ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

The Old Woman and the Eagle
Idries Shah
Natasha Delmar, illustrator
Hoopoe Books
978-1-883536-27-5
(November 2002)

The sight of an eagle inspires people all over the world. Eagles represent power, grace, and courage. So when an eagle flies into the life of an old woman, readers expect her to be impressed. They don't expect her to try to change him.

Living in a village in Afghanistan, the old woman has never seen an eagle before when one lands outside of her front door. "Oh my, what a funny pigeon you are!" she says. Unwilling to believe that he is something new to her, she convinces herself that he is a common pigeon and proceeds to clip his claws, comb his feathers, and straighten his beak to make him more "pigeon-like."

The old woman wants to make the eagle more acceptable. She does not see him for who he is, but for who she thinks he ought to be. It's a timeless lesson for young children and for the adults reading to them. After another eagle helps to bend back his beak and comb his feathers back up, they fly off with a final comment, "There are a lot of silly people in the world who think that pigeons are eagles, or that eagles are pigeons, or that all sorts of things are other things." Although children often prefer more subtle morals, in this case, the tender humor makes it work.

This book is eighth in a series by the author, who died in 1996. Each of his books, like *The Silly Chicken* and *Neem the Half-Boy*, presents the Afghan culture and beliefs through illustrated folktales. Shah understood that this gentle introduction to the Sufi culture practiced in Afghanistan would benefit children all over the world.

The illustrator, daughter of the Chinese painter Ng Yi-Ching, beautifully captures cultural details. This is her first children's book, and on each page she recreates borders of traditional Afghan designs, along with attractive floral patterns and prints.

This book animates both another culture and another way to see an eagle.

Anna Stewart