in a more sophisticated way. Both may eventually benefit from the lessons within.”**

*Lynn Neary “All Things Considered,”  
NPR News, Washington*

This manual accompanies one title in our series of illustrated tales from the rich storytelling tradition of Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Middle East. These stories have been told to countless children for more than a thousand years. Parents and teachers can use these ancient, universal tales not only to delight and entertain, but also to develop language and thinking abilities in the young. At the same time, these stories will encourage in children a love of good literature that can affect them positively throughout their lives.

In this ancient tradition, stories are told to young and old alike. A story can help children deal with difficult situations and give them something to hold onto. It can, at the same time, stimulate a deeper understanding in adults. While reading and discussing these tales with your children, you, too, may find yourself thinking and perceiving in new ways. A wealth of learning awaits us all in these old tales.

We hope you and your children enjoy them!

## HOOPOE TALES

**These stories show us what we share with these cultures and what we can learn from each other.**

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

These stories come from a rich tradition of storytelling in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East. For more than a thousand years, by campfire and candlelight, people have told these stories to their children, not only to entertain them, but also to help young people understand their world. Schools for young children were rare, but storytelling was not. Education came from stories.

Idries Shah, the author, was an Afghan who spent 30 years of his life collecting, translating, and selecting these stories for a Western audience. They show us what we share and what we can learn from each other. They help children understand human nature. They encourage qualities such as self-reliance, the ability to overcome

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**“Shah’s versatile and multilayered tales provoke fresh insight and more flexible thought in children.”**

*Bookbird: A Journal of International Children’s Literature*

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fears caused by things children do not as yet understand, peaceful negotiation rather than violent confrontation, and much else.

In presenting these stories to children, you can help them learn a little about these cultures that might, at first, seem strange and unusual. They may even be thought of in a negative way due to ignorance or the very sad recent world events.

The characters are shown in dress that is common in this part of the world. Women usually wear long, flowing garments and cover their heads with scarves or veils (historically this was as a mark of respect). Men and boys wear baggy trousers and long, loose shirts and vests, along with distinctive hats or turbans to protect them from sand and wind.

The illustrations include other aspects of these cultures: ornaments, wall hangings, and furniture that are often copied from Persian miniatures, or

beautiful multi-colored mosaic tiles found on mosque walls throughout the Islamic world. Minarets, flat- or dome-roofed houses, wells, alleyways, open markets and stores, and, of course, animals are used to illustrate these magical stories.

### MORE THAN ENTERTAINING

According to their stage of cognitive development, children take what they can from each tale. At first, they may respond only to one character or one event in a story, or they may understand only the most obvious meaning, but they will grasp a little more each time they hear a story. Bit by bit, they will find more meanings, concepts and insights in these stories.

Through repeated exposure to these tales, children learn to understand their lives and reflect on how people think and act in various situations. These tales help children learn to distinguish effective from ineffective patterns of thought and action.

In many ways these tales serve as mirrors. Identifying with characters in a story, we and our children become spectators of our own thinking and behaving.

### WHY READ TO OUR CHILDREN?

“Reading aloud” involves sitting with our children so that they can see the words and pictures as the adult reads from the book. When we read to children, we help them develop important communication and cognitive skills.

These stories captivate children and help develop their attention capacity. They also build linguistic fluency and competence, especially when children know the stories so well that they join in telling them. Because the language of stories is somewhat different from everyday language, a child’s language is refined and enriched by listening to stories. With stories as models, children learn to order their thoughts and to express themselves in meaningful and engaging ways.

When listening and speaking abilities are nurtured with stories early on, almost all children learn to read easily and naturally. They readily absorb the vocabulary, syntax, concepts, narrative structures, patterns of events, and images together with the emotional overtones of the language used in the tales.

When they are read to, children not only hear the story, they also observe the act of reading. The adult can help the child understand where the text begins on each page, can point to individual words, and can invite the child to read along when the child seems ready. In this way, children gradually learn that the written word reflects spoken language, and that a book has unique meaning and impact. They also pick up positive attitudes of the adult reader who enjoys books and loves reading.

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As they begin to read independently, children's oral language strengths help them decode text, predict events, and acquire a sense of story — an intuitive sense of what a story is and what to expect of various kinds of stories.

These skills, developed and honed with many stories throughout the childhood years, allow children to make an easy transition to understanding and appreciating the world of adult literature—the novels, short stories, biographies, and other works that enrich our lives.

