

Teaching The Middle East: Read Aloud Literature and Lesson Plans to Introduce Primary Aged Students, K through 5 to the History and Culture of the Region

Author of Lessons:

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Grade Levels:

Varied units for primary aged students.

Subject Area:

Language Arts

Introduction:

Presented here are a number of lesson plans that utilize literature that is either from or about the region of the Middle East and Central Asia. Chief among the goals for this project are: to expand student knowledge about the culture and geography of the region, to nurture their passion for literature and interest in pursuing independent reading, and to foster students' abilities to engage in literary discussion in ways that advance their understanding of the material and its relationship to their personal experience. A variety of books and stories are described and ideas for developing lessons and classroom activities are suggested. The children's literature selected here covers the range from kindergarten level through the elementary grades, with each of the five units loosely grouped as 'early primary', 'primary to intermediate', or 'intermediate' with regard to student reading and listening comprehension skills or the sophistication of the ideas and concepts discussed. Instructors will find that in general, these books will be very easy reading for students that read at expected grade level. The use of easy reading materials gives the instructor the opportunity to fully engage less proficient readers, including some English language learners, in both the shared listening experience and the independent rereading of texts. The stories and books recommended here share important attributes. They are highly engaging, they easily lend themselves to thoughtful discussion and imagination, they have the potential to help children gain insight about human experience, and they expose students to diverse cultures, both past and current, as well as different lives and ways of living.

All of the lesson plans suggested here build upon teacher "read aloud" time, in which the identified texts are read - and hopefully reread - to the whole class. The shared reading sessions are central to the success of these units as they offer the students the opportunity to share opinions and interpretations that enhance everyone's understanding of the material, and they increase the chance that personal experiences or memories that relate to the story or themes will be elicited. Most of the selections are short enough that the book or story reading and the discussion can be satisfactorily achieved in a 30 minute period, though intermediate level selections need about 40 minutes. Exceptions will be noted. Vocabulary words that are critical to story comprehension have been listed with easily understandable definitions. These definitions are most effectively utilized when they are quickly woven into the instructor's reading of the title or narrative as they appear in the story. For some students this will be pivotal to their comprehension of the story, for others it will reinforce their understanding of vocabulary in a different context. Each unit is planned around one or more themes, and each book or story within the unit builds on ideas explored in the ones before. Many of the units propose to develop or expand student familiarity with literary genres (e.g. trickster tales) and to help them learn to compare and contrast different texts by looking at both narrative and illustrations. The discussion points are meant to spark discussion among students and support the development of their skills in identifying themes and literary elements. Recommendations of additional books and stories that fit the theme(s) are included for each unit. At the intermediate levels,

instructors could elect to use some of the questions for a writing exercise after ideas are processed in group.

All books are in print and widely available; most are inexpensive. A world map is important for all units.

Lesson Objectives:

- To provide opportunities for children to engage in enjoyable experiences with literature.
- To provide a context for studying literary themes illuminating the human experience in stories featuring the Middle East and Central Asia.
- To nurture student knowledge of literary genres and themes that will motivate them to explore books on their own.
- To provide opportunities for literary discussion and analysis regarding themes, comparison of texts, and comparison of illustration.
- To provide opportunities for children to increase their comprehension of texts by sharing observations, opinions, and personal experience.
- To provide new or deeper understanding of specific vocabulary within the context of the stories.
- To provide opportunity for meaningful participation of students at all reading levels in the study and discussion of literature.
- To increase student knowledge about the geographical location of the Middle East and Central Asia in relationship to the rest of the world.

Much inspiration for this project as well as a wealth of practical wisdom for teaching students about literature was provided by Literary Discussion in the Elementary School, Joy Moss, National Council of Teachers of English, 2002

Unit 1: Early Primary Level

Materials:

Books: **What's The Matter Habibi?**, Betsy Lewin

How The Camel Got His Hump, Rudyard Kipling

How the Camel Got Its Hump: Tales From Around The World, Little Golden Book

Tales Told in Tents: Stories from Central Asia, (collection) Sally Pomme Clayton

Story for this unit: *Carpet of Dreams*, a story from Afghanistan

Zoobooks: The Camel Family

World Map

Movie: (optional) *How the Camel Got His Hump*, Narrated by Jack Nicholson, Produced by Rabbit Ears Productions

