

Nomad, Switchboard, Poet: Naomi Shihab Nye's Multicultural Literature for Young Readers: An Interview

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Naomi Shihab Nye is best known for her six volumes of what William Stafford has called "a poetry of encouragement and heart." These, together with her widely anthologized short stories and luminous nonfiction, have earned her four Pushcart Prizes, the I.B. Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, two Vortman Awards from the Texas Institute of Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress.

*For the past decade, she has also been winning recognition for a sizable oeuvre of multicultural literature for young readers, all of which is infused with a direct, determined commitment to peace and cross-cultural understanding. As a Palestinian American who spent part of her childhood in Jerusalem and as a long-time resident of San Antonio, Nye focuses on both Arab American and Latino issues in her books for young readers. Her edited collections, which emphasize visual as well as literary art, include *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* (1992), which the American Library Association named a *Notable Book*, *The Tree Is Older Than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems & Stories from Mexico with Paintings by Mexican Artists* (1995), and *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East* (1998). Her original works for children include two picture books for young readers: *Sitti's Secrets* (1994), which won the *Jane Addams Children's Book Award* from the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, and the lyrical*

Benito's Dream Bottle (1995). Her 1997 novel for young adults, *Habibi*, was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, an ALA Notable Book, a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age, and a Texas Institute of Letters Best Book for Young Readers. Called by one critic "the work of a poet, not a polemicist," it received both the Judy Lopez Memorial Award for Children's Literature and the Jane Addams Book Award.

Joy Castro: The direct, courageous expression of simple truths about family, friendship, and compassion seems to work well for your characters. In *Habibi*, for example, Liyana yells down the Israeli guards in order to visit her imprisoned father, a Palestinian American doctor: "Her throat felt shaky. But she didn't turn. . . . "Of course it's possible!" she said loudly. "He is my father! I need to see him! NOW! PLEASE! It's necessary! I must go in this minute!" (228). Liyana succeeds; the guards let her in. In your bio note at the end of the paperback edition of *Sitti's Secrets*, which is about young Mona's visit to her Sitti, her grandmother, in a Palestinian village, you write, "If grandmas ran the world, I don't think we'd have any wars." Can you talk further about your vision of the way in which personal connections function in the struggle for political peace?

Naomi Shihab Nye: Well, most of us aren't politicians, so personal connections are all we have. I guess I've always wished that people could speak up with their honest, true, insightful feelings and needs when they have them—but of course, it's not always so easy in real life: inhibitions confound us, expectations hinder us. We have all lost many opportunities to speak out about crucial issues we believe in. I have probably been guiltier than most since I have so many generous occasions on which I am invited to express my opinions. This is a luxury writers can never take for granted.

In books, I hope that my characters are brave and strong. I want them to use their voices. I want young people to be reminded, always, that voices are the best tools we have. In whatever seemingly personal venues we may find ourselves, voices matter. A voice may stir up little waves that reverberate out and out much farther than we could ever imagine. I hope this is true. It has seemed to be so in my experience.

Castro: I remember during your reading here at Wabash last fall, you described your “Nye dinner,” in which you invited all the Nyes in the San Antonio phonebook, sight unseen, to your house for a meal. For days after you left, people from the audience were buzzing about the risky generosity of that action: welcoming complete strangers into your home. It’s the kind of action that occurs at the end of *Habibi*, when Liyana’s Palestinian family hosts Omer, her Jewish friend, in their home—not without some accompanying tensions. What kinds of risks are involved in cross-cultural understanding, and how, in your fiction for children and young adults, do you encourage readers to prepare for and face those risks?

Nye: Thanks for remembering that offbeat Nye-family story of ours! Well, people who consider the world an interesting place filled with delicious variations always hope to get to know many other people who are unlike themselves in certain ways: different colors or cultures or food-preferences or song-styles or religions. You know, I’ve never understood the impulse to be with people only like ourselves. How dull that would be.

Sometimes it’s comforting to be with one’s own crowd for a *little* while, sure. Next weekend, for example, I’ll be attending the largest annual gathering of Arab Americans in the United States in Washington, DC and it’s always fun, like finding out you have this enormous family. But then you go back to your own neighborhood filled with so many different backgrounds and feel even *more* interested in all the possibilities and styles.

Sometimes appetites need to be whetted. I would hope that writing for young people might serve as an invitation to *get to know* some of those other slightly different folks out there in the world—without fear, without ever thinking of “otherness” as a threat. It’s a glory, not a threat. We’d have fewer school shootings if kids could remember this. Those people unlike us: how to have empathy with them, for them? Those lives seemingly unlike our own: how are we connected, ultimately? We all sleep, eat, have dreams and loves and hopes and sorrows. I want writing to be connected to all of this.