## TIPS FOR PRESENTING STORIES

Here are some tips for making the experience enjoyable and memorable for children:

- Make sure you are well rested and looking forward to story time. Do your best to put aside the many distractions of daily life so as to give the child and the story your full attention.
- Sit in a comfortable place with the child near you, allowing you to have good eye contact. Your physical presence is an important part of the whole experience for the child. The more comfortable and cozy the child feels with you, the more impact the story is likely to have.

- Read or tell the story at a relaxed, deliberate pace. Remember that children can't process information as rapidly as adults. When you slow down a bit, you'll help the child follow and comprehend the story more easily.

- Remember that children very much enjoy hearing the same story more than once. Repetition allows a child to become familiar with a story, to understand it more fully, to reflect on it long after story time is over, and to internalize many aspects of the story.

Some children like to hear the same story day after day for weeks, and this amount of repetition can be very beneficial. Other children like to hear the same story once or twice on one occasion, then again after several weeks or months.

- When a story is very familiar, invite the child to join in the telling, saying favorite lines with you. This practice enhances children's language development and their sense of confidence in using language.

- Make the book easily available for older children to read independently.

## LEARNING STRATEGIES

First, it's important to recognize that children who simply listen to a story repeatedly absorb language and concepts naturally, and, in the case of stories such as these, they also develop cognitive skills.

The strategies suggested in this manual can further strengthen children's natural learning process. We offer different ways to interact with and reflect on the stories and suggest activities that maintain children's contact with each tale in enjoyable ways. This gives them more time to develop their understanding and to find further meaning and value in the stories.

There are a number of enjoyable activities to do with children after the reading of a story. Here are some of the more typical and useful follow-up activities:

**Discuss.** Perhaps the simplest activity you can do with a child after finishing a story is to invite his or her reactions and comments and to share your own. Discussion will allow the child to express whatever thoughts may have arisen while listening

and to ask questions about the characters and events.

If a child doesn't talk spontaneously about the story, questions like these may help get a discussion going:

*What was the most important part of the story to you?*

*Why was that part especially meaningful to you?*

*Which character did you like the most? The least? Why?*

*Do you think the ending was a good one? Why?*

**Draw.** Have children tell what parts of the story they most liked and describe how they visualized the characters and events. Then have them draw, with crayon or paint, what they visualized. They will enjoy talking about their pictures and comparing them with the book's illustrations.

**Dramatize.** Invite children to act out a scene or two from the story. A child may take on the persona of different characters with each playacting. If several children have heard the story together, they may want to use simple props and scenery and put on short plays.

**Dictate or Write.** In a special story notebook, have children dictate or write a brief summary of the story and perhaps a comment about it. Pictures can be drawn to go with the summaries if the child enjoys drawing. A story notebook can serve as a reading journal that you and the child review, just for fun, from time to time.

**Retell.** If children enjoy the story, read it several times over the course of a week or more until they are very familiar with the sequence of events and can retell the story to family or friends. You can provide opportunities for them to retell it to other classrooms or in their community. You can also discuss ways to make their telling interesting and effective.

## STORY PLANS

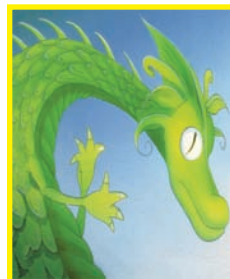
These plans will give you ideas of how you may use the books with one or more children, either at home or in a classroom. The activities are based on teachers' and parents' experience in sharing good literature with children.

The intent is to give children an enjoyable experience with the stories and help them realize that this literature can help them understand themselves and others.

Most children will be entertained the first time they hear a story and will develop a deeper understanding only after the story has a chance to "sink in." For that reason, we recommend reading a story several times over the course of weeks or months, each time giving the child a chance to respond to the story and to discuss different meanings he or she may find in it.

Each time you read the story, you may wish to ask different questions and do different activities, so a variety is provided here from which you may select. Of course you may have other questions or activities and we encourage you to use these, too.

**Next are some activities you can use while reading this Teaching-Story by Idries Shah with your children.**



## STORY:

# Neem the Half-Boy

## STORY SUMMARY

To help the queen, who longs for a son, the fairies consult a wise man, who gives certain instructions. Because the queen follows them only halfway, she gives birth to a half-boy, whom she names Neem. To help Neem become whole, the fairies again consult the wise man, who says that Neem must obtain a special medicine from a dragon's cave. Neem overcomes his fears and obtains the medicine by making a bargain with the dragon that, besides helping himself, also helps the dragon and the people it has been frightening.

