

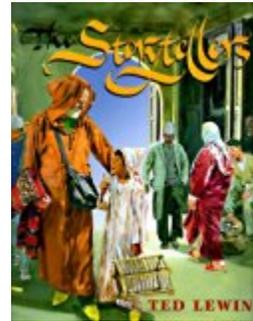
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ted Lewin. *The Storytellers*. New York: Lothrop Lee and Shepard Books, 1998. 40 pp. \$16.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-688-15178-2.

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Published on H-AfrTeach (January, 2000)



## The Storytellers

Rating: Highly recommended.

*The Storytellers* is a beautiful book. Ted Lewin has produced yet another watercolor masterpiece, and it illustrates a charming story. The pictures and text recall the colorful life in Fez, Morocco, and evoke the vivid scenes and noises and smells of the souks, or covered markets, in the old part of the city.

In this story we follow a boy and his grandfather, a storyteller, as they walk through all the different specialty quarters of the old Fez, among them the wool dyers, copper and brass workers, leather dyers, date vendors, weavers, and carpet sellers. When they reach an open square just outside the old gate of the walled city, they spread a carpet on the stone ground and the grandfather prepares to tell a story. Abdul, the boy, proceeds to let his white pigeon out of a cage, and it flies up to settle on his head. Then, when enough people have gathered round, the boy sends his magical pigeon high up to the sky, only to return to set on Abdul's head again, "bringing with it a story from the sky." His grandfather is now ready to begin.

The story he tells is a very abbreviated version of an old Moroccan tale, so the reader of this book does not experience all the excitement and the cultural values that many of these tales communicate, such as hospitality, generosity, bravery, and wisdom. Nevertheless, we learn that the storyteller has touched the crowd's heart, and that he will continue to tell more tales until nighttime, each time waiting for Abdul's pigeon to travel to

the heavens and bring back a story from the sky.

Although the book is intended for the primary grades, at times the text assumes a more advanced reader. My fourth grade son did not understand the sentence, "Shafts of sunlight stab through the reed roofs overhead, piercing the gloom beneath." The stunning watercolors, however, indeed will appeal to older readers who are interested in learning about Morocco and about the important tradition of storytelling in this and other African countries.

A one-page brief introduction to the book is helpful to the adult accompanying the child reader. It contains a glossary of a few Arabic words. It starts with the statement, "This story is set in the ancient city of Fez in Morocco, where life goes on very much as it did a thousand years ago." Some may find this statement problematic, as it implies a static, undynamic culture. In a sense the old city of Fez may look very much as it did a millennium ago, but certainly its inhabitants do not have the same thoughts and values and lifestyles. In fact, on the first page of the book Lewin states that, "huge mules laden with firewood, lambskins, even TV sets..." share the narrow lanes with people. It also might have been helpful to note, in the introduction, that the old Fez lies near a new Fez, which is essentially a French-style town, a bustling "ville nouvelle."

A minor clarification to make to the author, and to many Westerners who write about the Islamic countries in Africa and Asia, pertains to the name "Abdul." This name, if it stands alone, is an incorrect usage of Ara-

bic. The construct is “Abd,” meaning “Servant of,” plus “al,” meaning “the” in English transliteration. Often these two words are put together as “Abdul.” This formation then has to be followed by one of the attributes of God, hence Abd al-Karim (or Abdul Karim) means Servant of the Generous One, and Abd al-Hakim (or Abdul Hakim) means Servant of the Wise One. Abdul is never used alone, not even as a nickname; it is an incomplete construct.

Despite these small shortcomings, I would certainly recommend this book. With so few good children’s books on the Arab countries of northern Africa and east

of the Mediterranean, this is a welcome addition.

\*Other books about the Arab world that Lewin has illustrated include *The Day of Ahmed’s Secret* (by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, 1990), about a boy in Cairo who has learned to write his name; and Sami and the *Times of the Troubles* (by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, 1992), about a boy trying to cope in war-torn Beirut.

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**Citation:** Zeina Azzam Seikaly. Review of Lewin, Ted, *The Storytellers*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3705>

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