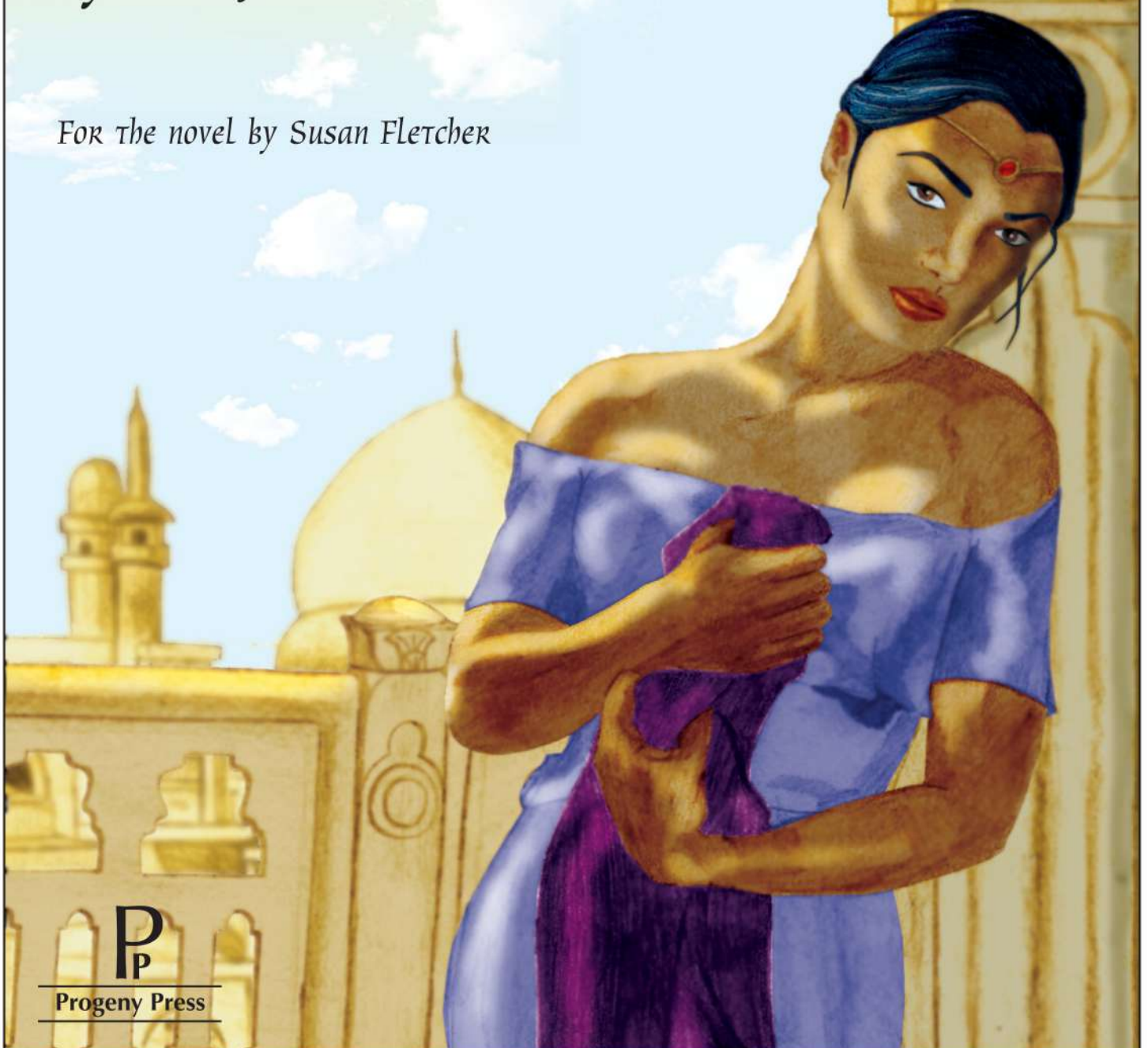


Shadow Spinner Study Guide

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For the novel by Susan Fletcher



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Synopsis

Shadow Spinner is a fresh and unique version of the story of the Arabian Nights and the 1001 Tales, but it focuses on the story teller and the people around her rather than retelling her stories, as most version do.

