

# Arab Children's Literature

## An Update

by Tami C. Al-Hazzá

Elementary school through high school

The Arab culture is an ancient one, with Mesopotamia (located in present-day Iraq) often referred to as “the cradle of civilization.” Historically, Arabs have made significant contributions in mathematics, science, literature, and poetry. However, confusion and misunderstanding often surround Arabs and their culture.

Arabs speak Arabic or have ancestors whose native tongue was Arabic. They possess Semitic roots and trace their origins to the Saudi Peninsula. Most people believe that all Arabs are Muslim. However, the Arab world includes sizable populations of Arab Christians, Egyptian Copts, Maronites, Druze, and Melokites. Only 20 percent of the world's Muslim population is Arab—the majority of Muslims come from Indonesia.

Arabs are a diverse people representing 17 countries, starting from Morocco on the western tip of Africa and spanning across two continents to Oman located on the eastern edge of the Saudi Peninsula. The countries can be divided into three specific

areas: countries located on or near the Saudi Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Jordan, Iraq); countries located in northern Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan); and countries located on the Mediterranean but not in Africa (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, which is awaiting statehood). These distinct ar-

for Arabs from different countries to understand each other.

In today's world there is a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation about Arabs and their culture. Stereotypes of Arabs as villains or terrorists are often propagated by the media and by Hollywood movies. These stereotypes and sensational news headlines are partly to blame for promulgating misun-



**Iraqi librarian Alia Muhammad Baker heroically saves thousands of books before her library is destroyed by war, in *Alia's Mission* by Mark Alan Stamaty.**

areas have significant differences in dress, food, and socially acceptable behaviors. Iranians, Armenians, Afghans, Kurds, and Turks are not considered Arab even though they inhabit the same region of the world and share some common cultural customs. All Arabs speak Arabic, but each country has its own dialect, often making it difficult

standings about Arab culture. High-quality Arab literature portraying Arabs as individuals and realistically depicting their values, cultural heritage, and traditions can help stop such prejudice from forming in the minds of American children.

The bibliography below updates the November 1999 *Book Links* article “The Arab World and Arab Americans” and represents a selection of well-respected and well-written children's literature that accurately

reflects Arab culture, respects Arab heritage, creates positive images of Arabs in readers' minds, and features story lines that credibly represent Arabs. These enticing titles deserve a place on classroom and library shelves and can be shared with students in a variety of ways—as part of a storytime with younger children, in a social studies or geography curriculum, or as possible choices in an independent reading program.

## Fiction

### Picture Books

Heide, Florence Parry, and Judith Heide Gilliland. *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*. Illus. by Ted Lewin. 1990. 32p. HarperTrophy, paper, \$6.99 (0-688-14023-8).

Gr. 1–4. This day-in-the-life story set in Cairo follows young Ahmed as he travels through the city on his donkey cart delivering butane gas canisters. But today is a special day, because Ahmed has a secret, which he reveals to his family at the end of the book. Lewin's vibrant watercolors ef-

fectively portray the hustle and bustle of city life. Also see Lewin's picture book *The Storytellers* (HarperCollins, 1998), about a grandfather and grandson in contemporary Morocco.

Heide, Florence Parry, and Judith Heide Gilliland. *Sami and the Time of the Troubles*. Illus. by Ted Lewin. 1992. 32p. Clarion, paper, \$6.95 (0-395-72085-0).

Gr. 1–4. Though it's rooted in the experiences of a Beirut family during the recent Lebanon war, this story marked by Lewin's watercolors will resonate in a discussion of the current war in Iraq. All his life, 10-year-old Sami has suffered through the crashes of guns and bombs that shake the walls of the basement where he lives most of the time with his family. When the good days come and it's safe to go upstairs, Sami and the others in his community try to resume a normal life until the fighting starts again.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Sitti's Secrets*. Illus. by Nancy Carpenter. 1997. 32p. Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-81706-1).

