

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Shadow Spinner by Susan Fletcher

Book Information

Susan Fletcher, Shadow Spinner

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When Marjan, a thirteen-year-old crippled girl, joins the Sultan's harem in ancient Persia, she gathers for Shahrazad the stories which will save the queen's life.

Award: ABA Children's Book Council; ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Blue Spruce Award/Nominee; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Countries/Regions, Iran; Disabilities, Physical; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Abu Muslem the former vizier of the Sultan, who was banished when he helped young girls escape; he disguises himself as a blind storyteller at the bazaar

Auntie Chava and Uncle Eli Marjan's owners, they bought her from her stepfather but treat her as a daughter

Ayaz the servant boy of Abu Muslem

Dunyazad Shahrazad's younger sister; Shahrazad tells stories to her and the Sultan every night

Farah the woman who had been the servant girl of Marjan's mother; she hides Marjan in her house

Marjan a young crippled girl who is a great storyteller

Mitra a little girl in the harem with a pet gazelle; she picks the lock of Marjan's prison room

Shahrazad the Sultan's wife; her ability to tell stories keeps her alive

Shahryar the Sultan who, until he married Shahrazad, had killed all of his wives

Soraya the copper-haired servant girl of the Khatun; both she and the Khatun want her to be the next queen

the Khatun Sultana the Sultan's mother, who controls the harem

Zaynab an old woman who is the Sultan's governor of messenger pigeons

Vocabulary

abhor to hate

jinn in Islamic myth, a spirit who can appear in animal or human form

labyrinth a combination of winding passages making it difficult to find an exit, a maze

moazzen a person in the Muslim religion who calls for daily prayers

vizier a person of high political office who works closely with the king

Synopsis

Shadow Spinner is the story of Marjan, a crippled servant girl who is a talented storyteller living in a land ruled by a sultan. She has been living with the kindhearted "Auntie" Chava and "Uncle" Eli since her stepfather sold her as a slave after her mother's death. As the story opens, Marjan and Auntie Chava enter the gates of the Sultan's palace to sell jewels and fine silks to the women in the Sultan's harem. There Marjan hopes to get a glimpse of her hero, Shahrazad, the Sultan's wife and an expert storyteller. Marjan greatly admires Shahrazad's courage in volunteering to marry the bloodthirsty Sultan Shahryar in order to bring an end to his practice of marrying a new wife each night only to execute her the following morning.

The practice began when the Sultan's first wife had been found with another man. In a jealous rage, he had her killed, as well as each wife that followed, to prevent further betrayals. The beautiful Shahrazad, however, had been able to delay her death and,

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subsequently, those of future wives with a brilliant strategy. On the night she married the Sultan, she asked to tell one final story to her younger sister, Dunyazad. The Sultan gave permission and also listened to the story. When Shahrazad stopped the story at an exciting place just before dawn, the Sultan had allowed her to live until the following night to complete the story. By telling other tales day after day, she has been able to delay her execution for two and a half years.

While Auntie Chava is showing her wares to the women in the harem, Marjan begins telling stories to some children. Dunyazad overhears Marjan and takes her to meet Shahrazad because Shahrazad is having difficulty finding new stories to tell the Sultan, and Dunyazad thinks Marjan can supply them. After several attempts to recall a tale that Shahrazad has not already told, Marjan finally remembers one about a mermaid named Julnar. Returning home with Aunt Chava, Marjan worries that her tale is boring and will not keep Shahrazad alive.

The next morning, though, she discovers that Shahrazad is alive, and a eunuch soon comes to take her to the palace to be Shahrazad's servant. When Shahrazad greets Marjan, she tells her she needs to know the rest of the mermaid story. The Sultan had heard the story in his youth and knows there is more. Foolishly, Shahrazad had been too eager to please him and told him that she would be able to tell him the remainder of the tale. Unfortunately, Marjan does not know the rest. Dunyazad does not believe Marjan and claims that Marjan is not willing to tell the rest of the story because she has been threatened by the Sultan's mother, the Khatun, who does not trust the Sultan's wives to be faithful.

