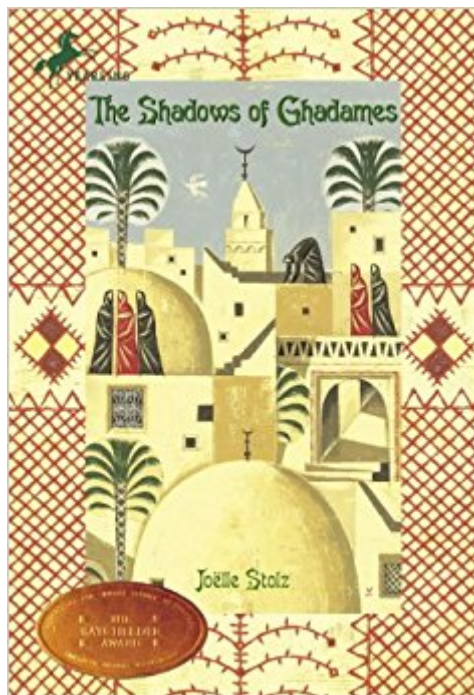


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The Shadows Of Ghadames



Synopsis

This story about a Muslim girl bound by traditional Islamic customs but who yearns for something more explores women's rights, freedom, religion, and identity. In the Libyan city of Ghadames, Malika watches her merchant father depart on one of his caravan expeditions. She too yearns to travel to distant cities, and longs to learn to read like her younger brother. But nearly 12 years old, and soon to be of marriagable age, Malika knows that like all Muslim women she must be content with a more secluded, more limited life. Then one night a stranger enters her home . . . someone who disrupts the traditional order of things and who affects Malika in unexpected ways. "I was enchanted by this story of a brave Berber girl who dares to dream and its filigree of details about harem life, ancient trade routes, goddesses and healers. The real beauty of *The Shadows of Ghadames* is that it transcends the exotic to explore universal truths about the condition of being human." Suzanne Fisher Staples, author of the Newbery Honor Book *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* "Stolz invigorates her tale with elegant prose and a deft portrayal of a girl verging on adolescence. The vivid backdrop is intoxicating, but the story's universal concerns will touch readers most." Booklist, Starred

Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

Grade 5-8 In Libya at the end of the 19th century, upper-class women were confined to their homes and rooftops, leading a quiet life filled with household tasks. Nearly 12, Malika is about to enter that world, although not without regret for the loss of freedom and the education her brother has. Her father's two wives offer her good models: her upper-class mother, the "wife from home," who calmly runs the household, and her brother's mother, the "wife from the journey," who moves more freely about the city, still veiled and hiding in dark alleys when a man appears. In spite of their upbringing and their husband's departure on business, the two women rescue a man injured outside their home. Abdelkarim remains hidden with them while they nurse his wounds, and as he recovers, he and Malika come to see that the world of women is richer than they thought. He teaches Malika her alphabet before he is smuggled away, and her mother, admitting that times are changing, finally agrees to let her learn to read. This quiet story is notable for the intimate picture of the traditional Muslim world that it conveys; unfortunately, not until the author's note at the end is the time period made evident. The imprecise use of language may make it difficult for readers to visualize this distant world and to understand the characters' motivations. Still, this novel would be useful in schools studying this part of the world.

Kathleen Isaacs, Edmund Burke School, Washington, DC Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Starred Review Gr. 6-10. In the Libyan city of Ghadames at the end of the nineteenth century, Malika is dreading her twelfth birthday. That is the time when, according to her family's Berber customs, she will be close to marriageable age and confined to the world of women. In Ghadames that means restriction to the rooftops, "a city above the city, an open sunny town for women only, where . . . they never talk to men." Malika longs to live beyond the segregated city and travel, like her father, a trader. But the wider world comes to Malika after her father's two wives agree to harbor, in secret, a wounded stranger. The story of an outsider who unsettles a household and helps a young person to grow is certainly nothing new, and some of the lessons here are purposeful. But Stolz invigorates her tale with elegant prose and a deft portrayal of a girl verging on adolescence. The vivid backdrop is intoxicating, but the story's universal concerns will touch readers most: sibling jealousy, confusion about adult customs, and a growing interest in a world beyond family.

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I must say with some shame that I opened this book prepared to hate it and to ridicule it in my review. Wrong wrong wrong. I might have known that this 1999 book originally published in France would have a deft sophistication that an American book, sanitized and homogenized would lack. But author Joelle Stolz does describe the life of a girl on the cusp of womanhood in 19th century Lybia with a gentleness that I found . The girl, Malika, lives in an ancient town of white washed houses isolated deep in the Sahara desert. Her father owns a caravan business and travels by camel train to far cities carting goods for sale and re-sale. He is a trader and merchant. Long ago he brought a woman from Timbuktu to be his second wife resulting in the birth of her brother and in the odd way that fertility sometimes works, in her own birth. Malika lives with the women, only with the women. Stolz gives us a look at her life, a life surprisingly full. It certainly contains a wide realm of secrets known only to the women of Ghadames. We do not need to, nor are we asked to, approve of the life of seclusion the women of Ghadames suffer. They have very little power over their own lives. Malika's mother certainly did not have a say when her husband showed up after one of his trips with an extra wife. In a year or two Malika will marry some one her father chooses for her. And she, like her father's wives, will spend her life behind the door of their home with only the freedom of the roof top for space. Stolz illuminates the lives of her characters for us, letting us see into a culture that still exists in places in the Muslim world. This book aimed primarily at young female readers is so much beyond the usual tripe put out for teen and tween girls as to be in another category entirely.