Gr. 1–5. A young Arab American

girl, Mona, travels to a Palestinian village to meet her father's mother, where she and Sitti (the Arabic word for grandmother) become very close. Carpenter's flowing paintings reinforce the intimacy between grandmother and granddaughter and incorporate details of daily life there. At the end of the book Mona writes a letter to the U.S. president, urging peace for that part of the world.

### Novels

Carmi, Daniella. *Samir and Yonatan*. 2000. 192p. Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine, \$15.95 (0-439-13504-4); paper, \$4.99 (0-439-13523-0).

Gr. 6–9. The suffering of a boy's Palestinian family is at the center of this moving novel about Samir and his stay in an Israeli hospital. A young Arab boy from the West Bank, Samir has been sent to the hospital for surgery, where the food, shelter, and attention are luxuries compared with his harsh daily life under occupation. Soon another patient, a Jewish boy named Yonatan, becomes Samir's friend. The theme of tolerance and understanding is uplifting and hopeful.

Clinton, Cathryn. *A Stone in My Hand*. 2002. 208p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (0-7636-1388-6); paper, \$5.99 (0-7636-2561-2).

Gr. 6–up. Eleven-year-old Malaak and her family are living in Gaza City during the first *intifada* uprisings against Israeli occupation in 1988. Malaak must cope with her father's sudden disappearance after going to seek employment

**Palestinian farmers harvest lentils while Sitti and Mona watch in *Sitti's Secrets* by Naomi Shihab Nye, illustrated by Nancy Carpenter.**



in Israel and her brother's involvement with a radical group. Her powerful narrative captures the experience of the occupation and the never-ending cycle of anger and retaliation.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Habibi*. 1997. 272p. Simon Pulse, paper, \$5.99 (0-689-82523-4).

Gr. 6-up. Liyana, an American teenager, relocates with her family from Missouri to the Palestinian village where her father grew up. At first Liyana is angry and resentful at moving so far away, to a place where she doesn't even know the language. In this heartwarming novel Nye paints an uplifting and optimistic portrait of friendship between Palestinians and Jews, and readers will relate to Liyana's efforts to make new friends and adapt to her new environment.

Osborne, Mary Pope. *Season of the Sandstorms*. Illus. by Sal Murdocca. 2005. 112p. Random, \$11.95 (0-375-83031-6).

Gr. 3-5. In this latest installment in the Magic Tree House series, siblings Jack and Annie journey back 1,200 years to the Golden Age of Baghdad, where they must safeguard a mysterious box until they can deliver it to the city's caliph. For another story set during Baghdad's Golden Age, see Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland's picture book *The House of Wisdom* (DK, 1999).

Stolz, Joëlle. *The Shadows of Ghadames*. 2005. 128p. Delacorte, \$15.95 (0-385-73104-3).

Gr. 5-8. This intriguing historical novel set in the late 1800s in the small city of Ghadames in southern Libya depicts the restricted, secluded lives of the women there. The story revolves around the dreams and passions of a brave young Berber girl, Malika, and what happens when her father's two wives agree to harbor, in secret, a wounded stranger. The author's descriptive writing enables readers to visualize the sensory details of life in this long-vanished world.

## Story Collection

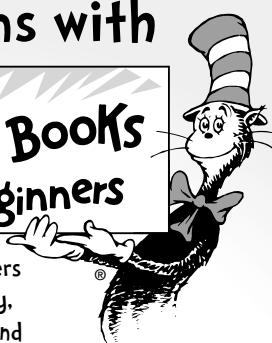
Marston, Elsa. *Figs and Fate: Stories about Growing Up in the Arab World Today*. 2005. 146p. George Braziller, \$22.50 (0-8076-1551-X); paper, \$15.95 (0-8076-1554-4).