## BEFORE READING

This story, with its unexpected twists, invites speculation at turning points, an activity that improves children's thinking and comprehension of the story. To get children started in making predictions when they hear the story for the first time, read the title and ask:

*What do you think a half-boy is? Why do you think so?*

*How do you think the boy became a half-boy?*

Accept and discuss any ideas offered, then say:

*Let's read and find out more about who this half-boy is and what happens to him.*

## DURING READING

Invite additional speculation during the story by asking for additional predictions at turning points. It's not important for children to guess correctly what actually happens. Predicting outcomes helps children think more carefully about the characters and events of the story even when the predictions turn out to be incorrect.

Help children enjoy making predictions by accepting all responses and encouraging the children to give their reasons for thinking as they do.

Here are some suggestions for places to stop and invite predictions:

When the fairies go to the wise man the first time (“I’ll tell you how the queen can have a little boy

for a son,’ said Arif the Wise Man, with a smile.”):

*What advice do you think Arif will give the fairies?*

*Why do you think so?*

When the queen drops the half-eaten apple (“And she dropped the apple, only half-eaten ...”):

*What do you think will happen now?*

*Why do you think so?*

When the fairies again ask the wise man for help in making Neem whole (“... he is only a half-boy, and he wants to be a whole boy. Can you help him?”):

*What advice do you think the wise man will give the fairies this time?*

*Why do you think so?*

When Neem confronts the dragon (“And Prince Neem said, ‘I am going to drive you away because you keep breathing fire all over people and they don’t like it.’”):

*What do you think will happen next?*

*Why do you think so?*

## AFTER READING

### Questions for reflection:

Invite reflection by discussing one or more of the questions below. These questions explore some of the different elements of the story and what we can learn and understand from them:

*What was the most important part of this story to you?*

*Why was that part especially important?*

*What does this story make you think about?*

*What thoughts do you have about the queen? What about the king?*

*What questions do you have about the story?*

*Neem was very clever, but he couldn’t make himself whole. Are there other people who are very clever but still can’t do everything?*

*How do you think Neem first felt when he learned he had to drive the dragon away?*

*How do you think Neem felt when he learned that Taneen was really sad about breathing fire and didn't want to do it?*

*What were some of the things that happened because of the agreement that Neem and Taneen made with each other? Were they good or bad? What makes you think so?*

*Neem had only part of a body, which is very odd. Do you think there are other ways that people can be only part of what they ought to be?*

*Even though it was important for the queen to eat the apple, she started thinking about something else and didn't finish. Why do you think she started thinking about something else?*

*Do other people forget about doing important things, just like the queen did? Why?*

*Are some things more important to remember than others? What are they?*

*This story has many different meanings. Can you think of any we've missed?*

*Can one person, even a child, make a difference in the way things turn out?*

### **Activities:**

Do one or more of these activities to enhance the experience of the story and give children the chance to express themselves:

- Have children draw and color their favorite scene from the story. Encourage them to tell about what they drew and why.

- Make a simple symmetrical drawing of a boy that children can cut out and decorate with details to make their own figure of Neem. Help the children fold their finished figures in half and use it to retell the story. For a more elaborate activity, make the same kind of paper puppets for the other characters in the story (king and queen, fairies, wise man, dragon) and use them to create a puppet-show retelling of the story.

- Ask the children to make dragons out of construction paper. Cut them out and on the back of each, use a black marker to print one word from the story that the children suggest. (Words might include **queen, king, fairies, wise man, apple, boy, half, dragon, stove, whole.**) Have children help join the dragon forms to each other with string to be hung on the wall and encourage them to read all the words once a day.

- Have the children make up sentences that use one, two or three of their selected words.

### **OTHER IDEAS**

- If children enjoy the story, read it several times over the course of a week or more. Hearing the story again will help familiarize children with the situations portrayed in the tale.

- Have children compare and contrast the dragon in this story with dragons they have encountered in other folk and fairy tales.

- When children run up against a conflict, remind them how Neem and the dragon worked together to resolve their conflict.

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**NOTES:** Use this area to keep notes about the children's reaction to the story or notes to yourself about reading or telling the story.