The Sultan's wife has betrayed him with a lover, and so the Sultan has killed the two of them. Unwilling to be alone, but believing that all women are betrayers, the Sultan marries a new girl each day and kills her before morning. No young woman in his kindom is safe.

Then Shahrazad, the daughter of the Sultan's own vizier, volunteers to be his wife. In the morning, facing death, she asks the Sultan if she can tell her younger sister one last story before she dies. The Sultan agrees, and listens as Shahrazad tells her story to Dunyazad. But as Shahrazad sees the sun rising, she breaks off her story at a particularly exciting spot, promising to finish it the next night if she still lives. The Sultan, entertained and intrigued, grants Shahrazad her life for one more day. And so begins a tense and uncertain pattern—each night Shahrazad tells a story, but if it does not please the Sultan, death awaits.

But after two and a half years, Shahrazad is running out of stories. . . .

So *Shadow Spinner* begins with Marjan, a crippled orphan storyteller who goes with her Auntie Chava to sell jewelry to the few women who remain in the Sultan's harem. When the children gather around her, she naturally begins to tell them a story, just as she imagines her hero Shahrazad does. One of the listeners is Dunyazad, and when she realizes this is a story she has never heard, Marjan is summoned before Shahrazad and taken into the harem.

Once in the harem, Marjan learns the Sultan's mother is just as dangerous as the Sultan himself, and she wants Shahrazad, and all who help her, to fail and die. When Shahrazad tells Marjan's story to the Sultan, they discover the story is a favorite of the Sultan's from his childhood and he looks forward to hearing the *full* story again—but Marjan knows only the small bit she has already told Shahrazad! They must find the blind beggar who first told the story to Marjan—but it is death to leave the harem! As they search for a way out of their deathtrap, they each learn the power of stories . . . when there is truth in the tale.

Background Information

The Story of Shahrazad and the Sultan

The unique tales of *The Arabian Nights*, set in exotic lands and filled with adventure, have thrilled generations of readers and widely influenced later literature. These stories were written and collected over the course of hundreds of years. The core stories originated in Persia and India in the eighth century, adding Arab stories from Iraq in the ninth and tenth centuries. By the 13th century, more tales of Syrian and Egyptian origin were added, and in the following years additional tales were added, finally bringing the total number of stories up to 1001, as in the title. Various individual stories reached Europe around the 12th century, such as Chaucer's Horse (the enchanted horse in *The Arabian Nights*). In the early 1700s, Antoine Galland translated the *Voyages of Sinbad* and, when they proved a success, from 1704–17 he translated the entire body of stories, consisting of 12 volumes.

The Arabian Nights uses an effective and complicated literary device called “framing.” At some points in the stories as many as three frames exist as Shahrazad tells a story about one person, who recounts another tale, in which a character begins to tell another story, and so on. The story of Shahrazad and the Sultan Shahriar provides the framework for *The Arabian Nights*, drawing us into her desperate plan to save the women of her country with only her fascinating stories to bring her a reprieve from death each morning.

Religion

The main characters in *Shadow Spinner* are Muslim, though the “aunt” and “uncle” with whom Marjan lives are Jewish. A Muslim is a person who adheres to the religion of Islam. Islam began as a formal religion when the Prophet Muhammad received what he believed to be revelations from Allah (God) in the early 600s AD. Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning it believes in only one God, as do Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Islam states that Judaism and Christianity are simply misinterpretations or corruptions of God's revelations to the prophets, which include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, among others. Muhammad is considered

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the last and perfect prophet who delivered the final and perfect message from God to all humanity.

There are five basic pillars of faith in Islam that all believers must perform—ritual prayer, giving to the poor, a pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and reciting “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.” Because *Shadow Spinner* is not about the religion of Islam, the author does not spend a lot of time telling about its practices. You may notice, however, that the ritual prayers and a strong sensitivity for modest dress are very important to the characters.

Just as there are a number of denominations in Christianity and different ideas about what makes a “true Christian” among people who call themselves Christian, there are various interpretations about their religion among Muslims.

[Information on Islam summarized from *The Encyclopedia of World History*, 2001; *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition, 2001–05; found online at <http://www.bartleby.com>.]