Gr. 6-up. These passionate stories of five Arab teenagers from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and a Palestin-

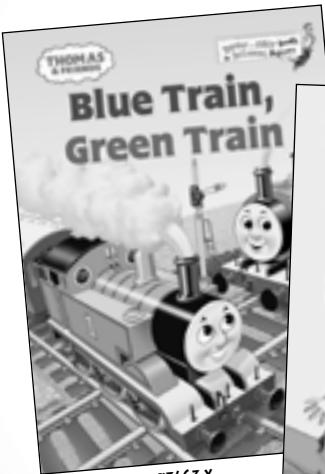
ian refugee camp tell of vast differences in culture and class as the main characters come of age and attempt to fulfill their dreams. Marston's collection offers a unique and insightful look into Arab culture that helps dispel myths and stereotypes. An author's note following each story provides some explanation and background.

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## Books about Islam

While not all Arabs are Muslims, Islam is the dominant religion of this group, and the books below will enhance a study of this part of the world.

- Ali, Aminah Ibrahim. *The Three Muslim Festivals*. Illus. by Aldin Hadžic. 1998. 68p. IQRA International Educational Foundation, \$9.95 (1-56316-308-X).

Gr. 2–5. Ali engagingly allows readers a glimpse into the homes and lives of three Muslim children observing the customs and celebrations of the three main Muslim holidays: Ramadan, Id al-Adha, and Id al-Fitr. Despite very plain and disappointing illustrations, this is an excellent book for introducing young children to Islamic customs.

- Demi. *Muhammad*. 2003. 40p. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry, \$19.95 (0-689-85264-9).

Gr. 2–5. Unbiased and inspiring, Demi's magnificent biography of the life and teachings of the prophet Muhammad is based on traditional Islamic sources. In keeping with Islamic teachings, Demi's detailed drawings do not portray Muhammad's face or body but depict him as a gold-embossed silhouette.

- Durkee, Noura. *The Animals of Paradise*. Illus. by Simon Trethewey. 1996. 106p. Hood Hood Books, \$14.95 (1-900251-09-4).

K–Gr. 3. This collection of animal stories originally appeared in the Qur'an, and readers will find woven into each a moral or narrative about one of the prophets. The introduction is written from a recording angel's perspective, and the illustrations are simple but vivid.

- Ganeri, Anita. *Muslim Festivals throughout the Year*. 2004. 32p. Smart Apple Media, \$27.10 (1-58340-371-X).

Gr. 3–6. Comprehensive in scope and appealing in design, this title from the A Year of Festivals series not only describes Muslim holidays such as Ramadan and Id al-Fitr but also explains some of the ideas of Islam. Full-color photographs and lots of sidebars accompany the main text,

and a glossary is included, along with related books and Web sites. Also see Ganeri's *The Qur'an and Islam* (Smart Apple Media, 2003).

- Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Celebrating Ramadan*. Photos by Lawrence Migdale. 2001. 32p. Holiday, \$16.95 (0-8234-1581-3); paper, \$6.95 (0-8234-1762-X).

Gr. 3–5. This picture book for older readers follows devout Muslim Ibraheem, a fourth-grader living in New Jersey, through the holy month of Ramadan. Each of the five pillars of Islam are introduced in text and pictures, including a series of six photographs in which Ibraheem demonstrates the postures involved in his five daily prayers. Migdale's numerous photos and Hoyt-Goldsmith's effective text help make this a sensitive, memorable portrait. For a fictional pairing, see Suhaib Hamid Ghazi's picture book *Ramadan*,

illustrated by Omar Rayyan (Holiday, 1996).