Background Notes for Instructor:

This unit begins with the absolutely delightful story and illustrations about Habibi, an Egyptian camel, who takes himself for a quick trip to the bazaar to acquire a 'fez', the traditional hat for men in many Middle Eastern countries. His name, Habibi, is the Arabic word for darling, and one other Arabic word used in this story is 'babouces', the word for slippers. This story only hints at the infamous camel temperament which is more fully described in Rudyard Kipling's How The Camel Got His Hump. The retelling of this story in the Golden Books version not only gives students a chance to hear a good story again, but an opportunity to judge the merits of the different books, including the language used and the illustrations. The Golden Book version also includes other legends about how camels got humps, providing an opportunity to discuss with students the tradition, across many cultures, of using myths and legends to explain the world as we know it. The last couple pages share facts about camels and how they are ideally suited for life in the desert. The *Zoobooks Series* offers lots of factual information and fun activities – including coloring and crossword puzzles – that appeal to young children. By sharing portions of the Camel Family edition together, in the 'read aloud' format, children may well become interested in exploring other editions in the series. The final story in this unit, *Carpet of Dreams*, is a wonderful tale from a truly exceptional collection of stories gathered from the Middle Eastern and Central Asian region. This is by far the longest story to be read in this unit but has a fairy tale quality that is sure to appeal to all children. It tells of a young boy who becomes a merchant on the Silk Route in ancient history - by camel, of course.

Teaching time: Six 30 minute sessions (*Carpet of Dreams* – two sessions)

Specific notes for each book:

Whats The Matter Habibi?

Important Vocabulary:

Habibi – Arabic word for 'darling'

plead – to try to change someone's mind by asking again and again

babouches – Arabic word for slippers

bazaar – market or marketplace, usually with both indoor and outdoor stalls

fez – a round hat that usually has a tassel and is worn by many men in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East

tassel – an ornament made of cord or string

bargain – discussion about price

Discussion Points:

- This story is set in modern day Egypt. Using the illustrations to foster the discussion, ask students to talk about some of the similarities and differences they see between Egypt and where they live. Draw their attention to clothing; some people wear “western” styles while others wear traditional Middle Eastern styles.
- The issue of camel temperament will come up in other books in this unit. What words might your students use to describe Habibi’s personality?

How The Camel Got His Hump (Kipling)

Important Vocabulary:

“Scrutiating idle” - Author’s phrase for very lazy

bit – piece of medal going through a horse’s mouth to which the reins are attached

trot – running with short, regular steps

fetch – to go and bring back

yoke – a piece of wood placed over the neck of an animal when it is used for plowing

plough or plow – to turn over the soil

djinn – genie; a magic servant

idle – not working

reflection – an image sent back, as from a mirror or water

Also:

palaver

indaba

} meeting to discuss some problems

punchayet

pow-wow

Discussion Points:

- Talk with students about the meaning of the author’s phrase “the world was so new and all.” This story is part of a long tradition in folktales that describe the creation of the world and explain why things are the way we see them today. Refer to other stories with which your students may be familiar (e.g. Native American folktales).
- This story is set in an Arabian desert. Give students at least a general idea of where Arabia is geographically and encourage them think about the challenges of life in the desert.
- Discuss the meaning of the camel’s retort, “Humph” and what that suggests about his temperament. Talk about the play on words in this story: humph and hump and help students understand the cleverness of the djinn’s threat and the justice of a hump that makes work easier in the desert.

How the Camel Got It’s Hump (Golden Book)

Important Vocabulary:

haughty - very proud

bandit – robber

genie- a magic servant

wealth – money

taxes – money taken by the government to pay for government services

Discussion Points:

- The inclusion of other tales about the camel's hump in this book offers the opportunity to reiterate the point that people from around the world share the tradition of creation folktales. Ask students to share their opinions about their favorite version.
- Ask students to compare the telling of the Rudyard Kipling tale in the two books. Was anything lost in the shorter, Golden Book, version? Be sure to compare illustrations as well, and encourage them to think about how illustrations make a book more interesting.
- Spend some time with the final pages of this book that describe the special qualities of camels, sharing what you know about their value as pack animals before the invention of modern vehicles.