A character study, a novel of historical fiction, an young adult's introduction to foreign culture, or a bold little step in the story of gender equality -- it does not matter why this book was read or how someone chose to categorized it; it succeeds on all fronts. A little glimpse into the world of a late-18th century Libyan 12-year-old girl is, by no means, an oversaturated subject matter in the world of books these days (if ever!). It is, however, perhaps all the more reason to pick it up. This is unexplored territory for almost every reader, and THE SHADOWS OF GHADAMES should not disappoint any of them. The story of Malika is character-driven with an engaging, fresh plotline that showcases the inserted "you've never been here before" set of facts about cultural, religious, culinary and societal customs that don't seem forced, thank God. The introduction of what might seem to be uncomfortable subject matter like polygamy is handled beautifully, if not artfully, and it is absolutely clear to me that the author truly respects all of her characters. Part of the success of this work is also due to Catherine Temerson's magnificent translation that is alive with beautiful, poetic language. Her work (translated from the original French) has nuance and energy, and is a delight to read. I recommend this book for whatever reason you can find to pick it up, particularly because of

the contrast you'll find with our current technological world. Today's students (at least mine) demand that things happen for them and that they're entertained, and for them there is little satisfaction in quiet, thoughtful solitude. As a contrast to the "I'm SOOO bored," mantra of today's youth, I think we really need our children to develop perspective and alternatives to the ever-present materialism and noise of 2007. *THE SHADOWS OF GHADAMES* is an excellent introduction to that lesson.

A bit of context. When I reviewed "Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind" (a tale about a Pakistani nomadic daughter and her struggle against repression), I characterized it as a slow moving epic. The kind of thing that kids should read but that if you forced it down their gullets they'd immediately detest. And though "The Shadows of Ghadames" is similar to "Shabanu" in a number of ways, I simply cannot repeat this advice. Here we have a small, unassuming, but brilliantly succinct encapsulation of the maturity of a young woman in late nineteenth century southern Libya. The book is fascinating and short, but says everything in its mere 118 pages that needs to be said. Unlike some historical fiction novels written for children, I'll be recommending this book to any and every kid I see. It's an infinitely interesting look at a world unlike our own but can (as "Shabanu" author Suzanne Fisher Staples says in her blurb on the back of the book), "explore universal truths about the condition of being human". Once again Malika's father is taking off from the city of Ghadames to sell his wares to lands distant from his daughter's home. As a girl, Malika is finding the freedoms she experienced as a child curtailed with the approach of puberty. Soon she will be condemned to remain on the rooftops of the city where all the women live, like her mother and her father's second wife Bilkisu. Malika challenges a society where she isn't allowed to learn to read and where the only garden she'll soon be seeing is the red one painted on the walls of the roofs. It isn't long before such brooding is changed to fear, however, when she and Bilkisu discover an injured man, hunted by the townspeople for preaching a different religion. Without Malika's father around, the women take it upon themselves to hide and tend to the wounded man. Through this act of kindness, Malika grows to learn more about the world of the women, far above the ground, and what they are truly capable of in spite of their entrapment. It was with great shock that I reached the end of this book, only to discover that "The Shadows of Ghadames" has been translated from the original text to what we read here. Originally the work of French author Joelle Stolz, the prose is lyrical and fascinating, without the stilted sentences that sometimes pepper a translated work. Better still, this book is interesting from page one onwards. There's a thrilling blindfolded race across a roof, lurid descriptions of the celebrations women have on their own, and complicated relations that never rely on black and white stereotypes. In most novels like this one, the young man rescued would turn out

to have a saintly disposition and would teach Malika how to be her own woman. Stolz turns this convention on its head, instead having the young man sneer at the ministrations of the women, angrily curse their ignorance (which he sees as willful), and teaches Malika to read possibly because he has nothing else to do. Likewise, the fact that Malika's father has two wives at first seems peaceful and without conflict. Later we learn that the situation was initially very tenuous and it was only with the birth of Malika herself that each woman came to terms with the other. This world is entirely unlike most that children read about in books. Stolz has created something new and fascinating. It's a land where the cries of women throughout the day, from rooftop to rooftop, tell the news. Where an entire citizenry remains above the actions of the men below. And best of all, it's a truly interesting book. There are no easy answers in "The Shadows of Ghadames". And there isn't that Hollywood happy ending where everything turns out hunky-dory at the finale. There's just a tale of how the oppressed can still live fulfilling lives in spite of their prisons. A great book of 2004.

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