



Under the Persimmon Tree

Suzanne Fisher Staples

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Intertwined portraits of a courage and hope in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Najmah, a young Afghan girl whose name means "star," suddenly finds herself alone when her father and older brother are conscripted by the Taliban and her mother and newborn brother are killed in an air raid. An American woman, Elaine, whose Islamic name is Nusrat, is also on her own. She waits out the war in Peshawar, Pakistan, teaching refugee children under the persimmon tree in her garden while her Afghan doctor husband runs a clinic in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan.

Najmah's father had always assured her that the stars would take care of her, just as Nusrat's husband had promised that they would tell Nusrat where he was and that he was safe. As the two look to the skies for answers, their fates entwine. Najmah, seeking refuge and hoping to find her father and brother, begins the perilous journey through the mountains to cross the border into Pakistan. And Nusrat's persimmon-tree school awaits Najmah's arrival. Together, they both seek their way home.

Known for her award-winning fiction set in South Asia, Suzanne Fisher Staples revisits that part of the world in this beautifully written, heartrending novel.

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Under the Persimmon Tree is a 2006 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

Under the Persimmon Tree Details

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From Reader Review Under the Persimmon Tree for online ebook

Rebecca says

Not bad, but stories like this one set in war torn Afghanistan are becoming more common than they used to be. It's hard not to become a little desensitised to characters and storylines that follow a similar vein to those that I've read before (eg. The orphaned child, the American woman Muslim convert). Having said that, this novel is aimed at young adult readers and as such it would probably be quite an eye-opening read for those who haven't had exposure to this sort of subject matter before.

Mary Hoch says

This book starts out telling two separate stories, one of a woman, the other of a girl, both living in the Middle East during Taliban seizure. Najmah, is the young daughter of a shepherd family living in a Northern Afghanistan village called Golestan. Soldiers take Najmah's father and brother, leaving her, her mother, and baby brother. Later, bombs take the lives of Najmah's mother and baby brother and destroy their family home. Najmah heads to Pakistan in search for her father and brother. Nusrat is an American Muslim who now lives in Pakistan with her husband, who returned to his homeland to run a medical clinic and help his people in their time of need. As Nusrat awaits his return in Peshawar, she hosts the Persimmon Tree School to educate refugee children. Their two stories merge as Najmah makes her way to Nusrat. Both, desperate to find lost family members, seek answers in the stars. While in Nusrat's care, Najmah reunites with her brother. Together they vow to honor their father by making their way back home to reclaim their land in Golestan. Nusrat endures the loss of her beloved husband and chooses to make peace with her family in America.

This is truly a heartrending tale of the struggles that take place in the world, which children should not have to endure. The author does an excellent job of immersing the reader into the characters' lives and culture. Dari vocabulary is used throughout the text, which at first slowed me down. However, a glossary is included in the back of the book. This book is appropriate for grades 6 through 9 and includes themes of the reign of the Taliban over Afghanistan, the devastation created by war, the power of education, the loss and search for family, and trusting in others. Because both protagonists are female, this book would primarily appeal to female readers.

Diane says

I loved Staples book Shabanu, but was disappointed in this one. It is set in Afghanistan and Pakistan during 2001 - 2002 (?) and is the story of a girl and a young woman. The woman converts to Islam, marries an Afghan doctor and moves to Peshawar where she runs a refugee school and he goes off to run a clinic in northern Afghanistan. The girl lives in rural Afghanistan and her family is killed/conscripted and she ends up at the school in Peshawar.

So much of this story is unlikely and feels artificial. The refugee school has 6 students - there were thousands and thousands of refugees. The woman chooses to put all her energy into the young girl when there is a

woman in the school with who wanted to teach Afghan children - why ignore her? The wealth and class of the young woman compared with her students and the other refugees is irritating and made me angry. The young woman's conversion to Islam seemed trite - although there is a bit of information about Islam that would be good for discussion - pretty thin though compared with Shabanu.

May be worth reading since so little is available for young people about women and Islam and the middle east.

Noelle Marie says

Under the Persimmon Tree by Suzanne Fisher Staples is a significant book to read to help promote a global society. Due to the war in the Middle East and much of the media coverage done on it there has been a great misconception created about Islam and the majority of Muslims. News and media has a tendency to focus only on the very worst. Media can even exaggerate news in order to suit a specific agenda. Due to this, unfortunately, many Muslims and middle easterners have been misrepresented. Under the Persimmon Tree breaks down many of these façades with which so many middle-easterners and Muslims have been wrongfully disguised by.