Castro: *Habibi* and *Sitti's Secrets* seem like two different versions of a similar story: one for older, one for younger children. Can you talk about the autobiographical elements of that story, and how you decided to move aspects of your own childhood experience into the realm of fiction? What were some of the challenges of doing so? I noticed that the chronology, for example, was updated.

Nye: Well, we're stuck with ourselves, aren't we? You're right, of course, in noting this. Someone I don't know sent me an e-mail from California: "Do you realize you have recycled some of the same material in various books of yours?" She had a rather snippy, academic tone. I wrote her back, "Yes, indeed, I am filled with shame," and never heard from her again. The truth is, we should not be filled with shame! We're like our own old grandpas telling the same stories. But I wasn't through with this material, I guess.

I updated it because I wanted to write it as closely-to-the-minute as I could—never an easy thing when dealing with the Middle East and its fluctuations. One must hope to find some deeper, timeless place when one writes, even though our stories are *set* in time. We all write out of what we know toward what we want to find out.

Anyway, I never met Omer, in *Habibi*. He's a totally made-up guy. My next book, I'm happy to report, contains many characters and events I have never met in my life. I wish they'd show up, though.

Castro: In writing about the Palestinian American experience, do you feel you were charting territory that really hadn't been explored in US publishing for children and young adults?

Nye: I would not be so brazen as to say "charting new territory," but I think there is much room for more Arab American perspectives in work for young people. Librarians have told me that, for one. And I am very happy each time I see a new book appear that conveys this perspective. For people interested in finding more books with a Middle Eastern connection, write an organization called AWAIR (awair@igc.org) and ask them to send their fine catalogue of listings.

Castro: Did you have the conscious sense while you were working on *Habibi* that you were writing *against* American stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans?

Nye: I would say it was both conscious and unconscious. When one lives in the United States, one cannot help but be aware of the general media stereotyping against Arabs that goes on—things have gotten much better in this regard in recent years, surely, more balanced—but it is certainly still a live wire in many places. Here on the very table next to me I have Professor Jack Shaheen's book called *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*—he has helped document patterns of recent ugly images in TV and film, as well as in political reporting and op-ed pieces, as has my friend Ali Abunimah of Chicago, who has taken on NPR and other media entities in full force in recent years.

When, for example, do Americans hear the word “terrorist” applied to others as often as it's applied to Arabs? I remember when that crazed Zionist gunned down the men and boys in the Hebron mosque as they were praying—our newspaper here in San Antonio never once referred to him as a terrorist; they actually called him a “good doctor.” Sheesh! I have been writing letters to the editor about this stuff all my life. So have all the other Arab Americans I know.

So I would have to say that the sense of wanting a positive image of Palestinians or Palestinian Americans to come forth through the simple story and appealing characters in *Habibi* was definitely part of my writing consciousness—but I didn't want it to be rhetorical, or a soapbox, or a didactic position, simply an intrinsic one. There's a great quote from Marcel Khalife, the beloved Lebanese singer, about Israeli occupation of his own country: “We fought an occupier that stole the details of our lives. We were forced to protect our sleep, our air, and the pound of flour with blood and steel.”

I salute the work of the Seeds of Peace camp in Maine—there's also a branch in Jerusalem now—which brings together Arab and Israeli young people every summer, hoping to build a sense of enlarged humanity in the region's future. I think we'll have to count on young people. The older ones haven't done so well. That's another notion that wove through *Habibi* for me.

Castro: Many writers who explore ethnicity in their work—I'm thinking here of Bharati Mukherjee and Lan Samantha Chang, for example—have been pressured to commodify their ethnicity for publication (exoticized jacket photos, explicitly “ethnic” cover images, etc.). Have you experienced such pressure? Is there a difference between children's publishing and publishing for adults in that regard?

Nye: No such pressures have ever been exerted on me. You're right, this may be a difference between books for young people and books for adults—thank goodness. Writers for young people may enjoy more freedom from marketing niches, etc. I must always thank my terrific editor Virginia Duncan, who used to work at Simon & Schuster and is now at Greenwillow, Harper/Collins, for her guidance in all matters—she is the best editor there could ever be. Her instincts are a keen compass on a true, true road. She is not swayed by hype, jive, or anybody else's pressures.

Castro: Most of your multicultural books for younger readers, both the edited collections and the original works, are very visual in their appeal—*Habibi*, I think, is the only exception. Was that a deliberate choice on your part from the inceptions of the projects, or did the focus on art evolve gradually?

