

MINI-THEME PROMOTING LITERATURE

Stories with Something Extra:

A Literary Treasure from Afghanistan

By Denise Nessel, Ph.D.

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The best stories for children are genuinely entertaining, capturing young listeners' attention and holding their interest. The tales may also be inspiring, or they may convey specific kinds of information, such as historical facts or details about life in other parts of the world. Stories may also teach a moral lesson. Both parents and teachers use literature in these ways to touch children emotionally and also to provide instruction.

There's yet another use for stories that is less well-known in the United States than in other parts of the world, but is attracting the attention and acceptance of a growing number of U.S. educators, psychologists, and parents. It appears that certain stories, because they have complex, multiple levels of meaning, can also develop children's thinking abilities and perceptions in beneficial ways. Such stories include structures and symbols that nurture the deepest part of us, enriching our perspectives and leading to greater understanding of others and ourselves in ways that ordinary stories cannot do.

The Importance of Afghanistan

Stories with such extra dimensions are found in many cultures but are especially prevalent in Afghanistan, where they have dominated oral and written literature for centuries. They are also common in other parts of Central Asia and the Middle East. Because such stories enable children to perceive and think more flexibly, critically, and insightfully, experts here in the U.S. are beginning to acknowledge their value.

“They’re different from most children’s stories, which seem to be built on arousing fear and presenting an emotional resolution or on simply telling children what they ought to do,” says noted psychologist and author Robert Ornstein. “Instead, these stories suggest ways of looking at difficulties that can help children solve problems calmly, while at the same time giving them fresh

perspectives on the difficulties that help them develop their cognitive abilities.”

“They have a depth not normally seen in children’s literature,” adds psychologist Charles Swencionis of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

Sample Titles

Two examples of such dynamic literature will illustrate. Both come from Afghanistan, where they have been told for centuries. In *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water* by Afghan author Idries Shah (Hoopoe Books), a good-natured lion doesn't understand why his attempts at communication, which involve ineffective loud growls, frighten other animals. Then he, in turn, is frightened by his own reflection in a pool of water. Eventually his thirst overcomes his fear, and he plunges his head into the water, whereupon his nemesis disappears. Children enjoy hearing this story many times, amused at what they recognize to be the lion's lack of objectivity and his unreasonable fear. With each rereading, the lion's predicament and his reaction to it become more familiar. This familiarity provides a base on which the child can come to understand egocentricity and irrationality at successive depths later in life.

Another tale of this genre is *The Silly Chicken*, also by Idries Shah (Hoopoe Books). In this story, a talking chicken creates anxiety and disorder in a community until people realize that just because a bird can speak, marvelous though that may be, it doesn't mean the bird knows what it's talking about. Like other stories of its kind, this one uses the ancient Eastern technique of attributing common foibles to foolish characters, gently allowing readers to recognize their own gullibility. The story has no heroes or villains and does not address weighty issues, yet it helps children to develop the habit of critical thinking.

Rich Meanings

These stories, and others from this tradition, are not moralistic fables or parables, which aim to indoctrinate, nor are they written only to amuse. Rather, they are carefully designed to show effective ways of defining and responding to common life experiences. A story is an especially good means for this kind of communication because it works its way into consciousness in a way that direct instruction cannot do. Adults, who have more experience to draw upon, may see additional depths in the stories beyond what the children recognize. In fact, many parents and teachers find that the stories yield richer meanings and insights with each reading, becoming useful to them as well as the children.

Traditional folk tales of the sort described here provide a powerful tool, not only for helping children appreciate books and reading, but also for guiding them to respond to life with creativity and insight.

Hoopoe Books
P.O. Box 176
Los Altos, CA 94023
www.hoopoekids.com

Tel: (800) 222-4745

Dr. Nessel is Senior Consultant with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, author of four methods books for teachers, and editor of the book *Awakening Young Minds* (Malor Books).

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