

# MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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## Literature and Poetry

### Enchanting Children Stories From Afghanistan

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It wasn't very long ago that few Americans even knew where Afghanistan was, much less had any interest in its culture. But all that has changed considerably in the wake of the September 11 tragedies.

As a parent who was born and grew up in Afghanistan, I've been aware of the scarcity here in the United States of worthwhile children's books having anything to do with my native country. So I was delighted to discover the series of children's stories from Afghanistan, collected by Afghan author Idries Shah and published by Boston-based Hoopoe Books.

Shah's extraordinary tales paint a more realistic picture of Afghanistan than what's shown on the news, but they do it in an indirect way that itself is typically Afghan. For these are vibrant, engaging, universal stories, not arid geography lessons; and the Afghanistan that emerges from them does so by virtue of the small

details, the outlooks expressed, the characters' actions, and the stunning illustrations rather than in a barrage of facts and figures.

The stories in this series that have been published so far include *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water* (32 pages, \$17.00, hardcover, \$6.99 paperback, ISBN 1-883536-12-X, 1998), *Neem the Half-Boy* (32 pages, \$17.00 hardcover, ISBN 1-883536-10-3, 1998), *The Magic Horse* (34 pages, \$17.00 hardcover, \$6.99 paperback, ISBN 1-883536-11-1, 1998), *The Farmer's Wife* (32 pages, \$17.00, ISBN 1-883536-07-3, 1998), *The Silly Chicken* (32 pages, \$17.00 hardcover, ISBN 1-883536-19-7, 2000), *The Boy Without a Name* (32 pages, \$17.00 hardcover, ISBN 1-883536-20-0, 2000), and *The Clever Boy and the Terrible, Dangerous Animal* (32 pages, \$17.00 hardcover, ISBN 1-883536-18-9, 2000).

These are all tales I grew up hearing, because they've been told and retold for more than a millennium by adults and children throughout Afghanistan as well as in other parts of Central Asia and the Middle East. Many people in that part of the world lack such diversions as television, movies, and computer games, which is one reason why storytelling still plays such an important role.

But it would be a mistake to view these tales as merely "primitive" substitutes for more "sophisticated" forms of entertainment. Their lasting appeal is due, I think, to the fact that they not only entertain, but can be understood on many different levels and provide a form of "nourishment for the brain" that can help develop thinking abilities and perceptions. Afghan culture is quite advanced in many ways, and for centuries has included a sophisticated form of story art designed to provide such nourishment.

It is this kind of story that Shah, a noted author in the Sufi tradition,

specialized in collecting for more than 30 years, until his death in 1996. A practical philosophy with deep roots in Afghanistan, Sufism is sometimes mislabeled "Islamic mysticism" in the West because it is widespread in Moslem countries, although it is not tied to any religion and has included members of all faiths.

While formal education usually consists of direct instructions ("do this," "memorize that"), stories such as those in Hoopoe's series take a gentler approach that encourages readers to think for themselves instead of telling them what to believe.

For instance, in *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water*, a lion whose growl scares the other animals away is in turn frightened by the image of another lion in a pool of water. Finally, overcome by thirst, he plunges in and discovers it was only his own reflection. This memorable tale, which is known to almost every Afghan, can teach children and adults valuable lessons about fear that unfold gradually, as one is ready for them.

As another example, *Neem the Half-Boy* deals with the universal theme of being incomplete and having to overcome difficulties to find

oneself. In it, a queen eats only half of a magic apple that a wise man had given her to conceive a son, and as a result gives birth to only half a boy. He eventually becomes whole, not by resorting to violence, but through a combination of cleverness, persistence, and compromise.

These enchanting stories Shah has collected have a richness and depth not often encountered in children's literature, and their effect on minds young and old can be almost magical. It is for this reason, as much as for what they can teach us about an important but little-known culture, that they are a most worthy addition to any bookshelf.