Nye: Well, we all love art and we always wanted the books to look appealing. I live with a terrific visual artist, photographer Michael Nye, whose portraits appear in *What Have You Lost?* [a 1999 poetry anthology Nye edited]. Virginia cares a great deal about matching the visual and textual elements—she has let me have a say-so in the selection of all artists and art for our books. I can't imagine working with an editor who operates otherwise, though apparently many writers do. This is far more important to me than royalties because it creates the whole ambiance and personality of a book. I couldn't live with a book that had art I didn't care for.

Castro: Nancy Carpenter did a beautiful job with the illustrations in *Sitti's Secrets*. Several incorporate surreal imagery—deserts superimposed onto hanging bedsheets, an ocean in the sky above the young protagonist—while others do not. Readers have to search

carefully, look for unexpected magic. Can you talk about the way in which that process relates to the story you're telling in *Sitti's Secrets*, and to the larger story about intercultural relations that all your books for young readers seem to offer?

Nye: Yes, I love Nancy's work! She experimented with her paintings for *Sitti's Secrets*, painting directly onto maps, using collage-effects in those desert scenes. We are doing another book together, called *Baby Radar*, and I'm thrilled she said yes to it.

And yes, I think readers (and human beings, in all the moments of their daily days) should always be on the lookout for layerings, tucked-away bits of magic, that help our scenes to glisten—they're there, it's just that sometimes we don't see them. This is what poetry urges us to do: pay that kind of attention. Unfortunately, international relations often hinge on Bigger Talk, Political Language, Generic Public-Speak, that is less intimate or endearing than a bucket, a swing, a jug of water, a sprig of mint. We have to reclaim those things ourselves, for sustenance. Kids are closer to this than adults. That's one reason I like to write for them.

Castro: Do you have in mind a particular child—or a type of child—as an ideal reader when you write for children?

Nye: Hmmmm. An open-minded one? I like to think most kids are open-minded.

Castro: *Benito's Dream Bottle*, a picture book, is dedicated to your son Madison. Children have such fresh and startlingly profound ways of looking at things, as you recorded in the poem from *Fuel* (1998), "One Boy Told Me," which is made up entirely of quotations from Madison and which got such a warm reception when you read it here last fall. The whole concept of a dream bottle that young Benito comes up with—"It's inside every body, between the stomach and the chest. At night, when we lie down, it pours the dreams into our heads" (10)—reminded me of my own son's patiently repeated explanation of his many-chambered stomach (we'd been reading about cows) that, oddly enough, allowed him to be full of his dinner after only half a plate while still leaving plenty of room for dessert. His "dessert chamber" became a much-

used expression among our extended family. Do any of the images in *Dream Bottle* come directly from Madison?

Nye: The image of the swivel cap that opened and closed by itself, and the way the dreams would pour out when a person lies down and go back in when the person stood up: all that came from him.

Castro: Were there any challenges in transposing elements of the story onto a Latino family's experience? Did you have any concerns about effecting that cultural translation successfully?

Nye: Truth is, I never thought of it as a Latino family—just a Latino neighborhood. I realize “Benito” is a Latino name, but here in San Antonio, I know more than one Anglo Juan, for example. Name cross-overs, experience cross-overs: you show me one culture that doesn't dream and then I'll start worrying. A few critics of that book said, “These characters look like Asian-Latinos!” which made me laugh since Yu Cha Pak, the artist, is a Korean now living in Houston. I did not have a specific cultural intent with that book. It was *very* important for me to use the name Mr. Laguna, because he was our beloved ninety-five-year-old neighbor and he really wanted to see his name in a book before he died.

Castro: The central idea of *Benito's Dream Bottle*—the restoration of imaginative freedom, spontaneity, creativity to an older person by the care and concern of an innocent child—reminded me very much of narratives by Frances Hodgson Burnett, as does the spunk of characters in other books, like Liyana in *Habibi*. I remember that Mary in *The Secret Garden* and Sara in *A Little Princess* both negotiate the move from colonized India back to an England that is supposed to be home but is actually strange to them. Was Hodgson Burnett a writer you read when you were growing up?

Nye: I do not recall reading Hodgson Burnett when I was growing up, though I certainly liked *The Secret Garden* as an adult. I appreciate your mentioning the spunk factor very much. Nothing matters more. Spunk is number one.

Some of my favorite authors as a kid were Margaret Wise Brown, E.B. White, Carl Sandburg, Louisa May Alcott, Langston

Hughes, and the list continues evolving through reading to this day! Some of my favorite current authors include Karen Brennan, Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, W.S. Merwin, Larry Brown, Reginald Gibbons, Edward Hirsch, Lucille Clifton, Jane Hirshfield—well, I have many, many, and I read widely in the Books for Young People field, too. I just loved Louis Sachar's *Holes*, as did millions of other people in the US

Castro: You've edited three wonderful collections of multicultural literature for young adult readers. Can you explain your goals for those projects?

