

Picture Books

Fatima, the Spinner and the Tent

Idries Shah

Natasha Delmar, illustrator

Hoopoe Books

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Hoping to find a handsome, affluent husband, Fatima—a spinner by trade—joins her father on a trip to several islands in the Middle Sea. On the way to Crete, a violent storm destroys her father’s ship, killing everyone except Fatima. Poor and alone, the girl befriends a family of weavers in Alexandria, and they teach her their craft. When she is captured by slave-traders and sold to a man who makes masts for ships, “her world collapses for a second time.” Now happy with the mast-builder, Fatima finds her life disrupted once again while traveling to Java: “Whenever things seemed to be going well, something came and destroyed all her hopes.”

Distraught, Fatima cries, “Why is it that whenever I try to do something it comes to grief? Why should so many unfortunate things happen to me?” Yet, she refuses to lose hope. She goes to China and learns that the Emperor is looking for a female stranger who, according to a legend, will be able to make him a tent. By this time, Fatima has worked as a spinner, a weaver, and a mast-builder, unaware that each career prepared her for her final one as tent maker and wife and mother.

The author, an Afghan scholar, adapted this well-known story from a version told by storyteller Sheikh Mohamed Jamaludin of Turkey. For most of his career, Shah collected, translated, and adapted stories grounded in the Sufi philosophy. At the time of his death in 1996, he had authored more than thirty-five books, including his signature work, *Tales of the Dervishes: Teaching-stories of Sufi Masters over the Past Thousand Years*, in which *Fatima the Spinner and the Tent* first appeared.

Born in Hong Kong, the illustrator grew up in Argentina and now lives in San Francisco. Her father, Ng Yi-Ching, a noteworthy Chinese painter and poet, taught her to paint. This book is a worthy follow-up to her first, *The Old Woman and the Eagle*, which received favorable reviews. Here, the illustrations depict architecture, costumes, and decorations that reflect the

culture and the time period. Family scenes are painted in bright cheery colors while scenes that capture Fatima's misfortunes are often in somber earth tones. The endpage drawing of a map invites readers to chart Fatima's travels.

Designed for ages five and older, this book is an excellent example of a "Teaching-Story" used to promote critical thinking through the power of an entertaining tale. Discussions about goal-setting, perseverance, and hard work will come naturally while reading this volume. The conclusion explicitly states the book's moral: "It was through these adventures that Fatima realized that what had appeared to be an unpleasant experience at the time, turned out to be an essential part of the making of her happiness."

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