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# Reading Differences

## Teaching sequence for *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*

written by Geraldine McCaughrean, illustrated by Rosamund Fowler  
Oxford University Press, 1999

### About the book

Written originally in Arabic, this collection of stories is a classic of Middle Eastern literature dating back over a thousand years. Its mystery and rich imagery have inspired Western writers, artists and poets from the 18th century to the present day. Children will recognise the familiar themes of traditional stories such as heroic quests and voyages, magical objects and transformations, and the struggle between good and evil and between ingenuity and brute force. The framing story is about the vizier's daughter Shahrazad and her attempts to sustain the king's curiosity – and put off her own execution – by telling him stories every night.

### Structure of the teaching sequence

There are three parts to this teaching sequence, each one divided into separate sessions that cover:

- i sharing, reading two stories together
- ii reading and responding to a selection of stories in groups
- iii children telling their own stories on the model of the Arabian Nights stories.

Depending on the interest and experience of the class, other stories may be chosen, but the aim should be to develop an in-depth knowledge of the range and variety of stories.

Possible links to other areas of the curriculum include RE (comparative religions), music, art and design, and mathematics.

### Links to the national curriculum and the primary national strategy (PNS)

This work relates to the requirement in the English national curriculum programme of study for reading: *a range of literature drawn*

*from a variety of cultures and traditions; myths, legends and traditional stories (8e and 8f).*

It also connects with specific teaching objectives in the *PNS Framework for Teaching* for years 5 and 6 to do with reading and responding to texts from different cultures.

### Anticipated outcomes

After reading these stories children will:

- appreciate how the origins of many familiar, traditional stories can be traced back over hundreds of years to Central Asia
- consider the purpose of traditional tales in the oral tradition as a vehicle for passing on shared wisdom or humour from one generation to the next
- learn about the social and cultural contexts of an ancient Islamic civilisation.

### Resources and preparation

- Map of the Middle East and India.
- Pictures of Arabic patterns, architecture, clothing.
- Copies of other versions of the stories for discussion and comparison, for example *Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp* by Phillip Pullman or *Tales from the Arabian Nights* by Robert Leeson.
- Background information on the history of the Arabian Nights stories, for example on the *Middle East UK* website ([www.middleeastuk.com/culture](http://www.middleeastuk.com/culture)).
- CDs or downloads of clips from classical and contemporary Arab music, and for comparison, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheharazade*.

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# Teaching sequence

## Sharing and reading two stories together

### Session 1: Explaining the function of the framing Shahrazad story

The Arabian Nights stories are sometimes considered to be the original soap operas, in which characters with readily identifiable traits interact in settings that are at once fabulous and credible. Begin by discussing with the children:

- what serialised stories or soap operas they are familiar with
- what characteristics make these stories compelling
- how the separate episodes link together in ways that make them recognisably part of the series.

One way of setting the scene for the world of the Arabian nights is by playing short excerpts of classical and contemporary Arab music, and/or an excerpt from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. Explain that these stories were part of one longer story and were told by a young woman called Shahrazad. Explain the rationale for the stories: that Shahrazad is obliged to use her storytelling skills to stay alive, gradually beguiling the king with her cliffhanger stories. What kind of stories will she need to tell to keep the king interested?

Read one story that will remind the class of other stories they know, for example 'The Tale of the Anklet', which is very like Cinderella. To help the children identify the distinctive qualities of this story, set different groups specific listening tasks about:

- the language used by the storyteller to describe Delilah and her sisters
- the reactions of the king and queen to the prince's wish to find the anklet's owner
- moments of surprise and humour in characters' reactions to events.

Ask the children which famous story this is like. Make a comparison grid together on a flipchart to show the similar features. Discuss one feature of the story that is not like Cinderella – the magical vase. Does this remind them of any other story? Explain that the Arabian Nights stories often feature magical objects.

Make a list of the main characters encountered in 'The Tale of the Anklet' to start the book of characters that will be one outcome of this teaching sequence. Add a brief one- or two-sentence description of each character, for example quoting a memorable image or remark from the story.

### Session 2: Ali Baba (part 1)

The story of Ali Baba is told in two parts because dawn rises before Shahrazad has time to tell all of it.

Read 'The Wonderful tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Bandits', which takes the story to the part where the robber chief has persuaded the tailor to point out Ali Baba's house.

In groups of no more than three, children recap and map out, on one half of a folded A3 sheet, what they consider to be the main plot points from the first part of the story.

As a class, predict what is likely to happen next in the story, explaining the predictions. Record the most plausible predictions on a flipchart.

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### **Session 3: Ali Baba (part 2)**

Complete the story by reading 'Ali Baba: The Robber Chief's Revenge'.

As a class, discuss the second half of the story and compare what happened with the predictions. Were they fulfilled?

Children record the main plot points on the second half of the A3 sheet.

Using their story maps to guide their retelling, the children rehearse the story in order to retell it to another group or the whole class. They must make their retelling as dramatic and exciting as possible, as Shahrazad had to do, through their choice of words and their expression. After rehearsal, children retell the story, taking it in turns to tell a section each.