Zoobooks Series: The Camel Family

This magazine has wonderful pictures and a lot of information about camels (which include, by the way, llamas, alpacas, and vicunas). It is not likely that you will want to read the entire book, so select sections that you think your students will be most interested in. Some of the activities included here may be appropriate for your students.

Discussion Points:

- Talk to students about the difference between fiction and non-fiction and ask them to put each of the reading so far into those categories and discuss why.

Tales Told in Tents – Carpet of Dreams

Note: plan for a long session, or break up reading into two sessions)

Important Vocabulary:

carpet - rug

weave – to make cloth by winding thread in and out

loom – a machine on which cloth is woven

merchant – person who buys and sells

Silk Road (AKA: Silk Route) – A network of roads that cross Central Asia, stretching from China to Turkey. Traders once traveled these roads buying and selling goods.

laden – carrying a heavy load

silk – thread which is produced from a caterpillar, cloth woven from this thread

caravanserai – inn for travelers

robe – long loose garment

royalty – member of a king's family

minaret – tower attached to a mosque

mosque – religious building for Muslims

bazaar – market-place

Discussion Points:

- To ensure student comprehension of this story in the first reading, stop after the first two paragraphs to explain the setting, which is a time in history when all rugs/carpet and most other fabrics were woven by hand. Also discuss the different roles of weaver and merchant.
- The back of the book offers a lovely map of the region which is very helpful when talking about the Silk Route, but students should also be helped to put the area in context with the use of a classroom world map.
- Help students understand why these kinds of carpets were (and continue to be) so valuable (e.g. hours of labor, expense of materials, beauty of product).

- Ask students to consider why it was that Arif's father changed his mind about his son traveling and becoming a merchant after Arif got the ruby.
- Reflect on the important role of the camel in the lives of people in the ancient Middle East and Central Asia. With trains, cars, airplanes and other vehicles, camels have lost a lot of their importance in the daily lives of the people in these regions, but some people continue to depend on camels to transport goods, or for food and clothing.

Other recommendations:

The movie of the Rudyard Kipling version of How the Camel Got His Hump, is fun for young children, and is preceded on the tape by How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin, also narrated by Jack Nicholson. It might inspire students to pursue reading some of Kipling's other tales on their own.

Tales Told in Tents has many wonderful stories for young readers; if the instructor would like to point out two great stories that are of the creation myth genre, check out *The Secret of Felt* and *The Girl Who Cried a Lake*. Readers should be encouraged to report back to the group or other interested readers.

To provide more stories from the Middle Eastern region, the books used for Unit 2 are well within the reach of most primary aged children but I would urge the instructor to nurture their interest by using the Unit 2 lesson plan.

Unit 2: Early Primary and Intermediate Levels

Materials:

Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs (compilation of stories collected by Sarah Conover and Freda Crane) Stories for this unit:

Mulla Nasruddin Hodja Feeds His Coat (Turkey)

All in the Family (Pakistan)

Hodja and the Pumpkin Tree (Turkey)

Words to Live By (Iran)

The Hungry Coat, Demi

Tales Told in Tents (collection) Sally Pomme Clayton

Story used for this unit: *The Whole Brain* (Kazakhstan)

World Map

Background Notes for Instructor:

The stories selected for this unit fall loosely into a genre of folktales that are intended to pass down wisdom about the world and about human behavior through the generations, much like Aesop's fables. All but one are very short, and they have been chosen for their wit and humor so as to interest young students. The particular goals of this unit are to expand student awareness of different types of legends or stories – with the ultimate goal of empowering students to recognize different genres such as creation myths, fairy tales, fables, legends, etc. – and to help students appreciate the contributions made by Middle Eastern cultures to this rich tradition. Most of the stories are available in the Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs collection. The main character of the two Turkish stories is variously known as Hodja or Hoca or Mulla Nasruddin, a widely popular Muslim hero in the Middle East. The story of *Hodja Feeds His Coat* is retold in a fabulously illustrated book version The Hungry Coat by Demi, which is a wonderful vehicle for giving students the opportunity to compare texts and illustrations. This second version is significantly longer and adds a lot to our understanding of the popularity of the Hodja character. *Words to Live By* deals with a temperamental ruler who, essentially, recognizes that he has an anger management problem and wants some help. This story offers good opportunities for students to share personal experience. The final story in this unit, *A Whole Brain*, from Tales Told in Tents, is the shortest but most priceless and speaks directly to its overall theme: the importance of storytelling, songs, and poems, for the communication of wisdom and insight throughout the centuries. The other stories in Tales Told in Tents are among my favorites in children's literature; it is a wonderful resource for any classroom.

