

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A Picaresque Silk Road Adventure About Storytelling Itself

In Daniel Nayeri's new middle grade novel, a runaway orphan boy joins a caravan and falls under the sway of its loquacious leader.

By Aditi Sriram

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THE MANY ASSASSINATIONS OF SAMIR, THE SELLER OF DREAMS, by Daniel Nayeri. Illustrated by Daniel Miyares.

Forget Botox, diets, oils, lotions. Humanity discovered the antidote to aging millennia ago: storytelling. In the narrating and the hearing of a story, in the creating and the disseminating of a story (and, one hopes, in the reviewing), everyone is young again.

Your body comes alive with frissons and goosebumps; your heart pumps out laughter and tears; your imagination sprints from image to memory and back again. You gasp at a plot twist in a dog-eared tale the way your tongue exults at the salt in a dish you have eaten a hundred times. It may not be new, but it always feels fresh. Like magic.

Daniel Nayeri understands this relationship between storytelling and magic, and finds every opportunity to celebrate it. His latest novel, "The Many Assassinations of Samir, the Seller of Dreams," is about a motley crew journeying thousands of kilometers along the Silk Road, from one end of Asia to another, selling and buying various wares and working hard to stay alive. The Silk Road, Nayeri writes in his author's note, is "just about the most magical place I can imagine. I have dreamed of it for most of my life."

While magic and dreams sound like ingredients for pure, childlike fantasy, "The Many Assassinations" is historical fiction, with background information and a bibliography at the end. Plot-wise, though, it's adventurous, funny and nimble.

A 12-year-old runaway joins a caravan of traders who are making their way across the Taklamakan Desert in China, and becomes a servant to its loquacious leader, Samir. This man, who names the youngster Monkey, turns out to be a corrupt fellow whom many angry merchants want to kill. The book is the story of those attempted assassinations, and how both Samir and his protégé survive them ... until a clever plot twist is revealed.

Nayeri regularly educates his readers about the Silk Road. A guessing game regarding religion invokes the Mussalmans, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, pagans, Sikhs and an "almost-Zoroastrian." Characters play an ancient form of chess called "shatranj." Monkey addresses his master as "Saheeb," whose etymology traverses Arabic, Persian and Urdu.

Nayeri is unerringly precise in his vocabulary: "It was midday at a caravanserai — which you probably know is a station beside the roads where caravans rest," Monkey explains. During a fight, a knife wound elicits a "wattle" of blood.

In a testy exchange while huddled behind a rock to avoid being blown up, Monkey is chastised for not knowing who Erkhii Mergen is. Another character provides an answer, making sure to mock Monkey at the same time: "The legendary Mongol archer? ... Shot out six of the seven suns that were scorching the earth and that's why we only have one sun? Never mind. It's a folktale."

"It's a folktale." The many chapters in "The Many Assassinations" are windows into the social and cultural lives of Silk Road traders: not just what they traded, but also how they participated in its lively literary (and multilingual) traditions. Stories were peddled up and down the Silk Road as frequently as the paper and ink used to collect them. In this particular book, Nayeri has entrusted them to a resilient boy and his dream-selling teacher.

From the beginning, Monkey hints to his readers to be attentive to the details, and simultaneously open to all the possibilities a story can hold.

"I'm just a kid telling you about the life and death of my last master," he shrugs. "It's a story that will hopefully satisfy you, so that you will let me go."

Monkey is a scrappy scabbler, orphaned and opportunistic, who learns quickly that a story can just as easily get you out of trouble as put you in it.

Is his the voice of a naïve adolescent or a practiced hustler? Is this an honest account or a bespoke forgery? What is more revealing, the story itself or how it is being told? Asked another way, to which details should Nayeri's readers be paying attention? The story of Monkey and his caravan, or the story Monkey *telling us* about his caravan? The story, or the *story* of the story?

Stories about stories go farther back than the Silk Road — and likely traveled along it as well. From the East, consider Hinduism's "Mahabharata" (fourth century) and Islam's "The Thousand and One Nights" (ninth century). From the West, Homer's epics, Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" and any one of Shakespeare's plays. In the sciences, Galileo framed his 17th-century critique of planetary science as a conversation between three characters; the book is titled "Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems" and transforms his intellectual skepticism into an informal chat.

In children's literature, two Salman Rushdie novels are centered on storytelling: "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" and "Luka and the Fire of Life."

It seems noteworthy that Monkey is the same age as Rushdie's Luka and Nayeri's Khosrou, the protagonist of his previous, autobiographical novel, "Everything Sad Is Untrue." These boys are young, scattered, playful, impatient. Ideal narrators to do two things at once: tell us a story and tell us that they're telling us a story, with asides, questions and inaccuracies.

Nayeri said in an interview that he wanted to present Khosrou as someone who "never takes a breath; he's desperate to tell everything. He's racing against time — meaning he's racing against you losing interest in him. He's got you by the scruff and he has to hold on."

This applies beautifully to Monkey as well: Both boys are trying to win over an audience using stories. It is stories that keep them connected to the people they love, stories that define and reassure them, stories that are the key to their freedom.

For much of Nayeri's own childhood, freedom seemed out of reach. He escaped from Iran with his mother and his sister, Dina, when he was 6. They went first to the United Arab Emirates, then spent time in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Rome before being granted asylum in the United States and moving to Oklahoma when he was 8. Interestingly, both siblings have become writers.

Not every aspect of "The Many Assassinations" is impactful. Daniel Miyares's paintings are vivid and fluid, but prefacing each chapter, they pre-empt readers from conjuring up their own images based on the fantastical words. Monkey clarifies early on why he fled an order of monks whose "whole world was black or white": "After all, love is red." Maybe this is the reason all the paintings include the color red? If so, the inside reference is too subtle for young readers, as it may even be for adults.

What Nayeri gets right is the novel's raconteur. Monkey knows when to tell a joke and when to make a confession. He knows how to paint a picture and imbue it with sound, how to convey the plot as well as its reasons, handle the magic and its philosophy, build the story and its dreamscape. Most important, he knows how to twist the truth to serve his self-interest while feeding longed-for flavors to a hungry audience. Monkey is loyal to Samir because he wants to be as skilled as his master at transacting stories.

By the end, he seems fated to *become* the next Samir, bartering sacks of infinite possibilities for spices, bird feathers and gunpowder; continuing to care for the magic and dreams that propel his caravan from one place to another. Will he?

If Nayeri's next novel features another plucky young migrant in narrative orbit, whose words can rotate and revolve at the same time, then maybe it is possible.

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THE MANY ASSASSINATIONS OF SAMIR, THE SELLER OF DREAMS | By Daniel Nayeri | Illustrated by Daniel Miyares | 224 pp. | Levine Querido | \$21.99 | Ages 8 to 12