

Ahmed, Said Salah. (2007). *The Lion's Share/Qayb Libaax*. St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission.

Hassan, Marian A. (2007). *Dhegdheer*. St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission.

Katie De Kam

Something exciting has hit my classroom. This is the kind of thing that kids are crawling over each other to get closer to, they are stealing it off the "teacher-only" pile of otherwise uninteresting papers on my desk and engaging in comparative discussions on during recess. It has everything to do with the very essence of my students and has proved to be that thing that helps students truly see themselves in the curriculum. I had no idea what was in store when I checked these popular books out of the library.

This excitement started with two books, both Somali folktales, and both written in two languages, Somali and English. My fifth grade students, most of whom are Somali, are head-over-heels about them. The stories, *The Lion's Share* and *Dhegdheer*, are a part of the four-book series called The Somali Bilingual Book Project sponsored by the Minnesota Humanities Commission. Both books have the perfect blend of qualities that make the folktales endearing to all readers, and for the Somali audience, provide a spotlight on their culture that makes them stand proud.

The Lion's Share is written by Said Salah Ahmed and illustrated by Kelly Dupre. It is a story with a lesson to learn about a greedy lion king and his unfortunate subjects. The story begins with the "beasts of prey were hunting together in the forests of Somalia. Late in the afternoon they found a big fat camel." As the story develops, it becomes apparent that the lion will be taking "the lion's share" of the precious camel meat, while the other beasts of prey will be lucky to go home with one or two bites of the kill. At the end of the story, the animals have learned and begun to chant, "The lion's share is not fair, the lion's share is not fair."

While *The Lion's Share* teaches us that sometime the bad guys get the good stuff, *Dhegdheer* has a message of justice: A wicked woman will get what she deserves. The book is written by Marian A. Hassan and illustrated by Betsy Bowen. *Dhegdheer*, which means Long Ear in Somali, is a boogeyman figure whose story is very common in Somali folklore. She is a fierce cannibal who is hunting for her next meal with her super-human qualities such as keen hearing, ability to run very quickly, and a magical talking vessel in which she stores her human flesh. When an innocent widow and her chubby child come upon *Dhegdheer's* hut, they are chased through the Hargega Valley and ultimately are rewarded with safety because of their innocence. In the midst of the chase, however, *Dhegdheer* loses her life to the valley because of the sins she has committed. As a result of *Dhegdheer's* death, rain, joy, and song are able to return to the valley once again.

There are several qualities that make *The Lion's Share* and *Dhegdheer* so enticing for the Somali reader. The very fact that the books are bilingual is their most compelling element. Both books are authentically Somali in text in that the authors are Somali/English speakers themselves and so there is no beauty of language lost in the translation. Said Salah Ahmed and Marian A. Hassan have saturated their books with carefully chosen words in both languages. My Somali translators tell me that there is no sacrifice of quality language so that the stories can be translated. In fact, poetic devices such as alliteration are found in both books in both languages. Marian A. Hassan even goes as far as to include rhyme in both languages at several points in *Dhegdheer*. It is obvious that these books are not written more for the readers of one language over another; instead they are meant to be read in each language equally. In my classroom, we were able to read the stories in both

languages. I used the books as a bridge between a poetry unit and a writing unit with a focus on word choice. Students could pick out poetic devices in both languages and see how the devices could be used in prose writing in addition to poetry.

The oral culture of the Somali people is another thing that is highlighted in the books and is appealing to the Somali audience. The authors keep a strong voice of the oral storyteller in their work, shying away from more formal descriptors. Said Salah Ahmed uses colloquial phrases like, "You, Ali with the short leg." Marian A. Hassan uses two bits of oral literature that are commonly memorized by Somalis. One segment is a poem that Dhegdheer recites as she is on her chase for the woman and child. When I read the poem to my class in English, they just continued to listen, but when they heard the Somali translation, they all burst out laughing. Confused as to why this was so, I asked them what I had missed. Hands shot up in the air. One student said, "My grandma always said that [poem] to me when I was four years old and running around the apartment." Another student said his mother used to comfort his little brother with that poem when he was crying. It seemed that everyone had a memory attached to the rhyme. The last line of the book also quotes popular oral tradition. "Dhegdheer dhimatoo! Dhulkii nabadeey" is a line from a catchy folk song that means "Dhegdheer is dead! The land has peace."

But the strength of the books does not lie in their appeal to Somalis only; they have universal appeal to all readers. We can easily compare the life lesson found in *The Lion's Share* to any number of Aesop's fables and *Dhegdheer* can be compared to the story of Hansel and Gretel. These striking similarities in themes of folktales across cultures help us see the common humanity among us all. However, in these books, the well-described setting and vivid characters put the extra twist on the tales to make them authentically Somali. These similarities-yet-differences would place these folktales well in the scope of any unit on East Africa in any type of classroom, ELL or not, K-12 with students in grades 1-6 probably getting the most enjoyment out of the stories themselves. Anyone with a third grade reading level would be able to read them independently.

The illustrations in the books also bridge the culture gaps between the non-Somali readers and the Somali readers. Kelly Dupre, illustrator of *The Lion's Share*, uses block prints that provide the distinct backdrop of an African tale. Her gouache enhancements provide extra zing to the personalities of the characters, making their feelings come out more, and even giving the sun that look of scorching rays typical of equatorial countries like Somalia. On the other hand, Betsy Bowen, illustrator of *Dhegdheer*, chooses a look of generalized washed figures, enhancing the ghost-like sense of the characters and the creepiness of the tale. Both illustrators showcase the harsh parts of Somalia's landscape and lack of vegetation, helping non-Somalis gain an understanding of the setting.

The overall goal of the Somali Bilingual Book Project has definitely been successful. The Minnesota Humanities Commission published these books with the goal of advancing "family literacy opportunities that positively impact the literacy levels of Somali immigrant and refugee families." Half of the books published in this series are being given away free of charge to Somali families in literacy and school programs in Minnesota. The books certainly do their job in building literacy in both languages as learning to read one language supports learning to read in the other. Also, as the Somali population continues to grow in America, the need for people literate in Somali will also increase. The need to give students Somali literature, therefore, is as paramount to their development as it is to give them appropriate English materials. *The Lion's Share* and *Dhegdheer* are just the ticket to help that literacy development happen.

Bibliography:

Minnesota Humanities Commission. Somali Bilingual Initiative.
www.minnesotahumanities.org

Reviewer

Katie De Kam teaches 5th grade language arts and 5th/6th ELA at Minnesota International Middle School. She would like to thank her students and Somali co-workers, especially Abdi Elmi, for their insight into the Somali language and culture in the texts.