

## A Wandering Poet for the Classroom: Naomi Shihab-Nye

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Naomi Shihab-Nye is a poignant and prolific writer of poems, young adult novels, essays, and stories. She has received the Witter Binner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, the I.B. Lavin Award from the Academy of American Poets, four Pushcart Prizes, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and numerous other honors for her books for young readers.

Shihab-Nye brings an international perspective to her writing. She is an Arab American whose father was a Palestinian refugee and whose mother is an American of Swiss and German descent. Much of her work is devoted to bridging gaps between cultures and people. When the World Trade Center fell, Shihab-Nye immediately penned the essay, "A Letter from Naomi Shihab-Nye, Arab American Poet: To Any Would – Be Terrorists" expressing her sadness over the tragedy in New York and presenting her vision for a better world. It remains a powerful piece of social activism and a plea for cross-cultural understanding.

Social studies teachers who wish to expose students to personal stories describing the Middle East situation should consider the picture book, *Sitti's Secrets*, the young adult novel, *Habibi*, or both. *Sitti's Secrets* is a semi-autobiographical story about Naomi's childhood visits to her grandmother who lived in a small Palestinian village. Sitti means grandmother in Arabic. Sitti's granddaughter Mona, the narrator of the story, describes everyday life with her grandmother and gives the reader a sense of the rhythm of Sitti's life in Palestine. The book ends with a letter from Mona to the President of the United States describing her grandmother's life and urging peace. The character of Mona provides a role model for social activism, a central theme throughout most of Shihab-Nye's works.

*Habibi*, winner of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, is a young adult novel with the same setting as *Sitti's Secrets*. Sitti is once again the Palestinian grandmother and *Habibi* is Liyana, a 14 year old girl who moves with her family from St. Louis to Jerusalem, just as Shihab-Nye did as a young girl. While shopping in Jerusalem, Liyana befriends a boy named Omer. She assumes he is Arabic but finds out later that he is Jewish. Upon meeting Omer, her mother says, "Liyana, I don't think he's an Arab," and Liyana responds, "We already talked about it. He believes in the peace as much as we do." Although Liyana and Omer are friends, the book does not leave the reader thinking that the Palestinian/Jewish conflicts can be solved easily. It does, however, give the reader hope.

Older students will be interested in Shihab-Nye's *Nineteen Varieties of Gazelle*, a collection of poems of the Middle East. The sixty poems depict lives of ordinary Palestinians. She dedicates these poems to "the wise grandmothers and to the young readers in whom I have always placed my best faith." Shihab-Nye's writing of the Middle East is always a plea for peace and a window into the hearts and minds of the people. In the introduction to this collection, Shihab-Nye writes about her own sitti, her grandmother who lived to be 106.

After writing about her in essays, poems, picture books and a novel, I had thought I could let her rest ... But since September 11, 2001, she has swarmed into my consciousness,

poking my sleep saying, “It’s your job. Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are.

Considering some of the stereotyping and profiling that continues to plague Arab-Americans, Shihab-Nye’s voice adds a much needed global perspective to our national discourse.

Shihab-Nye’s social activism is not limited to issues of the Middle East. In her young adult novel, *Going Going*, the main character, a 16 year old girl named Florrie, lives in San Antonio and takes up the cause of local businesses. Florrie differs from most of her peers in that she likes old buildings, old clothes, and worries about the future of her town if more small businesses fail. Much of the novel centers around a boycott of franchises organized by Florrie and some family and friends. This campaign to save “old San Antonio” succeeds enough so that Florrie feels rewarded for her actions. Many readers will be inspired. Again, the author draws on her real life experiences. San Antonio is Shihab-Nye’s home and when on the road she requests non-franchise hotels. While many adults decry the apathy of youth, civic-minded teenagers are everywhere and will enjoy this story.

Another of Shihab-Nye’s books, *I’ll Ask You Three Times, Are You O.K?* offers potential for use in the classroom. Shihab-Nye is a self-proclaimed “wandering poet,” and this collection of essays, draws on her experiences in taxi cabs and cars in cities in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The essays are a testament to staying open to people and new surroundings as well as the potential benefit of taking a slightly different path. Adults and students interested in writing essays will find good models in this collection. The essays prod our thinking and lead us to a well-planned destination, even as we take some interesting detours in the process.

Shihab-Nye is an advocate for children everywhere. She has taught writing workshops in Palestine and Israel to Arab children and Jewish children. She gives voice to young authors in her collection of the works of twenty-five poets under twenty-five, *Time You Let Me In*. It is obvious from her own writing that Shihab-Nye remembers what it’s like to be a child, both the wonder and the pain of it. She honors young writers across the globe arguing for peace, justice, and a future without prejudice.

### **Reference**

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