

Habibi

Naomi Shihab Nye

FIELD GUIDE



Book Summary

This is a realistic fiction chapter book, best for experienced readers in late elementary and middle school grades. The story involves a bit of dating and a lot of beautiful reflective passages. Liyana is "half and half," half Arab and half American. She has not experienced her Arab half until her family moves from St. Louis, Missouri, to Jerusalem. They have moved back to her father's Arab family and village. Liyana makes her transition as new émigré, learning about her heritage, her family, and herself. There are times when she does not feel one bit at home in this new and foreign culture, but that changes over the course of the book. As Liyana's sense of home expands, so, too, does her sense of herself and of her family. As Liyana struggles to find friendship in this new world, she learns that she and everyone else must learn to write a new story for themselves and for the war-torn Middle East.

Publisher

Aladdin (Simon & Schuster), 1999

ISBN

0689825234

TC Level

14

Basic Book Information

Naomi Shihab Nye has written numerous poetry anthologies including, *Come with Me*, *Salting the Ocean*, *Fuel*, *Red Suitcase*, and *Hugging the Jukebox*. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1952, to a Palestinian father and an American mother. She has twice traveled to the Middle East and Asia for the United States Information Agency promoting international goodwill through the arts. Nye has received awards from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Carity Randall prize, and the International Poetry Forum.

Noteworthy Features

Habibi is a strong and significant book. One of its strengths lies in the way Nye has developed her characters. Through Liyana's eyes, the reader can experience life in Jerusalem, life as an Arab, and life as an outsider. Liyana herself is brought to life so skillfully that an identification with and concern for her will carry the reader forward into this rather subtle and sometimes slow-moving book, sustaining the reader's interest.

Teaching Ideas

This book contains many terms from Arab culture. It holds the thoughts and fears of a newly immigrated teenager. Issue of tolerance, war, and peace are omnipresent.

This book is unusual because the plot revolves around character development. The main story line of this book follows Liyana and her family's progress as they grow into their identities. This makes *Habibi* especially suited to supporting work with characters. Liyana is a complex character, exemplifying the contradictions of teenagers. The book chronicles

her growth, from asking closed questions and answers to a more open and inquiring way of being. Throughout the book, Liyana models a sensitive and literate teen: she reads voraciously and writes in her notebook. She also rereads her notebook and reflects upon the entries and her life.

At the beginning of each chapter, there are italicized lines, which are from Liyana's point of view, although they are written in third person. These lines deserve attention. They can help readers focus on the events of the upcoming chapter and to grasp Liyana's changing attitudes. We recommend using these lines for support and letting them evoke lines of questions during teacher-student conferences.

The author has used drama and the beauty of the setting in Jerusalem to contrast (in a variety of ways) Liyana's past life in America. Jerusalem is ancient, full of mystique and story, which Liyana soaks up gradually. The setting can be seen as a metaphor for the contrast in lifestyle of Israel/Palestine and America. The central themes of the book are wrapped in with both the setting and the development of Liyana's character. *Habibi*, therefore, becomes a great example of the interdependence of all the elements of story. That is, an understanding of the setting is necessary for an understanding of the plot and theme and characters in this book. The setting, the plot, and all the other elements in this story (and in most stories) need to be seen as an intertwined braid, each influencing the others.

Although there are many rich avenues into a deep discussion of this book, *Habibi* is especially suited to a character study. One way to organize a character study would be for the teacher to read aloud a book or short story in which there is a nuanced, dynamic character and then to involve the class in lots of work around that character. Then the class could disperse to their small groups, and within each small group children would read and do character work with another text. *Habibi* might not be the most enthralling read aloud for a whole class, but it could be the book one of the groups of strong readers consider. Perhaps *Freak the Mighty* might work as the read aloud in a character study. In any case, some of the work with characters could include:

A journey of sorts in a book, and often the journey is an internal one. Are there stages in the journey? Turning points? Surprises? Who accompanies the character on the journey and how is that person's journey similar or different?

A discussion of the difference between static (stable) and dynamic (changing) characters. Which term fits the main character in your book and why? If he or she changes, what causes those changes? What resists those changes?

Objects or places that become an extension of a character's identity. Has your author done this?

An exploration of the characters' actions. We get to know characters not only by explicit descriptions of them but also by seeing how they act. Actions can reveal. Which actions in your book are windows to your characters' personalities?

Complexity of character. Although sometimes a book has evil characters and good ones, more skilled writers usually create characters that are more complex, and often in stories as in life, our strengths *are* our weaknesses. The loving father can also be overbearing. What are some of the complexities in your character; what are ways in which his or her strengths

are also weaknesses?

Book Connections

Other books that are similar in style to this one are: *Words Under the Words*, a book of poetry by Naomi Shihab Nye, and *My Louisiana Sky* by Kimberly Willis Holt.

Genre

Chapter Book

Character's Gender

Female

Teaching Uses

Independent Reading; Character Study; Book Clubs; Read Aloud