Nye: My goals have always been to make wonderful voices available to more readers, to promote poems of humanity and intelligence that extend and connect us all as human beings, to enlarge readers' horizons—including my own, as I work on the books—and to help connect people. My friend Wendy Barker, a fine poet, once called me a human switchboard. I think that was the greatest compliment I ever received.

Castro: In the introduction to *The Tree Is Older Than You Are*, you respond to anticipated criticism of your role as a non-Mexican editor of Mexican text. The passage reads:

Now I live in one of the most Mexican of U.S. cities, in an inner-city neighborhood where no dinner table feels complete without a dish of salsa for gravity, and the soft air hums its double tongue. For some, this may not qualify me to gather writings of a culture not in my blood. I suggest that blood be bigger than what we're born with, that blood keep growing and growing as we live; otherwise how will we become true citizens of the world? For twenty years, working as a visiting writer in dozens of schools in my city and elsewhere, I have carried poems by writers of many cultures into classrooms, feeling the large family of voices linking human experience. We have no borders when we read. (7)

Can you talk further about the politics of ethnic difference—territoriality, the commodification of ethnicity, cultural appropriation?

Nye: All I can really say about this is I think we all need to be both bigger and smaller than we are. We are uplifted by one another's cultures, infused, enlarged. Cultures by necessity blend and commingle and enrich and flavor one another.

If I were to present myself as an expert insider in the Mexican American community, people might take issue with that, but as an anthologist and lifetime reader and traveler in the region who simply appreciates Mexican poetry and visual art, I feel equipped to choreograph a book of the same. We may all appreciate one another's cultural traditions and help to be vehicles of traditions not originally our own by blood without having to feel guilty for it. But I guessed some people might ask, "Hey, who's she to talk about this?"—you know, can't there be Anglo experts on the blues? Sure, why not? Some of the best talks I've ever heard about Japanese poetry were by Anglo-Americans.

We are who we are, but we're not stuck there. I *love* it when a non-Arab serves me hummus, believe me!

Castro: Has being a Poet in the Schools affected your writing and editing for younger readers?

Nye: Being a Poet in the Schools is a fabulous pleasure, responsibility, blessing, experiment, and ongoing discovery for everyone who ever participates in such a program. It takes enormous energy reserves and flexibility. Being a nomad-by-nature helps too! It has inspired, uplifted, and challenged all of us who do it. And I keep running into kids, ex-students, who say how much it mattered to them too. My most recent anthology, *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* [2000], is a collection of some favorite student writings from over the years. I planned to work as a visiting classroom poet for two years when I started and have now been visiting schools for twenty-five years. I don't do many long-term ongoing workshops the way I used to do, however. Usually my visits now are one or two days long. Sometimes I miss the longer stints. There are lots of good people doing that work.

Writing projects for teachers in various states—the New Jersey Writing Project, for example, and many others—have encouraged teachers to make creative writing an essential part of the curriculum. They've done so much good. I'm always shocked, however,

at how many classrooms in the United States this wisdom hasn't reached yet. Bravo to Teachers & Writers Collaborative and the Writing Project at Columbia University for all the work they've done in this field, too—bravo to everybody. But no bravo to teachers who still imagine that occasional writing—for tests and official “assignments”—will ever be enough.

Castro: What has the reaction to the edited collections been from bookstores and educators? Do you know if the books are being used in schools, or if most of their readers just discover them privately on bookstore shelves?

Nye: People have been very kind and welcoming to these books. I'm happy to report that the books *are* being used in many schools and *The Tree Is Older Than You Are* has been warmly received by ESL teachers as well as Spanish teachers. Also, it ended up being distributed in Mexico by the Sanborn Company, which made me glad.

Castro: Do you have any other multicultural editing projects in mind for the future?

Nye: Yes I do, but first I have to finish this endless second novelito I'm working on! It is set in San Antonio, titled *Florrie Will Do It*. Also I am working on new poems, new essays, new picture books, and trying to improve upon my garden. After twenty-one years in the same house, wouldn't you think I'd have a beautiful yard by now? But I'm still working on it. Like writing does if we do it often enough, my yard seems to have taken on a life and directions of its own—I walked outside one day and there was this *enormous* bed of blossoming yellow and orange nasturtiums all around the mailbox. I have no memory of ever planting them.

Selected Bibliography of the works of Naomi Shahab Nye

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