Teaching time: six sessions averaging 30 minutes each; the first three stories are extremely short and the fourth, *Words to Live By*, is not only much longer, but is sure to spark a more lengthy discussion.

Specific notes for each story:

The Honorable Joha, Mulla Nasruddin Hodja Feeds His Coat

Important Vocabulary:

Ramadan – ninth month of the year when Muslims fast during the daylight hours.

debate – to discuss or argue

finest – best, most elegant

turban – headdress made of long cloth

Discussion Points:

- Share with students that Nasruddin Hodja is a character that has been famous throughout the Middle East and Central Asia for centuries; the many stories about Hodja are based on a real person by that name who was born around 1208 in Turkey. Ask students to consider this story and to share both their understanding of the “moral” of the tale and also their opinions as to why such a story would remain popular and relevant over so many centuries.
- Why is it important not to judge people by their appearance or belongings?
- What qualities might be more important in a friend?

All in the Family

Important Vocabulary:

strike – stopping of work

deaf – unable to hear

digest – to turn food into energy in the stomach and intestines

vein – small tube in the body along which blood runs to the heart

Discussion Points:

- Facilitate a discussion about the lesson of this story and how that might relate to the meaning of the title.
- Point out that while the main characters of most folktales and fables are people or animals, in this unusual example, the characters are body parts.
- Ask students to think about how this tale and the previous one (*Hodja Feeds His Coat*) are similar.

The Honorable Joha, Mulla Nasruddin Hodja and the Pumpkin Tree

Important Vocabulary:

Allah – Arabic word for God

contemplate – to look at intently or fixedly

Discussion Points:

- This story invites the reader to pause to appreciate the wonders of nature. Help students articulate the wisdom that is meant to be shared through this story. Have them identify some of the marvels of nature that they have noticed or enjoyed.
- Discuss how this story compares with the previous two in this unit.

Words to Live By

Important Vocabulary:

temperament – the nature of a person, their response to emotional events

changeable – changes often

imam (i-mām') – a religious leader of Muslim faith

perspective – way of looking at something

assembly – meeting

homespun – home made, simple

motto – short phrase to sum up an attitude

spineless – weak and indecisive

Also: discuss feeling words used in the story: ‘pride’, ‘disappointment’, ‘sorrow’

Discussion Points:

- The ruler in this story has both bad and good qualities of character – help students identify them.
- Encourage students to think about the ideas this story explores for living a more satisfying or fulfilling life. (e.g.: Having the courage to look at one’s own faults or weaknesses and trying to improve upon them.)
- Discuss who provided the ruler with words of wisdom to live by. Did he need to be scholarly or wealthy to have this kind of wisdom?
- Consider the words, “This too shall pass” and how they might help the ruler control his moods or temper. Help students think of real life examples – for the ruler, or for themselves- in which these words might be helpful, and how.
- Ask students to think of other words or mottos that help them, or could help them in frustrating or irritating situations (e.g. when an academic task is hard or they are aware that they are not getting it all correct, when they feel left out socially, when they lose a game, etc) (The power of what is often called “self talk” in psychological research should not be underestimated. For example, students can be helped to avoid thinking about themselves in critical or negative language when they are frustrated by difficult situations or tasks. They can learn to use more encouraging “self talk” such as, “this is hard for me, but it doesn’t mean that I am stupid, I just need more practice.”

The Hungary Coat

Important Vocabulary:

caravansary – inn for travelers
banquet – a large, formal dinner
preen – to smarten or tidy oneself up
swagger – to walk in a proud way, swinging your body

Discussion Points:

- After reading thus far, the other stories in this unit, this is a great time to revisit the story in this very different version. Students will be able to see a big difference in the narrative and will appreciate the way the illustrations bring this story to life. Take time to talk about these elements.
- At the end of this version of the story, Hoca gives a bit of a lecture to his friends about judging people on superficial qualities. Reread this section to your students and ask them to talk about what they think he is trying to teach them.

