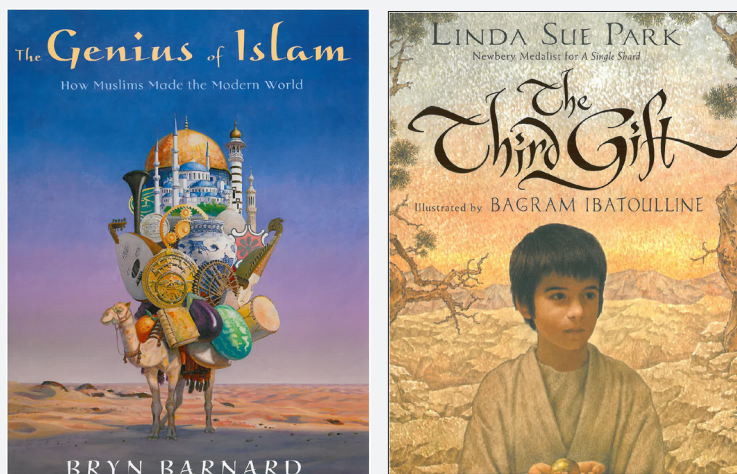


First Opinion: Muslims' and Arabs' Contributions to World Civilization

Barnard, Bryn. *The Genius of Islam: How Muslims Made the Modern World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

Park, Linda Sue. *The Third Gift*. Illus. Bagram Ibatoulline. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011

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Bryn Barnard's *The Genius of Islam: How Muslims Made the Modern World* is a timely book and highly needed, especially during the current Arab Spring. It reminds Muslims and non-Muslims of the Muslim culture during the Middle Ages, which was a period of tremendous artistic, cultural and scientific advancement in the Islamic Empire. In this important book, Barnard uses short, engaging text and attractive, full-color artwork to bring Islam's contributions gloriously to life. Every section in Barnard's book reflects some of the great influences of Islam to the improvement of the human condition: "The books we read, the music we play, the words we speak, the numbers we count, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the science we depend on [the medicine we take, the perfumes we smell]—all were shaped, at least in part, by Islam" (6). Moreover, Barnard summarizes significant inventions and innovations of various Muslims and gives short biographies of many Muslim inventors, scientists, and other leaders. These inventions and innovations include, but are not limited to, books and libraries, Arabic writing and calligraphy, and even the shift from using scrolls to using books to keep records and tell stories.

Barnard claims that Islamic civilization evolved into a heterogeneous society that drew its strength and validity from the interaction of many cultures, ethnicities, and faiths. According to him:

This new society was unlike anything the world had seen before: multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious, optimistic, open, curious, tolerant, literate, and cosmopolitan, united by a single language, brimming with cutting-edge science and technology, assured that the light of civilization burned brightest within its borders. (8)

Although, for the most part, Arabs ruled and led, they acknowledged and rewarded talented minorities: Christians led centers of learning and embassies, Jews became generals and prime ministers, and Persians who converted to Islam became esteemed scholars. Paradoxically, many Americans and Europeans tend to marginalize the contributions of the Muslim citizens of history. Part of that might be due to current events, but a bigger part of it is that most of them were never taught what Muslims brought to the western world. Perhaps Barnard's 2011 picture book, *Genius of Islam*, will fill some gaps in children's knowledge of the impact of the Islamic civilization. Barnard closes with an alarming reminder of the ways in which 16th-century Europeans worked to claim such advancements as their own and obscure their origins. He concludes, "Europe set out to deliberately forget its Islamic heritage" (34). This child-accessible history book will give a larger view of Islam.

Muslims not only contributed to the world civilization, but to its societal morals. Islam spreads moral values to reform society: to make it more just, more charitable, and more fair. Islam came to complete the existing good morals that shaped the Arabic culture. For example, Arabs value strong, respectful relationships between youth and adults, and children and parents. We can feel these Arabic parental relationships in the picture book by Newbery Medalist, Linda Sue Park, *The Third Gift*. In it, we meet a Christian Arab boy who is learning his father's trade—a man who harvests dried pearls of sap that bleed out of myrrh trees when the bark is cut. The dried sap, the boy claims, is "called tears because it seems as if the tree is crying" (Park). The narrator is a typical Arab boy who joins his father in his journeys in the Middle Eastern desert and carefully observes his dad's search for the good trees: "My father has to see inside each tree" (Park). The boy learns that "the tears take time and skill to harvest" (Park). Finally, the boy is very excited as his father allows him to harvest the largest tear during their search, which is then sold at the spice market to three men who are taking a third gift to a baby. As the men leave on their camels, the boy is left wondering about this baby.

As an Arab non-Christian woman, I feel that the illustrations are really beautiful and really authentic to the region and time. Park reflects on the possible life of those living in the Middle East at that time. I loved the author's detailed explanation on where myrrh comes from, how it is collected, and what it is used for. When the author mentions the various applications of the tears, including the funeral use of the very best tears and as

a wine additive, I discovered that the book is addressing Christian Arabs and not Muslim Arabs, as wine is forbidden in Islam. It wasn't until I reached the author's note at the end of *The Third Gift* that I learned it was telling the Christian Nativity story. I admit that while reading this picture book, I felt the mysterious tone of the text; the obscure references to tears, egg, blood, crying, and mourning made it a sad rather than a happy story for young readers.

About the Author

Nisreen M. Anati is an assistant professor at the College of Education/English Language Teacher Education Department, Al Ain University of Science & Technology, United Arab Emirates. She has a number of publications on issues related to children's and YA literature, particularly Arabic/Islamic children's and YA fiction.