## OTHER HOOPOE STORIES BY IDRIES SHAH

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### THE BOY WITHOUT A NAME

A boy is born and, just as his parents are about to name him, a wise man appears. He tells them that their son is very, very important and that one day he will give the boy something marvelous. Until then they must be very careful not to name him. As the boy grows up, “Nameless” wants more and more to have a name of his own. He asks his friend to help him, and together the boys find the wise man. The wise man gives Nameless his very own name and lets each of the boys pick their very own dream. Among the many insights which this story introduces is the idea that it takes patience and resolve to achieve one’s goals in life.

### THE CLEVER BOY AND THE TERRIBLE, DANGEROUS ANIMAL

Townspeople are terrified of something unfamiliar that they have concluded is a terrible, dangerous animal. A boy, visiting from a neighboring village, helps them overcome their fears by teaching them what the object really is — a melon. In an amusing way, this story illustrates how irrational fears based on ignorance can grow. Becoming familiar with this idea can help children deal more easily with similar fears of their own.

### THE FARMER’S WIFE

A farmer’s wife is picking apples. When one falls into a hole in the ground, she tries to retrieve it in a way that becomes ever more complicated and hilarious and, in the end, turns out to be completely unnecessary. Or was it? For some this story mirrors the very common human tendencies of looking for solutions to problems in all the wrong places and of exerting efforts that, though great, are essentially useless. To others this story shows how the world is interconnected, and how it is often necessary both to work hard to find a solution and to understand that the best solution may not be the direct one.

### FATIMA THE SPINNER AND THE TENT

Fatima’s life is beset with what seem to be disasters. Her journey leads her from Morocco to the Mediterranean, Egypt, Turkey and, finally, to China. It is in China that she realizes that what seemed at the time to be really unfortunate events were an integral part of her eventual fulfillment. This Teaching-Story is well known in Greek folklore, but this version is attributed to the Sheikh Mohamad Jamaludin of Adrianople (modern-day Edirne) in Turkey, who died in 1750.

### THE LION WHO SAW HIMSELF IN THE WATER

A lion makes the other animals afraid because of the way he talks. He doesn’t understand their reaction to him but is himself afraid when he goes to a watering hole for a drink. He sees his own reflection in the water and thinks that there is another lion in the pond. When he, at last, understands that the other lion is only his own reflection, he is no longer afraid. For children, this story gently explores how fears can arise in the mind and how they can be overcome with more information and experience.

### THE MAGIC HORSE

This is the story of two princes. Prince Hoshiyar gains rank and fortune by supervising the construction of huge metallic fishes that perform wondrous tasks and bring riches to the people of his land. His brother, Prince Tambal, is interested only in a wooden horse that he obtains from a humble carpenter. The horse is a magical one, and it carries the rider, if he is sincere, to his heart’s desire.

### THE MAN AND THE FOX

A man tricks a young fox into believing that he will give him a chicken. The fox gets trapped, but through ingenuity and perseverance he manages to escape. This story of the young fox can inspire children to face challenges, to overcome and, sometimes, to make use of obstacles in their path to solve problems.

### THE MAN WITH BAD MANNERS

This is an amusing Teaching-Story about a badly behaved man. A young boy initiates a plan to change his behavior and, with the help of all of the villagers, succeeds. The story will bring laughter to young children and, at the same time, teach them valuable lessons about conflict resolution, initiative, and cooperation.

### THE OLD WOMAN AND THE EAGLE

Superbly illustrated by Natasha Delmar, daughter of the celebrated classic Chinese painter Ng Yi-Ching, this story tells with gentle humor what happens when an old woman encounters an eagle for the first time. Perplexed by its unfamiliar appearance, she decides to change it to suit her own ideas of what a bird should look like. Her efforts — which, much to the poor eagle’s chagrin, include straightening its beak, trimming its claws and smoothing its feathers — mirror a common pattern of human thought: altering the unfamiliar to make it acceptable.

### THE SILLY CHICKEN

A chicken, having learned to speak, proclaims that a disaster is about to happen. Highly anxious, the townspeople run frantically to escape. When nothing happens, they find out that the chicken didn’t know what it was talking about. At first they are angry, then amused at how easily they were fooled. In the end they laugh at the chicken because, as they now assume, this chicken — and all other chickens — are simply silly. In an entertaining way, this story illustrates what can happen when people do not think critically about what they hear.