A Whole Brain

Discussion Points:

- Share with students that in the past, huge percentages of the populations in all countries never learned to read, making the role of the professional storyteller, who frequently memorized many, many stories, highly valued for his or her ability to accumulate folktales, legends, and myths and to pass them down through generations. Some of the tales that were most treasured were the stories that made people think about their own behavior and how they chose to live their lives.
- Share with students that the stories or folk tales in this unit come from a part of the world that is largely Muslim or Islamic. Ask students to think of tales they have read that may have come

from other parts of the world and help them to understand that cultures from around the globe share the tradition of storytelling as a means to impart wisdom or knowledge.

Other recommendations:

Now that the class has discussed and compared stories that impart a lesson or moral, the Unit 3 lesson plans will expand the discussion to a different genre using different stories from the same books. After discussing the books in these two units, students will be much better able to identify types of tales and legends as they read independently. Student recognition of story genre can facilitate their comprehension and appreciation of new literature.

Unit 3: Primary and Intermediate Levels

Materials:

Tales Told in Tents (collection)

Story for this unit: *The Bag of Trickness* (Kazakhstan)

Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs (collection)

Stories for this unit: *The Wise Saillimai* (China)
Affanti and the Donkey's Tail (Turkey)

World Map

Also:

“Riddle Bazaar” A riddle solving activity found in **Tales Told in Tents**

Background Notes for Instructor:

These stories borrow from two literary genres: the trickster tales and stories involving the solving of riddles. Tricks and riddles delight young readers and can spark their interest in reading more tales in this vein from the Middle Eastern region and other parts of the world. The stories are fairly short, allowing time to discuss the riddles and tricks so that all students can appreciate the wit. The “Riddle Bazaar” included in the Tales Told in Tents collection, is a fun activity. It can be made more “user-friendly” for students by presenting the questions and solutions as a matching activity.

Teaching time: three 30 minute sessions

Specific notes on each story:

The Bag of Trickness

Important Vocabulary:

Erte, erte, ertede – long, long, ago (translation from Arabic)
yurt – round, domed tent made from a collapsible wooden frame covered with felt
steppe – flat grassland or desert. Much of Central Asia is steppe
tale - story

Discussion Points:

- A rereading and discussion of the meaning of the last three sentences of this story will help ensure comprehension by all students of the tricks employed and the outcome of this story. What was Aldar-Kose’s “bag of trickness?” What horse grew a “new tail?” Discuss the use of the play on words: tale and tail.

The Wise Saillimai

Important Vocabulary:

Hui - a group of people from a particular geographical region of China
escort – to accompany
coax – to persuade to do something
persist – to continue doing something in spite of the obstacles
virtuous – very good, very honest
Allah – Arabic word for God

Discussion Points:

- It is fun for students to have some time to process and discuss the ruler's four demands/riddles before proceeding to Sailimai's responses.
- Sailimai's responses are also a kind of riddle that students may not completely understand without discussion.
- Discuss the heroine in this story. The story describes her as, "poor and unschooled, but...(she) possessed a wise and deep heart." Ask students to describe some of her qualities.

The Honorable Joha, Mulla Nasruddin Hodja, Affanti and the Donkey's Tail

Important Vocabulary:

arrogant – very proud, excessively proud
inshaa Allah – God willing (translation from Arabic)
humble – modest, not proud

Discussion Points:

- Verify and reinforce student comprehension of the trick Affanti played on the emperor.
- This is a short story, which leaves time to encourage students to compare it to the other stories in this unit as well as other folktales, legends, or myths they may have read. In addition to helping them understand "trickster tales" as a specific kind of genre, guide them to think about the similarities they see in the heroes or heroines in these stories. The protagonists in trickster stories are almost always poorer, weaker, or less educated than the person they trick, and must use their wit and cunning to win in the end. Share with students that most of us love to root for the underdog in such situations, and that this might account for some of their popularity throughout many cultures and many centuries.

Further recommendations:

There are many wonderful trickster tales from around the world. One of the best is an Anansi the Spider tale out of Africa called "*All Stories Are Anansi's*" about a spider who has to complete three very tricky tasks in order to earn the rights to all folktales and myths.

