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How I Learned Geography

Tessa McMillan

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Title: How I Learned Geography  
Author: Uri Shulevitz  
Reviewer: Tessa McMillan  
Publisher: Farrar Straus Giroux  
Publication Year: 2008  
ISBN: 9780374334994  
Number of Pages: 32  
Interest Level: Toddler, Preschool, Primary, Intermediate, Young Adult  
Rating: Outstanding

Review

After war destroys their home in Europe, a young boy and his parents find refuge in Central Asia. The boy’s small family live in a one-room house made from clay, straw, and camel dung. They share their home with a couple they do not know. Life is hard as they try to handle living in such a foreign place. At the end of a long, hunger-filled day, the boy’s father returns from the bazaar with a large world map and a very small piece of bread. The boy is angry at his father for not bringing home enough food. But after his father hangs the colorful atlas on the wall, the boy’s imagination ignites. He transports himself away from his hunger and misery to experience exotic locations all over the world.

How I Learned Geography is a simple but heart-felt story based on Shulevitz’s own life. At the age of four, Shulevitz and his family escaped wartorn Poland in 1939. As struggling refugees, his family moved to Turkestan—known as Kazakhstan today. This book is based on his years living there and the world chart his father brought home for him. In Shulevitz’s Author’s Note, he states that even though the wall map was lost long ago, his illustrations using collage, pen and ink, and watercolor help him convey his childhood memories of the places he dreamed about as he stared at the world’s colorful countries. The story’s theme seems to follow the old saying of “if you give a man a fish he eats for a day but if you teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime”. With the gift of that atlas, Shulevitz feasted and thrived on his imagination to fuel his whole life. A beautiful, uplifting read for all ages.