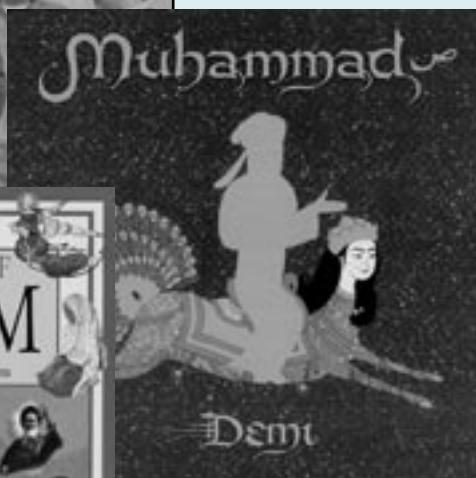
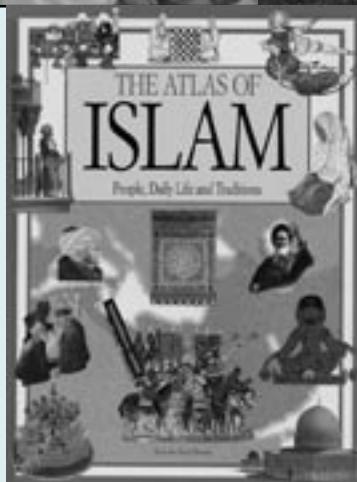
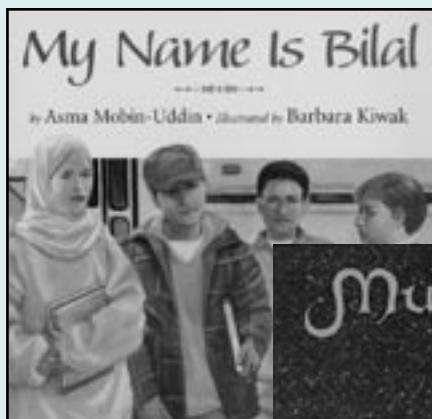
- Mobin-Uddin, Asma. *My Name Is Bilal*. Illus. by Barbara Kiwak. 2005. 32p. Boyds Mills, \$15.95 (1-59078-175-9).

Gr. 3–7. Bilal and his sister, who are Muslim, start school in a new city. At first Bilal tries to blend into the

largely non-Muslim environment, but encouraged by a sympathetic teacher and the teachings of his faith, Bilal finds the courage to stand up to a group of bullies when his sister is teased for wearing a headscarf. Large-scale watercolor paintings mark this picture book that will jump-start a discussion of cultural differences, prejudice, and respect for the beliefs of others.

- Morris, Neil. *The Atlas of Islam: People, Daily Life, and Traditions*. Illus. by Manuela Cappon and others. 2003. 64p. Barron's Educational, \$14.95 (0-7641-5631-4).

Gr. 5–8. Covering a time span from "Arabia before Islam" to "Islam Today," this oversize book is packed with fascinating pictures and illustrations chronicling the history and geography of this major religion. With sections on women in Islam, science and technology, and art and architecture, this title is an excellent resource.



## Informational Books

Ellis, Deborah. *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. 2004. 112p. Groundwood, \$16.95 (0-88899-554-7).

Gr. 6–up. This series of short interviews conducted with Palestinian and Israeli children during 2002 are hard-hitting snapshots of the difficulties and horror young people in that part of the world face every day. Sprinkled with black-and-white photographs, the book includes an age-appropriate list for further reading. Also see Mitch Frank's straightforward *Understanding the Holy Land: Answering Questions about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Viking, 2005), which gives even-handed information about the history and complexity of the struggle.

Macaulay, David. *Mosque*. 2003. 96p. Houghton/Walter Lorraine, \$18 (0-618-24034-9).

Gr. 4–up. A tribute to the magnificent religious architecture produced during the Ottoman Empire, Macaulay's book provides a fascinating glimpse into the meticulous construction of a mosque and its surrounding structures. Set in sixteenth-century Istanbul, the story is based on a composite of actual historical people and mosques. Macaulay's familiar combination of labeled architectural drawings, sketches showing artisans at work, and thorough descriptions vividly portray each stage of the building phase; this is an excellent resource for studying architecture and Middle Eastern history during the Ottoman era.

Marston, Elsa, and Ramsay M. Harik. *Women in the Middle East: Tradition and Change*. 1996; reissued 2003. 192p. Franklin Watts, \$30.50 (0-531-12222-0).

