Clever Ali

Sandra L. Tidwell

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Reviewer: Sandra L. Tidwell  
Reading Level: Primary  
Rating: Outstanding  
Genre: Folklore; Adventure stories; Picture books;  
Subject: Homing pigeons--Juvenile fiction; Egypt--History--640-1250--Juvenile fiction; Fathers and sons--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;  

Will Ali be able to escape the Sultan's anger? Will he be thrown into the deep, dark oubliette? Ali has just turned seven and his father, the keeper of the royal pigeons for the Sultan of Cairo, takes him to the palace to learn about pigeons. The pigeons are the Sultan's communication link to the people in his kingdom and they help keep the Sultan aware of invading enemies and other dangers. Ali is told that if everything doesn't go perfectly right with the Sultan and he becomes angry, "The first person the Sultan sees is thrown straight into his deep, dark oubliette (ooo-blee-et)." At the bottom of the oubliette is a huge ugly demon with black horns, long scaly arms, and huge purple claws.

When Ali is given his own pigeon, Othman, to train, Ali over-feeds the bird. Instead of returning to the pigeon loft when Ali and Baraka take Othman far away from the palace to see if the pigeon will return, Othman flies into the Sultan's throne room! Othman grabs a cherry out of a serving bowl, upsets the dish, and the Sultan is furious! "If this boy can bring me a bowl of six hundred cherries in three days, I will forgive you. If not down the oubliette you go!" exclaims the Sultan. Ali and his father devise a clever plan to bring the fruit from the far off mountains of Syria. However, will this really appease the Sultan's anger?

The lilting, loving language in such expressions as "O my son and light of my eyes" and De Marchen's exotic, magical illustrations make this ancient Arabian tale a great read-aloud story. The author's note explains that *Clever Ali* is based on a true story of the Egyptian ruler Al-Azeez. The illustrator describes in the artist’s note where she obtained ideas for the very detailed illustrations which are found even on the front and back inside covers.