Another exceptional story is *One Grain of Rice*, retold and illustrated by Demi. This story, from India, involves a "village girl" who uses a clever mathematical proposition to trick a stingy ruler. The story intrigues children of all ages with the simple mathematical formula and the how it is illustrated. Only in hardback but worth the \$20.00 sticker price.

From the Beautiful Signs collection used in this unit, students will also enjoy *Hodja and the Tricky Case*.

Unit 4: Primary and Intermediate Levels

Materials:

Muslim Child, (collection of stories) Rukhsana Khan

Stories for this unit: *The Black Ghost* (Canada)

Azeeza's First Fast (United States)

Sitti's Secrets, Naomi Shibab Nye

World Map

Background Notes for Instructor:

These three stories, in addition to being extremely engaging, offer invaluable opportunities to capture student interest in the Middle East and the Muslim religion. This unit explores some of the issues that Arab-American families face living in North America. These particular stories were selected to generate interest among students in understanding differences in religion or personal experience among their peers, while concurrently offering plenty of opportunity to recognize the universality of human experience. Like families of all religious beliefs, Muslim families vary enormously in their observance of their faith's religious traditions and rituals. It is also important to note that not all Arabs are Muslim; many religions are practiced in the Middle East, though Islam is certainly the principal religion in the region. The first two stories, from The Muslim Child, are about children in families that are fairly orthodox in their observance of Islam. They highlight religious practices that have likely stirred the curiosity of students who know little about the Muslim faith, but have friends or classmates that are Muslim, or have seen references to Islam in movies, or the media. In addition to some very engaging stories, The Muslim Child has several sections of background information about the history and traditions of Islam, making it a helpful resource for an instructor looking for answers to common questions about the religion. Religion is not a central issue in Sitti's Secrets. It is a lovely story, with remarkable illustrations, about Naomi, a young American girl who goes to Palestine to visit her grandmother. This story will particularly resonate with many children of immigrant families who have had similar experiences, especially those who, like Naomi, do not speak their grandparents' language.

Teaching time: three 40 minute sessions

Notes about specific texts:

The Black Ghost

Nabeel, a second grade boy who lives in Canada, has a difficult secret. He is so embarrassed by his mother's veiling of her head and face as an expression of her Muslim faith that he doesn't want his friends to know that she is his mother. This story offers a great opportunity to begin to demystify the issue of head scarving for students who have undoubtedly seen many variations of it in the media and in public places. The instructor should be able to tell students that while they may be familiar with many different kinds of head coverings, for both men and women, including turbans, scarves, and veils, that not all of them are an expression of the Muslim faith. Among women, in particular, many who wear scarves over their heads and hair, practice religions other than Islam, or simply wear scarves out of habit - a tradition that may well have developed as a means of protecting one's head from the heat of the sun. Many Muslim women do not wear any head scarves at all, and do not cover their faces as Nabeel's mother chooses to do. For Muslims, the decision concerning covering one's head has to do with their personal interpretation, or their families' interpretation, of the religious teachings of Islam. As in all religions, different people of the same faith interpret their religion differently. The religious directives of Islam suggest that women and men should be modest in public places and not attract the attention of the

opposite sex; some Muslims interpret that teaching to suggest that women should cover their heads and bodies in public. Many Muslim girls and women choose to wear head covering, some are pressured or forced to by their families. In a few countries in the world women are never allowed to choose for themselves and are all expected to cover their heads and bodies when out in public or face punishment from the government.

Important Vocabulary:

assalaamu alaikum (us-sa-lā'-mōō 'a-lā'-koom)- a customary or conventional Muslim greeting meaning "peace be with you."
hijaab (hi-jāb')- head covering
niqaab (ni-kāb') – face covering
coward – a person who is not brave

Discussion Points:

- Why was Nabeel embarrassed about his mother? Can you think of things that would have helped Nabeel deal with his problem?
- At the end of the story, Nabeel's friend, Danny, is also embarrassed. He thinks Nabeel will consider him a "coward". Why? What does Nabeel really think?