Under the Persimmon Tree has inclusion of minorities for a purpose. One of the main characters, Nusrat, is a minority. Nusrat's birth name is Elaine, a name given by her parents who still live in Watershed, New York. Nusrat is Elaine's Islam name given to her by her husband from Afghanistan, Faiz; Nusrat translates to "help" in Islam. Nusrat met her husband, while getting her masters at Columbia and teaching in Manhattan. Faiz, a doctor in New York, becomes distraught by the turmoil and disruption being caused by the Taliban and knows he must go home to Afghanistan to help. Nusrat not wanting to stay without her husband, and also desperate to help in any way possible, accompanies Faiz to Peshawar, Pakistan where his family is seeking refuge in the affluent University Town district. Nusrat chooses to live closer to the refugee camp so that she can help even though it is more dangerous than living with Faiz's family. At their home in Peshawar Elaine provides schooling for children at the refugee camp in Peshawar. During this time, Faiz has gone across the border, all the way to North Afghanistan to run a clinic for the mujahedeen (Afghans fighting against the Taliban) in Mazar-i-sharif. It is much more dangerous in Mazar-i-sharif and Nusrat worries somberly for her beloved husband.

Under the Persimmon Tree does exceptional work of using unique language. Fisher-Staples uses Dari in her work and often. Dari is a language very similar to the Persian spoken in Iran. Many languages have influenced Dari including Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, and English. Many of these words are also used in India, Pakistan, and other countries of the Middle East. The Dari flows off the page in a way that the reader can likely figure out what the word means without having to look it up. However, if they do, there is a glossary provided in the back of the book. Below is a list of some of the most commonly used words in the book and their English translations:

- Baba - father
- Mullah – a spiritual leader
- Naan – unleavened bread baked in a mud oven
- Pattu – woolen shawl worn by men and women
- Saheba – term of respect

According to Tunnel et al multicultural books should, "Present a positive and reassuring representation of a reader's own cultural group." (Tunnel et al, 1993) Under the Persimmon Tree definitely has had a profound

effect on me. As a Christian there was a part at the end of the book that was very meaningful to me. One morning Nusrat and Najmah are drinking tea when Nusrat tells Najmah that God will help them find out about her father and brother. At this Najmah asks her, "What is the difference between Allah and the God of her childhood?" Nusrat replies, "They are the same. I don't believe God cares by which language we name him." I thought this was profound because I have often struggled with the same thought but have never been able to put it into words.

Tunnel et al also states that multicultural books should "Foster awareness, understanding, and appreciation of people who seem at first glance different from the reader." I have learned a lot about the Middle East and Muslims after reading *Under the Persimmon Tree*. Due to the war in the Middle East, 9/11, and much of the media coverage done on it there has been a great misconception created about Islam and the majority of Muslims. News and media has a tendency to focus only on the very worst. Media can even exaggerate news in order to suit a specific agenda. Due to the fact that media only focuses on the Muslim fundamentalists or extremists much of the western world has been guilty of generalizing all Muslims in that negative light. *Under the Persimmon Tree* has taught me so much more about the Muslims who are staying to fight for their country, their family, and their tradition.

Under the Persimmon Tree is a very appealing in format. It is a mostly picture less chapter book. The one picture on the inside of the book is of a map of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and surrounding areas. This map is located at the beginning of the book and I found it to be very helpful. *Under the Persimmon Tree* talks about many different towns in Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially when Najmah was traveling from her home village of Golestan in the Kunduz province. The map served as a very visual representation to better understand how far Najmah traveled, and how far away Nusrat's husband, Faiz, was.

One of my favorite things about this book is the glossary in the back. This could be a great tool to use for the classroom.

The illustration on the cover of the book was not very meaningful to me until after reading it. On the front there is a woman holding a persimmon, gazing up at the stars. The stars were very meaningful in this novel and were discussed a lot. Najmah's name even means star. There is also a shooting star on the back. In the Middle East, many people believe that to see a shooting star is a bad omen. Nusrat taught Najmah that this was just a myth spread by evil people to strike fear in others in order to gain control over them.

After, Nusrat discovers that her husband has died she decides that she must go back to her family in America. While this makes her sad she is able to cope. While telling Asma, Faiz's sister, that she is her family and culture of choice she says, "The culture in which I grew up doesn't make me so unhappy now that I know what I believe in and what I value. I know who I love and why. My culture will always be with me wherever I go." I believe this statement here is the essence of what makes this book a Notable Book for a Global Society

Sis3 says

I think I can use this at school. War torn Afghanistan. Map in the front of the book is helpful. Completely benign for language and sex. Young girl meets an American teacher and the stories coincide all while the story of family/culture and tradition coincide. The writing is not great- not a literary work at all, yet the glimpse into Afghanistan might be worth reading this . Probably middle school level yet people die,

kidnapping, orphans, blood. (Teacher view)

Margaret says

Under the Persimmon Tree is about Najmah, a girl of about eleven, who watches the Taliban kidnap her father and brother, and later her mother and baby brother are killed in an air raid. At the same time, the story of Nusrat, (originally named Elaine) who is a blonde white girl from New York, who met and married Faiz, a doctor from Afghanistan. Faiz hearing about the war in Afghanistan feels he must return home and help his people. Nusrat returns with him and teaches school at a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan. In alternating chapters, these stories are told. Najmah's story of traveling toward Peshawar and Nusrat's story of worrying about her husband who is helping his people in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan and teaching the refugee children. There is much discussion of the political climate in Afghanistan during this period.