Gr. 7–12. While the Middle East includes many non-Arab groups, readers will learn much about Arab culture in this revised edition in the Cultures and People series. The authors draw on their extensive personal experience in the region, as well as a wide range

of documented sources, to show the diversity among countries and within each country. Whether the subject is education in Iraq or political activism in Palestine, the facts are part of today's headlines. Chapter notes include related books, articles, and Web sites.

Rumford, James. *Traveling Man: The Journey of Ibn Battuta*. 2001. 40p. Houghton, \$16 (0-618-08366-9); paper, \$5.95 (0-618-43233-7).

Gr. 3–5. Based on the life of Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century scholar and traveler, this delightful picture book explores the ancient world through his journey of more than 75,000 miles, from Morocco through Arabia to China and back. The book's beautiful design features double-page watercolors and Arabic calligraphy and lends itself to in-depth discussions of history, culture, and geography. A glossary, translations of the Arabic, and a map of the journey are included.

Stamaty, Mark Alan. *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*. 2004. 32p. Random, \$12.95 (0-375-83217-3).

Gr. 4–7. In this book based on actual events that occurred when Western forces invaded Iraq in 2003, Alia Muhammad Baker is an Iraqi librarian in Basra who, fearing looting and bombs, hid more than 30,000 books prior to the invasion. Stamaty's black-and-white ink, graphite, and wash artwork pairs well with the comic-style narration, though the omission of source notes is unfortunate. Also see Jeanette Winter's picture book *The Librarian of Basra* (Harcourt, 2004).

Stanley, Diane. *Saladin: Noble Prince of Islam*. 2002. 48p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (0-688-17135-4).

Gr. 3–7. Stanley eloquently tells the life story of the twelfth-century sultan Saladin, who was known for his generosity and fairness in the fight against bloodthirsty European Crusaders led by Richard the Lion-Hearted. Intricate Persian-inspired illustrations feature a kaleidoscope of color and portray key moments in

## Web Connections

The Web sites listed below, as well as additional Web sites about the Arab world, can be accessed through the Book Links Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks>. Click on the "Web Connections" link to access the list. The sites were verified at the time of publication, but please check that they remain valid before using them in an educational setting.

- "Arab Gateway" at <http://www.al-bab.com>, maintained by journalist Brian Whitaker, presently Middle East editor of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, provides a wealth of well-organized information on the Arab world, including country-by-country analyses, maps, and time lines, and detailed information on Arab art, literature, music, poetry, architecture, language, science, history, and more.
- From the University of Pennsylvania's Middle East Center, the "Marhaba: Welcome to the World of Arabic" page at <http://mec.sas.upenn.edu/resources/marhaba.html> includes a list of lesson plans relating to Arab history, geography, language, and culture. Topics include coffee, Arabian horses, Arabs and astronomy, Arab writing, and more; click on the "Marhaba Lesson Plans" link to access the list.

Saladin's life. Supplemental information includes an author's note, maps, a glossary, and a bibliography.

## Poetry

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. 2002. 160p. Greenwillow, \$16.99 (0-06-009765-5); HarperTempest, paper, \$6.99 (0-06-050404-8).

Gr. 6–up. Nye's poignant collection of poems about the Middle East offers insight into the values and traditions inherent in that part of the

## From the Editor's Chair: Discovering *Goha the Wise Fool*

by Patricia Lee Gauch, *Philomel Books*

I stumbled upon Goha in a tiny, dusty, creaky bookshop in Cairo, Egypt, where I was visiting my daughter who lives there. I met him in a small local paperback: a charming Middle Eastern folk hero, a trickster of sorts, at times witty, at times wise. He and his donkey were clearly Everyman, gathering stories around him that made his public laugh at him and love him probably because he was so endearingly vulnerable.

He and his witty stories would be perfect for a picture book. I knew it instantly. I would need just the right translator to gather the stories and write them, and I would need a wonderful illustrator.