Azeeza's First Fast

Celebration of Ramadan is a central tradition of the Muslim faith. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar when Muslims fast during the daylight hours. As we learn in this story, people choose how often they wish to fast during this month, and young children (as well as people who are elderly or sick) are not expected to participate. Azeeza feels she is old enough to try for at least one day. The story has a nice twist when a student in her classroom has a birthday and his mother brings in a "chocolate birthday cake with sprinkles." There are a few Arabic words used in this story, all briefly defined in the margins of the pages near the narrative; there is also a pronunciation guide in the back of the book. The only illustration of significance is wonderful in its realistic depiction of classrooms across the U.S.

Important Vocabulary:

fast – a period when you stop eating
Ramadan – Muslim month of fasting, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar

Discussion Points:

- What made Azeeza so motivated to participate in Ramadan?
- How did Azeeza's classmate, Tony, and their teacher support her in her goal?

Sitti's Secrets

When Naomi visits her grandmother in Palestine, she finds that her "sitti" is a warm, skillful, and wise woman who shares the mysteries of her life with Naomi in spite of their language difference. The story opens with the words, "My grandmother lives on the other side of the earth. When I have daylight, she has night. ...I think about this when I am going to sleep. 'Your turn' I say." This theme, and the incredible drawings that illustrate it, create a terrific opportunity to teach about time zones and geography while also conveying a sense that like Naomi and her grandmother, we are all connected. English language learners will have much with which they can empathize as Naomi finds ways to communicate with her grandmother and children in the village who do not speak English. Oblique references to war in

Palestine remind readers that countries involved in wars are peopled by ordinary citizens who must carry on with their lives.

Important Vocabulary:

sitti - grandmother (Arabic translation)

Discussion Points:

- Why do you think it is that Naomi and her grandmother do not speak the same language?
- What is the meaning of the title of this book?
- Do you know the word for grandmother in another language?

Other recommendations:

Another favorite story from Muslim Child is *Jumbo Jelly Shoes*. This story deals with the Islamic restriction on the eating of pork or pork products. Any of the stories in this book are likely to appeal to students.

Unit 5: Intermediate Levels

Materials:

The Librarian of Basra, Jeanette Winter

Alia's Mission, Mark Alan Stamaty

Sami and the Time of the Troubles, Florence Parry Heide & Judith Heide Gilliland

The House of Wisdom, Florence Parry Heide & Judith Heide Gilliland

World Map

Background Notes for Instructor:

The first two books in this unit tell the true story of Alia Muhammad Baker, the chief librarian of the Central Library in Basra, Iraq, before and during the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003. It is a captivating, and in many ways uplifting story, brilliantly told and illustrated in two very different styles. Three of the four books in this unit, while not grim, expose students to some of the realities for people living in a war zone and can help offset some of the superficial or romanticized portrayals of war that children see in movies and video games. Some teachers may feel reticent about discussing the Iraq war because of likely differences of opinion among the school community about American involvement. Handled sensitively, however, discussions with students can give them an important opportunity to discuss aspects of this highly pertinent topic. The books in this unit make it extremely easy for the instructor to take a completely neutral position with regard to the war, which in turn helps students to focus on considering how people are affected by war, rather than whether or not a particular war is necessary or justified. Alia's "mission" in this non-fiction story, is to protect the books of the large library in which she works, from potential destruction or looting. The story elicits many interesting questions for students to consider, ranging from a discussion of the relationship between books and culture, to how people choose to behave in times of extreme crisis. Sami and the Time of the Troubles, tells of the experience of war from the eyes of a young boy. The war, in this case, is in Lebanon, but that point is not directly made in the story. The House of Wisdom revisits the theme of books, culture, and the importance of libraries. It is a recreation of the life of a real, historical figure, who lived in Baghdad over a thousand years ago and was one of a generation of scholars who translated books from all over the world for the legendary library; bayt al-hikmah (translated: the house of wisdom). This book is truly awesome for its entertainment value, gorgeous illustrations, and the thoughtful way in which it presents history to children.

The books are written at about a second to third grade reading level but the creativity of the authors and illustrators, as well as the compelling discussion topics they lend themselves to, will make these books appealing to the most sophisticated reader.

Teaching time: four 40 minute sessions.

