

1. Nye, N.S. (2002). *19 varieties of gazelle*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Naomi Shihab Nye published *19 Varieties of Gazelle* in response to the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and states in the introduction that, "...a huge shadow had been cast across the lives of so many innocent people and an ancient culture's pride (Nye, xv)." From this place, Nye pulls together much of her previously published poetry, along with poems written specifically for this book, to create a remarkable work that should not be left out of the study of Middle Eastern literature. While dealing with broad cultural events, she gives us personal glimpses at the people in her life. In hearing a local merchant describe her father, "He always looked dreamy, preoccupied, like he could see things other people couldn't see," Nye thinks to herself, "Well, yes, that's what immigrants look like. They always have other worlds in their minds (Nye xiii)." Needless to say, Nye's introduction alone is worth reading.

*19 Varieties of Gazelle* is separated into two sections with thirty poems in each section. Section one takes us on a very intimate journey that includes poems about Nye's friends, neighbors, father, uncle, cousins, grandmother, and everyday objects rich with symbolism. Through Nye's honest and crafted words, everyday items such as lemons, almonds, olives, fig trees, embroidered cloth, and Arabic coffee come to represent universally important values of home, hearth, community, and humanity. In the midst of these poems are also ones that shock the reader to the reality of occupation, war, and loss. Soldiers are commonplace, freedoms are limited, carefree

times of the past are mourned. One poem that stuck with me was “For the 500<sup>th</sup> Dead

Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh (Nye, 53-54):”

Little sister Ibtisam,  
our sleep flounders, our sleep tugs  
the cord of you name.  
Dead at 13, for staring through  
the window into a gun barrel  
which did not know you wanted to be  
a doctor.

I would smooth your life in my hands,  
pull you back. Had I stayed in your land,  
I might have been dead too,  
for something simple like staring  
or shouting what was true  
and getting kicked out of school.  
I wandered stony afternoons  
owning all their vastness.

Now I would give them to you,  
guiltily, you, not me.  
Throwing this ragged grief into the street,  
scissoring news stories free from the page  
but they live on my desk with letters, not cries.

How do we carry the endless surprise  
of all our deaths? Becoming doctors  
for one another, Arab, Jew,  
instead of guarding tumors of pain  
as if they hold us upright?

People in other countries speak easily  
of being early, late.  
Some will live to be eighty.  
Some who never saw it  
will not forget your face.

Section two of the collection starts off covering broader topics and the poems are titled as such: “Arabic,” “Jerusalem,” and “Holy Land.” There is a poem called “Peace,”

but I was more moved by “How Long Peace Takes (Nye, 123).” It is told in four line stanzas and couplets to moving effect. The last of the poem is especially effective:

As long as the questions – what if I  
were you? – has two heads

As long as the back of the skull  
is vulnerable and the temple and the chest

As long as anyone feels exempt  
or better and one pain is separate  
from another and people are pressed flat  
in any place

And longer

If every day the soldier slaps  
another cousin's face

To state that Nye's work is culturally authentic and accurate is an understatement. She has traveled the Middle East in search of commonalities and in search of a better understanding of her people and her "cousins." Nye works diligently for the Seeds for Peace organization that is dedicated to bringing teenagers together for dialogue and understanding and donates part of the proceeds from her work to the organization. Naomi Shihab Nye is a talented author and I recommend her other work fashioned for a younger middle school audience, also. Although *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is recommended for ages nine through adult, I would not use the entire collection for children under the age of twelve in a library or academic setting. I would hesitate to allow my daughter to read this collection on her own until she was at least twelve as much of it is told using symbolism and metaphor. Some of the subject matter would definitely need a parent, children's librarian, or teacher to put it in context to historical/world events. This collection would be worthy of a multi-cultural unit about the

Palestinian/Jewish conflict used in conjunction with Jewish literature. It is certainly long enough, at 160 pages, to be used in lieu of a chapter book and it certainly touches upon a wide variety of relationships within the Middle Eastern culture.

2. D'Adamo, F. (2003). *Iqbal*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

D'Adamo chooses to tell the story of a real Pakistani boy named Iqbal through a fictional narrator, Fatima. Through Fatima, we learn of the horrors of child slavery/labor in Pakistan as she is bonded to an evil rug trader, Hussain Khan, whose goods are created by children on primitive looms. Fatima and the other children have very little memory of life before their enslavement. They are not allowed to see the outside world, learn to read or write, or even go to the bathroom except during the scheduled time. They are fed thin lentil soup and bread and must work at a focused and steady pace in order to "work off their families' debt." The children are led to believe that they are making daily progress towards freedom despite never having seen anyone actually work off the debt. Still, the children feel lucky to work in the carpet trade instead of the brick trade as they have been told the horrors of that life. Working with thread until one's blisters on fingertips burst and harden over seems luxurious compared to the alternative.

The children's obedient existence is disrupted by the arrival of a young boy named Iqbal who is considered an artist with the loom, but also a rebel. Iqbal is forthright with the other children that they will never work off their families' debt and that their only hope is to escape. The children start waking from their trance-like state and begin breaking small rules, such as staying up late to talk. Iqbal finally makes his

escape and the others are left to wonder what happened to him until he arrives days later with the police. Hussain Khan bribes the police and throws Iqbal into the Tomb – an isolation chamber devoid of light, water, or food. The children, led by Fatima, bring Iqbal food and water each evening to help him survive. What he shares with the others is the beginning of new life for them as he discovered the Bonded Labor Liberation Front of Pakistan while he was free. Soon the children, led by Iqbal, plan their escape from slavery.