Luckily for me, shortly after I discovered Goha, by coincidence I met Denys Johnson-Davies, probably the best-known translator of Arabic in the Middle East. Canadian-born and famous for translating much of Naguib Mahfouz's fiction, he is known for his ability to capture the voice and tone of Arabic work. Yes, he would gather and translate stories for us.

It was some time in the middle of the night after I got home to the States, that I decided that it was madness to use an American illustrator for this book. A Middle Easterner should illustrate a Middle Eastern tale. But who? It was another middle-of-the-night brainstorm when I remembered seeing Goha depicted on *khiyamiyas*, large appliquéd hangings, sewn by tentmakers in the Cairo *souk* (marketplace). Could I possibly get a tentmaker to illustrate the Goha stories?

The tentmakers are almost an anachronism even in the paradox that is Cairo. Gathered in a 350-year-old, rose granite-covered marketplace, one of Cairo's last, tentmakers sit cross-legged in stalls, sewing and displaying their *khiyamiyas*. At one time they designed and sewed the colorful Islamic tents for funerals and weddings; but in modern days they also sew the appliquéd *khiyamiyas* for tourists: the invincible folk hero, Goha, is a favorite and lively subject.

Before the next day was out, my daughter had gone to the tentmakers' *souk* in Cairo, photographed 10 different Gohas—serious Gohas, distinguished Gohas, jaunty Gohas, whimsical Gohas—and e-mailed them to me and my art director, Semadar Megged. In our New York office, we printed the samples and laid them out

in the conference room. The serious Goha was lovely and colorful, reminding us of the elaborate carvings in Egyptian temples, but it was the warmly simple Goha of the tentmakers Hany and Hag El Hamdy that Semadar and I loved: slightly round with a colorful and jaunty cap and banded pants, every emotion from anger to surprise to determination found its way to his pudgy face. In short we fell in love with him.

But would these two tentmakers want to create illustrations for a picture book? Again, my daughter became the go-between, and soon she had their answer: not only would they illustrate the book, they would "reach across the world with pleasure."

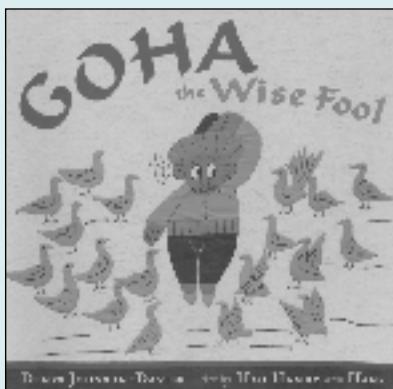
It was a wonderful thing to imagine them working away in their "factory" during that next year. I visited it after the book was in production, and discovered

the craftsmen and their fellows on the second floor of a centuries-old building with light streaming in through dusty windows that looked onto a rubble courtyard where chickens pecked the stones. In their robes, they sat cross-legged in a circle on the floor, their needles moving so quickly I could barely see them make their stitches.

Just under a year later, we opened a giant package of *khiyamiyas* in our New York office. The colors of the appliquéd quilts were exquisite: bold blues and earthy greens, warm apricots and brilliant yellows. But it

was the character, brought to life by the colors and presentations, that took our hearts away. As Semadar and I went through the illustrations—here he was with his 13 donkeys, here he was with his son carrying the donkey on his back, now here he was weighing his cat—I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. I loved this Goha.

In this world torn by war, where Westerners and Middle Easterners seemed hard put to understand each other, here in this delicious folk hero is a shared humanity. Semadar and I in our New York office, with the sounds of taxis at our lobby door, had put a book together with craftsmen whose tradition was as old as Cairo itself, perhaps older. And what we had discovered in our whimsical, clever, vulnerable Goha was that we on this side of the world laugh at the same things, fear the same things, are embarrassed by the same things as our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world. Goha, called Nasrudin in Iran and Afghanistan, Hoja Nasrudin in Turkey, other names in other places, is all of us no matter the name.



world. Published after the September 11 attacks, this small, timely collection illustrates the drama of the present war through everyday moments without sentimentality.