Notes about specific books:

Alia's Mission

Author, illustrator Mark Alan Stamaty created this book, which is presented in comic strip style. Stamaty's comic strips have been widely published in many prestigious magazines (see book jacket flap). It will be important for students to have a chance to see the illustrations during your group reading, but also to study them at their leisure in the days that follow, as you want them to think about how feeling and ideas are communicated in these highly affecting drawings. It is important to start the unit with this

version of Alia's story with older students. In spite of the simplicity of the language, it does not come across as a "childish" book.

Important Vocabulary:

Basra – A large city in southern Iraq

Discussion Points:

- Why do some people regard Alia as a "superhero?" What risks and decisions did she have to face? Would you consider her a leader?
- What makes books so important? Alia, and others in the story, consider them worth risking their lives for, and yet the looters didn't take them, why is that?
- Talk about the choices different people in this story made in response to the crisis of war. Consider the government officials, the civilians (including looters), the soldiers (on both sides), etc. Try to understand their motivations and decisions from their points of view.

The Librarian of Basra

The illustrations in this book are stunning, and because of their two dimensionality, have a childlike quality that is both very appealing and reminiscent of Persian miniature artwork. Students should have an opportunity to study and discuss the artistry here; this is a book that could be understood without even reading the words.

Discussion Points:

- Compare the styles of the two books about Alia. How did the illustrators communicate feelings and ideas differently and similarly? What are some of the advantages of using the comic strip style? The traditional picture book style? Consider color and extent of detailing as well as the degree to which the pictures seem either more or less factual, or imaginative.
- What are a few of the illustrations you find most interesting and why?
- What important meaning or information (if any) was lost in this second version? What was gained?
- Does Alia seem like the same person in both books? Do you think that she is successfully portrayed in both versions?

Sami and the Time of the Trouble

This story is told from the narrative of a boy who appears to be about eight years old. He and his family are forced to spend most of their time in a basement dwelling during long periods of active warfare outside. This book provides an accessible, yet realistic portrayal of civilian life in wartime. The illustrations are a fascinating contrast to the ones studied in this unit thus far, photo-like in their realism and rich in detail that describe setting and feeling.

Discussion Points:

- Sami's life seems pretty hard in this book; his father was killed in this war and he has to spend a lot of time indoors in a poorly lit basement. He doesn't even get to go to school. What

encourages Sami not to give up hope? What kinds of things and experiences continue to be important to him?

- Sami's grandfather also has hope for the future. One experience that makes him hopeful is a memory of a special day, several years before, when children rallied together and marched for an end to the fighting; it is called "the day of the children." Why do you think this would be an important memory for Sami's grandfather?
- At one point in the story Sami talks about a conversation that he has with his grandfather, he says, "It seems that he wants me to answer a question, a question he has not asked. What is it that he wants me to say?" Do you have some idea about what Sami's grandfather might want Sami to say?
- Look at the illustrations in this story and compare them to the illustrations in the books about Alia. Why do you think this artist chose this kind of illustration to communicate the mood and message in this book?

The House of Wisdom

Important Vocabulary:

caravan – a group of vehicles or animals traveling together-particularly across a desert

caravansary – an inn for travelers

Aristotle – Greek philosopher who lived over 2000 years ago.

javelin – a long spear used in battle or in sport

monk – a man who is a member of a religious group and lives in a monastery

Discussion Points:

- Why does Ishaq's father love books?
- What made the "house of wisdom" such an unusual place at that time in history?
- Ishaq has many experiences that contribute to his love of books, what are some of the most important ones?
- At the end of the story, Ishaq thinks he finally understands what his father meant when he said, "We are like leaves of the same tree, separated by many autumns." What do you think he meant?
- What do Ishaq and his father share with Alia Muhammad Baker?

Further recommendations for this unit:

Both Alia's Mission and The House of Wisdom have information that can help students get started on research projects about the history of famous libraries. Other topics might include the history of written language or a biography of the Caliph al-Ma'mun.

Students might be interested in reading the newspaper article written for the 'New York Times' on 7/27/2003 by reporter Shailak Dewan that was the inspiration for this story. There may be a small fee for downloading the article.

Other Newspaper references to Alia: Book Review: Karen Campbell, *Christian Science Monitor*:
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0222/p18s01-1egn.html>

Encourage students to use cartooning with dialogue in balloons to develop and organize a story.

The moving illustrations in The Librarian of Basra might inspire students to try their hand at depicting their visions of peace and war using whatever materials or art supplies available.