This book is appropriate for grades 7-12. It could be read and discussed in discussions about the Middle East and Afghanistan in particular.

Ln Rispoli says

Draining. The first person present tense was unbearable. It was whiny and unamusing. I did not connect with a character who tells me everything.

Jacqueline says

This was an excellent book! One of those books that I think everyone should read. A book that should be on every school's "reading list."

The book takes place roughly 2001-2002 in Afghanistan and Pakistan following two people: one a shepherd girl from a fictional North Afghanistan village and the other the American wife of an Afghan doctor who is living near a refugee camp for Afghans in Pakistan while her husband works at a clinic in war torn Northern Afghanistan. A series of probable events brings these two people together.

The book shows Northern Afghan culture as well as a lot of the culture of Pakistan, from the wealthy University professors to more typical Pakistani to the poor and the refugees. It also shows recent events in the part of the world in a realistic light. (The author was a reporter and did volunteer work in Afghanistan and Pakistan during this time period.) Although the reading level and tone of the book are suitable for 4-8th graders, there is plenty here for discussion and thought for older students and adults.

Sasha says

Wayyy to depressing. Too many characters with no introduction. Instead of an intro, the author goes right into action. Yes, it was more interesting, but there were too many characters and too sad. Unless you read

books for deaths, don't read this.

Olivia says

Really did not enjoy reading this book. I thought it was confusing, and it took me a while to finally realize what was going on

Ayanna Dukes says

When I was reading this book, A long walk to Water popped up in my mind. Their both so alike in so many ways: two points of views and they both intercept, child soldiers, losing your family but finding them in the end, and etc. Under the Persimmon Tree really makes you look at things differently, just like A Long Walk To Water. Also, I like how this book some insight on how people lives are in India or Pakistan. This book didn't disappoint me whatsoever, and I hope that you get a chance to read this amazing book.

Mia says

I got to page 100 and stopped. I just can't do it. This godawful piece of garbage beat me. I'm actually wondering how I got this far. There are so many things wrong with this book that I'm not even sure I can list them all.

A large amount of the sentences have an absence of commas, making them either extremely choppy and short or so long that my internal voice even has to take a breath. Either way, it is exceptionally annoying. A great example of this would be in page 7, where it bares the sentence of "And only a moment later Baba-jan comes whisting down the path that leads from the pens that hold our sheep and goats at the base of the foothills of the Hindu Kush." That is one sentence.

There is also the additional issue of how she uses the same word in a very short span of time. It seems as if she was lacking a thesaurus as she was writing the book.

A third problem I spotted had only occured once in the chapter, but it caught my eye nonetheless. It is a sentence located on page 12, which has been cut to spare the decent grammar and cut to the chase. "... except for camels and donkeys and horses, and people on foot." ... There are three ands there! Revist the first grade if you must! How did this get past her editor, Jeffrey Ward? WHY?! Hey, at least she used a comma.

Also, I just really don't like that the two separate stories are told in first and third person. I have not gotten used to it yet and it's really aggravating. If it's to easily depict who's perspective that part of the book is being told from, it's not working. You might be able to tell the difference from the names at the beginning of every chapter, but what do I know?

On page 45 she used three question marks in a row. For a book, that is not proper. At all.

If that's even a word, on page 46 (hey, they're right after each other) Staples, or rather 'Nusrat' described the character Fatima as having 'bright dark eyes'. There's supposed to be some sort of poetic-like description in there, but that's just awful.

Overall, Uncle laughs too much. In the span of three pages, Staples said some variant of 'Uncle laughed' five times. That might just be a personal thing, but it bothered me.

On page 62, within the span of a paragraph a day and a half passed by. It was irritating to me, at least.

On page 63, Najmah said 'the gazelle will turn into a fish', referring the stars above her at the time and throughout her life, twice in the span of a paragraph.

In all of chapter 5, it was predictable, at least to me, that someone was going to die or get injured. Or at the very least, something bad was ought to happen. Everything was too perfect the night before the bombing, and Najmah had been gone for too long.
There, oh my Lord that took forever...

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO READ THIS.

Kayla says

This was a very good book. It has many insights about the Muslim faith. I liked how she spoke in 3rd and 1st person when changing different characters. It helped with the point of view and made the story more interesting and catchy. I would recommend this book.

Aryaan says

The book bored me half to death. Basically, there was 270 pages of buildup- but no climatic ending. What a disappointment.

Isaac Vandehei says

Overall, I really enjoyed the book. At first I wasn't too big of a fan, but then once the family problems came into play I wanted to keep reading. Every chapter switched between Najmah and Nusrat and that was a little confusing at the start because I didn't know what was happening. The book was very upbeat and it has a good story behind it. It shows how important family really is to people and that parents would do anything for their children. This may not be a true story, but this stuff really happens. People lose their homes, land, and family members to war and that is horrifying. I would definitely recommend this book to a friend. It is only 270 pages and it is very meaningful. The author makes you want to keep reading because you are so interested in what is going to happen next to these families. The ending may be sad to some, but it also shows the true value of family and what your family would want you to do.