### **Session 4: Overview of main characters and storytelling in Ali Baba**

Ask the children the names of the main characters in the story and add them to a chart to use later with the book of characters. Add a brief description of each character as before.

Who has the most power in the story? Who is the cleverest person in the story? Ask for volunteers to argue (in role) the case for a particular character's right to be thought of as the cleverest person in the story (for example Ali Baba, Marjanah, the robber chief).

Is there a moral to this story? If so, what is it? Ask the class to suggest a moral and record it.

Remind the class that Shahrazad has to be a good storyteller to keep the king's interest. What is it about this story that keeps the listener interested? Ask children in pairs to mark copies of the story to show points where the story is particularly exciting, for example when Kasim tries to get out of the cave, when Marjanah goes to get some oil, the whirling dance of Marjanah.

As a class, discuss the effect of mixing fantastical events, such as finding a secret cave or the sewing up of Kasim, with everyday realities such as using butter and cheese to trick people and making magic passwords from the names of grains (sesame, wheat, barley). Record the children's ideas on a flipchart. Do they know any other stories that use suspense in similar ways to keep the reader interested?

## **Group reading focusing on selected stories**

### **Sessions 5 and 6: Identifying key characters, relationships, customs, attitudes and beliefs**

During these sessions introduce children to some other versions of the stories and highlight ways of making comparisons and contrasts, focusing on the story they have chosen to work on. For example, encourage them to make a simple table for recording differences under headings such as language, characters, description/setting, use of speech, narrator's voice.

Give a story to each group according to their reading experience. You may offer short summaries as a starting point (short synopses of five stories are on the last page of this teaching sequence).

The children summarise the main plot events using a storyboard and identify the theme of their story.

Groups then retell the story to other groups or to the whole class.

Groups talk to each other about which was the most interesting or exciting story and why.

Encourage the children to identify the wit and humour in many exchanges where characters try to get the better of each other, as well as to identify what makes the descriptions of extremes of good and bad behaviour so vivid.

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## Session 7: Devising dialogues between characters

In pairs, children choose two characters from their story and then construct a dialogue to bring out personality and relationship between the characters, using language typical of each character.

Children rehearse a performance of the dialogue.

Children present dialogues. The rest of the children listen and identify the characters and the relationship between them, for example who has the power, and how do we know this from what they say?

Add all the main characters from these stories to the book of characters.

Have a class discussion of the types of character found in these stories and how they are brought alive by the way they speak and how they are described.

## Session 8: Making the book of characters

Children choose a character from their own or another story to illustrate for the book of characters. Their illustration should include a speech bubble with a typical saying, possibly a quote. They also write a one-paragraph character description as a caption for their illustration, drawing on the text.

Children share drafts of captions with writing partners and redraft as necessary.

The children compile a book of characters as a scrapbook.

## Session 9: Summing up – what are the Arabian Nights stories like?

Make a comparison grid to compare features of all the individual stories read in this unit under certain headings: character's name, what we know about them, quote from text.

Ask each group to describe what is special about their story, for example patterns in the way the story is told, key themes, characters or language.

Invite children who have read different versions of the stories to tell the others about them and to say which version they preferred.

Discussion of the Arabian Nights stories as a whole: how can we sum up what makes these stories special? How have the stories travelled so far and lasted so long?

## Modelling stories on those in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*

### Session 10: Children's own stories

Give groups of children small bags or boxes containing a range of small artefacts, for example a ring, a key, a small bottle, a feather or a shell. The children select the artefacts they want to use and compose a story together, with one person making brief notes. They should model their stories on the Arabian Nights stories they have heard. The children then decide on how they are going to tell the story to the rest of the class. Remind them that they must make their stories exciting enough to keep the interest of their audience.

As the groups share their stories, discuss and draw together the themes and elements that arise, and what these stories have taken from the Arabian Nights stories.

## Synopses of suggested stories to be read in groups for optional use in sessions 5 and 6

### **The Tale of the Anklet**

Delilah, lovely, generous, forgiving, youngest daughter tormented by two stepsisters, buys a magic vase that grants her wishes such as beautiful clothes. She goes to the palace and eventually marries the prince. Theme: virtue wins over meanness.

### **The Tale of the Leg of Mutton**

Raiya loves money but can't find a husband rich enough. She marries two men, who are not aware of each other's existence until they meet coincidentally and compare notes. Theme: a woman's ingenuity can outwit men.

### **The Scrounger's Tale**

Tufail lives entirely by scrounging from other people. At dinner he is given a very small fish, but he persuades his host to give him the big fish by telling him a humorous, unlikely story. Theme: how humour can be used to gain favours.

### **The Fisherman and the Bottle**

A fisherman finds first a dead donkey, then pieces of broken pottery and finally a copper bottle in his net. When he takes the stopper out of the bottle, a jinni appears and threatens to kill him. The fisherman tricks the jinni back into the bottle. Theme: ingenuity can outwit aggression.

### **The Everlasting Shoes**

Abu Kassim is very wealthy but very mean. After bathing one day he mistakenly puts on a merchant's silk slippers instead of his old and smelly shoes. This leads to a series of unfortunate events. He is blamed for things he didn't do and has to bribe his way out of trouble. Eventually he has no money left. Theme: meanness leads to loss.