Note to Parent or Teacher: The original stories from the Arabian Nights collections can be crude and rather gory, as is the case with many original folk tales. If you wish to have your students read further in these stories, you may wish to take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the specific collection your child is using to make certain it is within your parameters of acceptability. Many acceptable versions are available.

Chapters 3–4

Vocabulary:

Context and multiple definitions:

Some words have more than one meaning and we must use the context of the sentence to determine which meaning the author intends to use. This can be particularly important when the word is being used as a metaphor or to create a picture for the reader. For instance, the word *peppering* can mean “sprinkling or seasoning as with the spice pepper,” “showering with shot or missiles,” “or hitting with rapid repeated blows.” However, in the sentence, “Uncle Eli came, hobbling toward us in the twilight, *peppering* us with questions. . .” none of the definitions above literally fits the context of the sentence. But by using the context of the sentence we can determine that the author is using the definition “showering with shot or missiles” to create a picture of Uncle Eli asking a lot questions very quickly.

In the exercises below, all of the definitions listed are true for the underlined words. Choose the *closest* correct meaning for the underlined word after looking at the context within the sentence.

1. _____ “Eli came hobbling toward us..”
 - a. fettering
 - b. hampering, impeding
 - c. moving along unsteadily or with difficulty

2. _____ “sent it clattering across the tiles..”
 - a. making a rattling sound
 - b. talking noisily or rapidly
 - c. moving or going with a clatter, to cause a clattering noise

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15. *Author techniques:* Remember, a *metaphor* is a figure of speech that creates a picture by saying something is something else (for example, “he became a lion when angry”). *Similes* are a figure of speech in which words such as *like* or *as* are used to more clearly indicate that a comparison is being made to something else (for example, “he fought like a lion”). *Anthropomorphism* [an-thro-po-mor-fism] is a technique by which an author gives human or animal characteristics to inanimate objects (for example, “the trees stretched their limbs in the warm, early morning sun”). After each of the following sentences from the book, fill in which technique the author used in that sentence.

a. “I wanted to ask so many things I couldn’t squeeze them all into a single question; they spilled into a stream of questions that started small and flowed out to cover the rest of my life.”

Author technique: _____

b. “I closed my nostrils from the inside—breathed through my mouth—but the revulsion crawled down my throat.”

Author technique: _____

c. “. . . my mind was moving slowly, like wading through a pool of deep water.”

Author technique: _____

d. “I felt as if I were blindfolded, groping my way through a maze of hidden traps.”

Author technique: _____

Dig Deeper:

16. In a general sense, *perspective* is the personal evaluation of the significance of something, generally based on a person’s own experiences or circumstances. The night after Marjan returns from the harem, she worries about the story of Julnar that Shahrazad was going to tell the Sultan: “It was a boring tale! I could

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see that now, though I had not before. It would never save her!” Why does Marjan have this perspective about her story? What does she say about the story the next morning after she learns that Shahrazad lives? What event changed her perspective?

17. In the “Lessons for Life and Storytelling” at the beginning of Chapter 3, Marjan says, “Sometimes, when you wish for a thing and then it comes true, you discover that maybe you didn’t think through your wish all the way to the end.” What did Marjan wish for at in the middle of Chapter 3 that came true? How did her perspective change when she realized her wish was about to come true? How did her perspective change again when she was taken into the harem?

18. What does Auntie Chava say about the tongue in Chapter 4? How does this compare with what the Bible says about the tongue in Psalm 34:13, Proverbs 10:19, and Proverbs 21:23?

19. When speaking of her words, Marjan says, “The trouble was, I couldn’t resist letting them out. They made a turmoil in my mouth until I did.” What does Marjan mean by this? Explain Marjan’s meaning. Where is her true turmoil? See Psalm 39:1–3. Compare and contrast this with Marjan’s situation.

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20. In Chapter 3, Auntie Chava says that she wants only a few things—what are they? How does this compare with what the Bible says in 1 Timothy 6:6–11?