I understand why the author chose to tell this story from Fatima's point-of-view. We were able to see from a first-person point-of-view how a child might view the world if resigned to a life of slavery. We then see the phases of enlightenment, restlessness, rebelliousness, and then freedom through Fatima. Iqbal is treated as a mythic figure in the novel to great effect.

Iqbal Masih is indeed a martyr for the child labor movement as he was assassinated at age thirteen shortly after winning a national award from Reebok for his bravery and speaking to the United Nations. There are numerous websites that have information about Iqbal and child labor. A couple good ones to start are [www.childrensworld.org](http://www.childrensworld.org) and [www.freethechildren.com](http://www.freethechildren.com).

Frances D'Adamo researched *Iqbal* with the help of the Bonded Labor Liberation Front of Pakistan and first published this novel in Italian in 2001. The book is recommended for grades three through seven, but I would consider using it for low-readers up to grade nine. I believe this book would be a great part of a unit researching Middle Eastern culture and child labor. (128 pages)

3. Heide, F.P. and Gilliland, J.H. (1992). *Sami and the time of troubles*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Ted Lewin's watercolor illustrations bring emotional impact to Florence Heide and Judith Gilliland's straightforward prose in the telling of young Sami and his family surviving in war-torn Beirut. Sami describes quite simply what it is like for his family to live and hide in their uncle's basement while a war rages overhead. The dense and dark depictions of basement life contrast vividly with Sami's recollections of a day at the beach, an imagined peach orchard that his father told him about, and the one day of outside play allowed during a break in the fighting. The basement is lined with treasures from a better time – bright rugs and a wedding vase. The outside world surprisingly bustles back to life for one day for a game of soldier, shopping at the market, and a wedding with bombed buildings and cars as a backdrop. Sami's relationship with his sister is one of protector and is only picked up on through subtle clues within the prose. Sami's relationship with his grandfather unfolds gently as his grandfather keeps hope alive and gently tutors Sami to think of himself as an agent of peace.

*Sami and the Time of Troubles* is a beautifully told story that introduces just enough of the Beirut war to the young five-year-old reader and is useable with a wide audience up to age nine. The story provides a springboard for more research and discussion if needed, but it stands well on its own. It works well by showing the results of the war on everyday life and the infrastructure of a city, but also shows the country in normalcy. Both these perspectives are important when teaching a multi-cultural unit. (40 pages)

4. Winter, J. (2005). *The librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq*. Orlando FL: Harcourt Books.

Jeanette Winter was able to bring the story of Alia Muhammad Baker, the chief librarian of Basra's Central Library, to life with the help of a *New York Times* reporter named Shaila K. Dewan. Their collaboration led to the simple, but effective telling of how a single, brave librarian saved over 30,000 books from destruction when the library burned during the Iraq invasion of Basra on April 6, 2003. Winter also illustrated the book with acrylic and pen in an almost storyboard style. My only complaint is that the Iraq's do not have distinct features and appear somewhat stereotypical.

I would like to read more about Alia Baker and her efforts to save the collection. I imagine there is much more to tell than is covered in this simplified version. There has been much talk about the lack of news coverage in Iraq due to the danger to reporters, but I do hope that one day the people of Iraq will have their stories told in detail. Until then, it is wonderful to have this short, but important story told of one woman's bravery and the difference that she made. (Ages 4-8 / 32 pages)

5. Climo, S. (1989). *The Egyptian Cinderella*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Junior Books.

Rhodopis was a small Grecian girl stolen by pirates and sold as a slave in Egypt where she immediately was noticed for her unusual beauty as she had blonde hair, green eyes, and skin that turned rosy in the sun – thus, the name “Rhodopis” or “rosy-cheeked.” Rhodopis was treated cruelly by the other servants, but her master was so enchanted by her graceful dancing that he had a pair of dainty slippers of rose-red gold

made for her. The other servants reacted with jealousy and vengeance as they left her behind when they went to a big celebration for the Pharaoh Amasis. All was not lost, however, as help arrived in the form of a great falcon, the symbol of the god Horus, who stole a slipper from Rhodopis and flew to the Pharaoh and dropped it in his lap. Of course, the Pharaoh took this as a sign from the gods as to whom he should marry and he searched for the rightful owner of the slipper. After many trials and tribulations, Rhodopis was discovered as the rightful owner of the slipper and his new queen.

I actually enjoyed the telling of this Cinderella tale and it was interesting to see how my daughter reacted to it as Disney's version of Cinderella was her first obsession. Isabella actually enjoyed it and didn't seem to connect the two fairytales. According to the author, Shirley Climo, this version of the Cinderella story is one of the oldest and was first recorded in the first century B.C. by a Roman historian. Ruth Heller's watercolors are vivid and enjoyable. There was an attempt to include many archeological artifacts within the illustrations and the depictions of the Egyptians of ancient time are what we are accustomed to seeing from ancient Egyptian art. I think this would be a fun book to try to use as a foundation for learning more about ancient Egypt. (Ages 4-9) (32 pages)

6. Thompson, L. (2001). *One riddle, one answer*. New York: Scholastic Press.

This book for ages four through eight was beautifully done and such a joy to find a book that focuses on smarts over beauty as a young princess looks for a husband who can solve a riddle that uses several mathematical steps. However, the story was not a revelation of culture for me through the prose of Lauren Thompson. The

illustrations of Linda S. Wingerter, however, did depict a desert landscape, architecture, and garb of what we might expect to see in the ancient Middle East. This book might be better used as a way to get girls interested in math or as a way to investigate whether the illustrations are historically accurate or not. I could not find information to verify its accuracy or authenticity one way or the other. It was enjoyable, though, and the illustrations are beautiful. (32 pages)