

The Knight, the Princess, and the Magic Rock: A Classic Persian Tale

Sara Azizi

Alireza Sadeghian, Illustrator

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We are told at the beginning of this book that the story of Bijan and Manijeh comes originally from the *Book of Kings*, written by Persian poet Ferdowsi around 1000A.D. What's exceptional about this version (in the form of a children's book) are the illustrations by Alireza Sadeghian. They have a very Eastern sensibility, with detailed borders and stylized backgrounds and fabrics. Some are full-page and deeply colored, while others are more whimsical accents to the text. Children may find it confusing that the characters' clothing changes from page to page and the faces are not always recognizably individuated. But there is a lot for children to look at while the text is being read.

The story itself is a familiar one from all cultures, about forbidden love and the twists and turns the young lovers must make to be together in the end. This one differs in that the young hero is rescued from a pit capped with a magic rock by a strong and wise man's prayers. Another lovely addition is how the king learns of his hero's plight: he had a golden cup in which he could see all the corners of the world; he prayed all night long and then looked into his cup and saw all that had happened to Bijan.

The story of *The Knight, the Princess & the Magic Rock* is simply told without adjectives or descriptive phrases. The author, Sara Azizi, is careful to represent this "classic tale" as basically as possible and she does a good job. The main story is framed by a page on either end in which a "modern-day" grandfather asks his grandchildren to listen closely as he tells the story; at the end, the children ask for more stories but are told "they will have to wait for another day." Perhaps more use could have been made of these pages to explain the meaning of the story, but at the same time there is obviously a formula and tradition to maintain.

A religious interpretation of the story lies at the end of the book and is instructive, though the adult reader wonders if it came from the commentary of Adham Khalkhali, the mystic who is mentioned at the beginning of the book, or from the author herself.

The Knight, the Princess & the Magic Rock is an easily read and enjoyable story with beautiful illustrations in the style of an ancient ethnic tale.

JANE HAUGH (June 20, 2012)

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