Optional Activities:

1. Continue examining each “Lessons for Life and Storytelling” section throughout the book for foreshadowing.
2. In Chapter 3 we see Marjan’s opinions about several things change radically as she gains a different perspective of them. Read Matthew 6:31–34; 7:12. Discuss how these two passages relate to our perspective on how we should treat other people and worrying about the future.
3. Begin keeping track of things Marjan has strong ideas about, and then keep track of how her perspective changes later after she has more information.

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Chapters 21–23

Vocabulary:

1. *cross out*—jovial, *replacement*—sarcasm
2. *cross out*—impenetrable, *replacement*—vulnerable
3. *cross out*—distraught, *replacement*—jubilant
4. *cross out*—obvious, *replacement*—subtle
5. *cross out*—determinedly, *replacement*—profusely
6. *cross out*—pleading, *replacement*—prostrate
7. *cross out*—brilliance, *replacement*—effrontery
8. *cross out*—propellant, *replacement*—dilemma
9. *cross out*—navigating, *replacement*—calculating
10. *cross out*—completed, *replacement*—intricate
11. *cross out*—surmised, *replacement*—conspired
12. *cross out*—auditorium, *replacement*—clamor

Questions:

1. Marjan takes the coins she received from Ayaz and hides them in the lentil jar for Farah to find. Marjan is leaving so she will no longer endanger the family. She does not want to wait until Farah's husband asks her to leave.
2. She remembers what Shahrazad said about framing dangerous truths inside of tales within tales.
3. Marjan tells them she is Shahrazad's slave who escaped from the harem and she has a story to tell the Sultan.
4. The throne room is huge with windows of colored glass, cloth-of-gold hangings, carved ceilings taller than full-grown trees. The Sultan is wearing black silk robes edged in sable, an enormous ruby in his turban, and a diamond studded dagger at his waist.
5. Marjan tells him that there is truth *in* her tale.
6. He wants to hear the story from Shahrazad.
7. He orders them all locked up in the dungeon. He says they have all conspired to deceive him, which is true.

Thinking About the Story:

8. Marjan dreams of Badar Basim with his bird's foot and how Jauharah massaged his foot to ease his pain. The dream may have several interpretations. Certainly, the fact that Badar Basim and Princess Jauharah were old and Badar Basim still has a bird's foot imply that some pain or injuries are permanent; and the fact that Princess Jauharah massages the foot and eases the pain demonstrates that one may help ease the pain of a permanent injury but not take it away. Whether Badar Basim represents the Sultan, and Princess Jauharah represents Shahrazad; or Badar Basim is Shahrazad and Princess Jauharah is the Sultan; or Badar Basim is Marjan with her injured foot; all may be valid interpretations by the student.
9. Marjan realizes that her mother had loved and cherished her and fought hard for her. She had been brave and protected Marjan the only way she could think of.
10. The tale was too much like his own life—specifically the merman king who killed a wife each day. He lets Marjan continue to find out in what way the singing mermaid had deceived her husband—or how Shahrazad deceived him.
11. Marjan uses the analogy so the Sultan can pretend, as Marjan tells him when he gets angry, “It’s only a tale . . . that the fish told.” He can hear the story and understand what she is talking about, but it gives just enough distance between himself and the analogy that he can listen a little more objectively than if Marjan had just come to him and told him what he, the Khatun, Shahrazad, and she had done. In the story, the Sultan is the merman king; Shahrazad is the beautiful, singing mermaid; and Marjan is the mermaid with a broken fin.
12. The Khatun is lying. At this point it is unclear. She may simply want everything to happen as she dictates, be angry at being thwarted by Marjan, be consumed by her own fear for her sons, or possibly want to keep total power in the harem, which she couldn't have if there is a permanent queen.
13. He asks if the mermaid queen loathes the king. He wonders if Shahrazad loves or hates him. She sees a soft, vulnerable, hurting look, like a child.
14. Soraya tells the Sultan that she did *not* see a man being smuggled into the harem, directly contradicting the Khatun. Answers will vary. Marjan says she “could almost see her weighing sides, calculating which [answer] held the least danger”; implying that Soraya did not care so much for the truth as she did for picking the safest route for herself. Because Marjan is not always a perfect judge of others, students may have their own ideas. After Dunyazad comes to Marjan in her prison cell, she tells Marjan that Soraya was found drowned in the harem baths, and everyone thinks the Khatun had