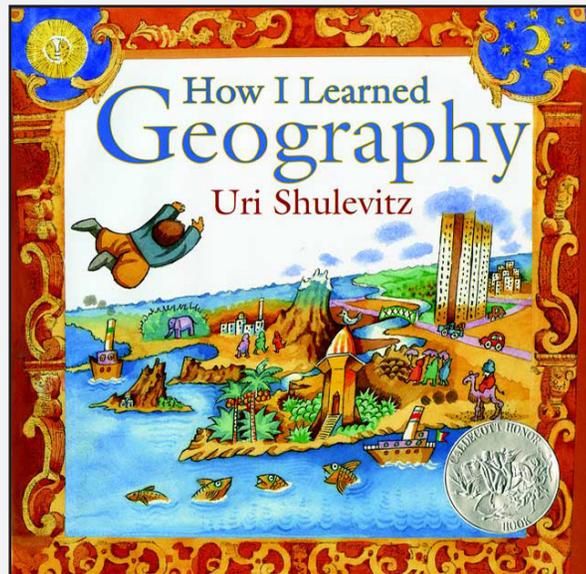


## First Opinion: Nourishing Landscapes

Shulevitz, Uri. *How I Learned Geography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Judith Lysaker



Uri Shulevitz once again takes us on a marvelous, dream-like journey in his 2009 Caldecott Honor Book, *How I Learned Geography*. As in two of my other Shulevitz favorites, *One Monday Morning* and *Rain Rain Rivers*, it is imagination that shapes the narrative and transforms the daily life of a child in *How I Learned Geography*.

In this autobiographically grounded work, Shulevitz tells the story of a boy and his family who leave their homeland to escape the devastation of war. They travel great distances and finally arrive in a strange, new place. Here, they share a primitive home with a couple they don't know. Food is scarce, and the boy often goes to bed hungry. One day, the boy's father goes to the bazaar to buy bread but instead comes home with a large map. The story that unfolds reveals the power of the map to sustain and soothe the boy as he and his family live as impoverished refugees.

*How I Learned Geography* blends sound and image to create a world of both delight and despair. The simplicity and rhythm of the language and the pace of the storytelling will appeal to children as young as three or four. Yet, Shulevitz goes beyond this to create a layer of compelling emotional territory with color and image that will draw in readers of

all ages. The opening page screams the violence and terror of war in oranges and reds. The words “When war” pound the eyes. Then Shulevitz moves to muted blues, grays, browns, and beiges as we accompany the family to their sparse living quarters. The faces of the boy, his family, and the other refugees are kept in shadow, often with their eyes shielded from full view. We feel the weight of their loneliness and poverty.

Then, in an almost Emerald City moment, the father brings home a map, and everything changes. The brightness of the map, with its far-off places, covers a wall in their otherwise barren home, replacing a dismal and difficult life. The boy studies the map, reciting words he doesn’t understand and enjoying the rhythm of them. They are nourishing words, sources of play and delight. The emotional territory lightens, and the boy smiles as he embarks on a fantastic flight to other lands, provoked by the study of the map.

*How I Learned Geography* is likely to resonate with children who have faced abrupt geographic uprooting or sudden changes in family circumstance, particularly those who find themselves in poverty. They will see themselves in the boy as he struggles to be “at home.” They will surrender, with the boy, to the adventures of the map. But the reach of *How I Learned Geography* goes beyond this, to any child who has at one point wished more than anything to escape something or someone, however briefly. Shulevitz unveils the great gifts of text and of imagination to, magically and fantastically, relocate us and, in the process, free our minds and feed our souls.

Still, I wondered if there was a missed opportunity or two. For example, once the father brings home the map and the boy begins studying it, the background of poverty utterly disappears. Of course, this is largely the point; engaging in fantasy takes us out of the present reality and can be a joyous, healing experience. Yet keeping something of the refugee life within the reader’s visual field might lead to interesting contrasts between the real, the imagined, and the relative power of both. Frames where we see the boy studying the map on the floor—still in the midst of a colorless life—would point out these contrasts, perhaps sparking interesting conversations between parent or teacher and child. Similarly, I wondered if there was more to do with the geography itself, which is so richly implied. Might we have seen the boy studying a particular location on the map with the fantasy images alongside? The young reader could then geographically locate the snowy mountains and exotic temples that the boy sees in his mind’s eye, perhaps deepening the reading experience.

For this reader, a small influx of reality would make the fantasy all the more potent, all the more yearned for, and all the more wonderful. In fact, Shulevitz does something like this in the end pages where he tells the story of his family’s struggles in Turkestan and a map he once had. These are just small wonderings, however, about what is already an intensely nourishing book, one which invites children to experience the sustenance discovered at the intersection of a text and a reader’s imagination.

### Works Cited

- Shulevitz, Uri. *One Monday Morning*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.  
———. *Rain Rain Rivers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

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