*The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East.* Edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. 1998. 144p. Simon & Schuster, \$22.95 (0-689-81233-7).

Gr. 6–up. An exceptional anthology for any library, this book includes artwork and poems by more than 100 artists and poets from a wide range of countries in the Middle East. The themes range from homeland and exile to love and childhood. The full-page paintings are exquisite and vary in style from narrative folk art and intricate Arabic calligraphy to surrealism and contemporary graphics.

## Folktales

Bahous, Sally. *Sitti and the Cats: A Tale of Friendship.* Illus. by Nancy Malick. 1997. 32p. Roberts Rinehart, \$13.95 (1-879313-61-0); paper, \$7.95 (1-57098-171-X).

Gr. 1–5. This captivating Palestinian fairy tale with energetic pictures in a bright folk style revolves around Sitti (the term used by Palestinians to mean “lady” or “grandmother”) and her friend’s encounter with a family of magical cats. Palestinian-born Bahous draws on her childhood memories to create an authentic setting and tone.

Hickox, Rebecca. *The Golden Sandal.* Illus. by Will Hillenbrand. 1998. 32p. Holiday, \$17.95 (0-8234-1331-4); paper, \$6.95 (0-8234-1513-9).

Gr. 1–5. This charming retelling of the ancient Iraqi Cinderella story will enchant young readers. In this version, Maha is a beautiful, kind girl whose fisherman father does not notice the injustices inflicted by her stepmother because he is away from home much of the time. The prince is a rich merchant’s son, and the fairy godmother is a little red fish that comes to Maha’s rescue. Subdued illustrations portray details of the Babylonian era and give the story a whimsical touch.

Johnson-Davies, Denys. *Goha the Wise Fool.* Illus. by Hag Hamdy and Hany. 2005. 40p. Philomel, \$16.99 (0-399-24222-8).

K–Gr. 3. “Beguiling” adequately describes Goha, the age-old wise fool who has charmed readers throughout Arab history. Children will enjoy these 15 entertaining short stories of Goha and his antics that are marked by striking illustrations made by a team of Cairo tent makers in the form of traditional *khiyamiya* quilts.

Kimmel, Eric A. *The Three Princes.* Illus. by Leonard Everett Fisher. 1994. 32p. Holiday, \$17.95 (0-8234-1115-X); paper, \$6.95 (0-8234-1553-8).

Gr. 1–5. In this enchanting story, a princess “who was as wise as she was beautiful” must choose between three

princes, two who are wealthy and one who is poor. To help her make a decision, she sends each on a mission for one year to “bring back the rarest thing you find in your travels,” and declares that she will marry the one who finds the rarest thing. Fisher’s bold illustrations accompany the story. Also see Kimmel’s *The Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Holiday, 1996), which captures the flavor and excitement of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Zeman, Ludmila. *Sindbad: From the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights.* 1999. 32p. Tundra, \$17.95 (0-88776-460-6).

Gr. 3–6. Readers will delight at the hyperbole the author employs as she eloquently retells the adventures of Sindbad in this classic sailing story. The narrative commences with Sindbad and his crew landing on a whale that is disguised as an island and continues with Sindbad flying on a monstrous beast and sleeping in a pit of vipers. Vivid illustrations with traditional Persian decorative carpet borders will transport the reader into an ancient world full of mystery and wonder. Endpaper maps trace the course of Sindbad’s wanderings, and an author’s note describes sources and research. Also see the other books in the trilogy: *Sindbad in the Land of the Giants* (Tundra, 2001) and *Sindbad’s Secret* (Tundra, 2003).

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**Goha teaches his son a life lesson and ends up carrying his donkey in *Goha the Wise Fool*, retold by Denys Johnson-Davies, illustrated by Hag Hamdy and Hany.**