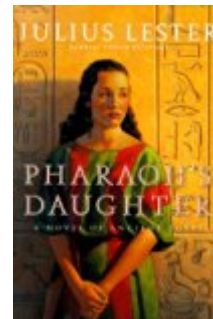


Julius Lester. *Pharaoh's Daughter*. Silver Whistle. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, 2000. ix + 182 pp. \$17.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-15-201826-9.



Reviewed by Sue D'Auria

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Pharaoh's Daughter

It is rare, when reading stories of the biblical Exodus, to find the Egyptian point of view represented. Yet such is the case in this refreshing novel for ages 12 and up, an account of events leading up to the Exodus, focusing on the life of the fictional sister of Moses, Almah.

Written in the present tense, the story begins in Goshen, the Habiru (Hebrew) settlement housing workers building the temple of Pharaoh Ramesses II at the northern Egyptian capital, Pi-Ramesses. "Hebrew" is rendered "Habiru" to reflect the ancient usage. The author has consistently attempted to use the ancient names of places, peoples, and even the calendar, lending an authentic air to the novel. Egyptian soldiers are carrying out an order to kill all Hebrew newborn boys when Almah encounters Pharaoh's daughter, Merytamun, in the city, and escorts her back to the palace. When the soldiers return, and Almah's brother Mosis (Moses) is placed in a basket among the rushes, Merytamun retrieves it, deciding to raise the baby as her own, with Almah and her mother residing in the palace. Almah takes imme-

diately to life as an Egyptian, becoming a priestess of the goddesses Hathor and Eset (Isis).

Part II is told from the point of view of Mosis, who is confused and discontented at his position straddling the Hebrew and Egyptian worlds. While Almah has dedicated herself totally to the Egyptian religion, replacing Merytamun in the affections of Pharaoh and actually taking her name, Merytamun has become a convert to the Hebrew faith, changing her name to Batya. These new relationships are somewhat confusing, and may take some time for young readers to sort out. For instance, when Mosis mentions "mother," is he referring to his Hebrew mother or to the princess?

In order to complete his temple on schedule for his jubilee (30-year) celebration, Ramesses II forces all Hebrews to work on its construction, and bans Mosis from the throne room, ostensibly so that his loyalty will not be questioned. This sets a chain of events into motion with tragic results, ending with Moses' sojourn in the land of Midian, and thus before the events of the Exodus. Throughout, the author gives a nicely balanced view of both Egyptian and Hebrew religion. The

calm, strong faith of Almah's Hebrew father offsets the religious zeal of her mother. Ramesses II is seen as a sympathetic figure who won't release the Hebrews because it would disturb "maat," the balance of order in the universe, whose maintenance was the king's primary responsibility. He explains that letting the Hebrews go would reward them for defiance of the divine order. Almah is a strong female character, committed to her faith, but unafraid to confront Pharaoh about the injustices he is committing.

The research that the author mentions in his author's note is apparent throughout the book, from the use of ancient terminology, to details about the architecture of the palace, to the description of ancient Egyptian and religious concepts, though there are a few minor inaccuracies. The Exodus is an event that is hotly debated among scholars, and some Egyptologists believe that the story is based on events that took place not under Ramesses II, but at a much earlier period. Whatever the actual chronology, the author has succeeded in his aim of showing the human side of events leading to the Exodus in a very readable book that is sure to captivate young readers.

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