Several days later, Marjan sneaks out of the palace to find the storyteller at the bazaar who told the story of the mermaid. Late in the day she finds him with the help of a boy named Ayaz. The storyteller continues the story but does not have enough time to finish the tale before she must return to the palace. When she returns, she tells Shahrazad the story and is relieved the next morning to discover

that she is still alive.

The next day both Marjan and Dunyazad return to the storyteller, this time carrying two baskets of pigeons. The storyteller relates more of the tale and agrees to send the remainder to the palace by notes attached to the pigeons' legs. The girls sneak back into the palace, where a servant girl finds Marjan and drags her to the Khatun, who interrogates her. After getting no response from her, the Khatun has her locked in a room.

The next morning Marjan escapes from the palace and returns to the storyteller with a note for him from her friend Zaynab, the palace pigeon keeper. The storyteller reads the note, then sends Marjan into hiding. At the hiding place, she overhears that Zaynab has been tortured in the Khatun's attempt to find the location of the storyteller, so she leaves to warn him of the danger. When she reaches his home, however, she finds he has left.

In a desperate move, Marjan heads back to the palace at daybreak and asks to see the Sultan. She tells him a tale that parallels the Sultan's murder of his wives and Shahrazad's lie to him about knowing the complete story of the mermaid. Marjan ends the story with the king forgiving the queen for her deception because her motive was to please him. The Sultan responds by forgiving Shahrazad and announcing a celebration of his permanent marriage to her. Meanwhile, however, the Khatun is still seeking to destroy Marjan and others who conspired with Shahrazad. They escape a week later, though, to take positions in the kingdom of the Sultan's brother. As Marjan departs on a camel, she imagines what her new life will hold.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

A cabinet-maker, oil merchants, musicians, and a carpet merchant all help in transporting Marjan outside the harem. How do you think those people are contacted? Why would they take such a risk?

Students might respond that Shahrazad probably trusted a eunuch to contact them. They probably were generously paid, which made them willing to take the risk.

Literary Analysis

The Sultan had been deeply hurt by his first wife's betrayal. Why do you think he continues killing his wives for such a long time? He finally stops when he marries Shahrazad, supposedly because he wants to hear the end of her stories. Is this the real reason he stops?

Students may respond that initially he killed his wives because he did not trust women, but as time went on, power became a factor. To just stop for no reason would have made him appear weak. Because he probably felt a genuine love for Shahrazad, he used her storytelling as an excuse for not killing her. As time went on, he even began to feel sorry for the killings but, as the powerful Sultan, could not admit it. Again, the storytelling afforded him an opportunity to save face.

Inferential Comprehension

Each time the Khatun was present, there was a sickly rotten smell. What do you think caused the odor?

Perhaps she did not bathe regularly or, perhaps, her extreme obesity was responsible for a disease or disorder that caused the smell.

Constructing Meaning

Marjan said she could feel sorry for the Sultan, but was not sure it was right to forgive him as Shahrazad had done. Do you think the Sultan should be forgiven? Why or why not?

Some students may respond that because he genuinely seemed to be sorry, he should be forgiven. Others may believe that the wrongs he committed are too great to warrant forgiveness.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Marjan is of the Muslim religion. One of the traditions she follows is answering the call to morning, noon, and sunset prayers. Ask the students to research and write a report on other traditions in the Muslim religion.

Making Predictions The book ends with Marjan imagining her new life beyond the green hills in the palace of Samarkand. Ask the students to write another chapter of the book describing Marjan's arrival at the palace.

Recognizing Details Dinars, copper fils, and silver dirhams are denominations of money mentioned in the book. Ask the students to research and find pictures of the money. If someone in the class or the community possesses any of the coins, ask to borrow them for display in the classroom. After the students draw and cut out cardboard coins, designate one day that they can earn coins for work completed, good behavior, etc. On another day, allow them to spend their accumulated coins on small prizes or special privileges.

Recognizing Setting The author describes beautiful terraces and courtyards inside the palace. Ask the students to draw and color one of them. Display their artwork around the classroom.