Stories to Share: A List of Persian Folklore Resources

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Given the tangled and antagonistic relationship the United States and Iran currently share, it might seem difficult to present Persian folk and fairy stories in libraries here. But these tales are funny and poignant and come from a rich tradition many American readers will enjoy learning about. From the “wise fool” Nasruddin to the powerful shahs (some munificent and good, some awful tyrants), from fish to parrots, there is a lot to attract readers and listeners from all backgrounds to these stories. It’s my hope that this attraction and enjoyment will lead to greater understanding of the folkloric history of Iran, and ideally the realization that we share many delightful themes in our stories. If we all laugh at the silliness of a man riding backwards on a donkey, and if we all wish for the underdog to win, if we are together saddened and cheered by stories… These similarities should make it harder to hate.

This bibliography is intended for librarians in schools and public libraries, particularly those who are interested in creating a story time or culturally themed program. Included are sources individuals can best use to acquaint themselves with Persian stories, and the best sources to recommend to young adults and children. The books in the latter section would all be appropriate for a story time; they feature beautiful illustrations and are sized so children can see them while the reader holds up the book.

It should be noted that some of these tales, especially ones about Nasruddin, make use of Islamic phrases like “Insh’allah” (God willing), which may not go over well with all parents. As always, prudence is recommended. I believe that it adds to the tales, but omitting the phrases them will rarely detract from the story at hand. Be aware that young children may not know what a minaret or a muezzin or possibly even a desert is, making these stories an excellent opportunity to explain the way another culture has operated for many centuries.
For Librarians


Despite the title’s use of “Oriental,” this book is generally respectful of Persian culture and even includes a list of phrases that pepper Farsi conversations. Lots of Nasruddin tales and several animal stories make up the text. Would not recommend for children because of the “Oriental,” but the stories would be good to share with them.


Many stories; a lot of animal tales. This book includes of discussion of common motifs in Persian stories (the peri or fairy, deception, etc.), and is not to be missed by the adult seeking to acquaint herself with stories from Persia. Many of these stories were not replicated in any of the other books in this bibliography.


Since the humor of Nasruddin tales is not always readily apparent on the page to a western audience, please see this excellent example of Manish Vyas telling a short Nasruddin story.

This is a wonderful collection of stories—probably too long to read more than one in a sitting, but all delightful. The book does not feel dated at all. Particularly good is *The Story of the Hunter and the White Snake*, which includes and explains several Iranian expressions like having a “heart of roasted meat.” Difficult to find in print, but thankfully the full text is available online.


This is the best Nasruddin resource. The tales are in chronological order, so you can find a series of tales from different points of Nasruddin’s life, which makes for an easy introduction to this beloved folk character. The book also features a short list of terms.


Magnificent online encyclopedia on all things Iran. It’s wise to keep this open as you are reading new stories.


These stories from the *shahnameh*, a Persian court book, are often too long for children to tackle on their own. But all would make wonderful spoken stories and are an ideal introduction to fairy tales from Iran. The tale of Rubadeh, a Persian Rapunzel story, would be particularly good to share with children.
For Older Children


Long for children and without illustration, but delightful stories. Easy to read.


Fifteen stories accompanied by black and white illustrations. At 100 pages and quite large size-wise, this is probably best for older children. But the text is simple to read, and the stories—especially the animal ones—are enchanting and their morals are gently expressed.


Simorgh is famous in Iran: a powerful being in the body of a powerful bird. Simorgh helps those who work hard and are righteous, like Prince Korshid in this story. Any collection of Persian fairy tales should include Simorgh. There is recurring reference to Korshid doing things after “calling the name of god” but the god’s name is never given.


I Know That Already is instructive without being preachy. Some of the stories touch on subjects (infanticide) best shared only with older children or young adults, but they are well-told. No illustrations.

These four stories are just long enough, and accompanied by many pictures.


Delightful pictures on every page. Most of these are popular tales also found in other books, but this is a good compilation intended for children, and the language reflects that.


This is not an Iran-specific collective, but there are four folktales from Iran (marked as such) in the list. A good collection of stories from many regions. They are not illustrated and only a few paragraphs long.


These tales are set in Turkey but few ever mention a specific location. Hoca is Nasruddin, and these eighteen stories are written to introduce younger readers to his sagacious brand of foolishness.

Thousands of friends are far too few, one enemy is too many.
For Younger Children


Ideal for story time; lushly illustrated in bright colors. This story is adapted from a poem by Rumi, and thus particularly appropriate to include in any Persian culture display.


While the stories in this collection are good, what really makes *Goha the Wise Fool* a must to include are the illustrations, which are done as *khiyamiyas*, a special kind of regional tapestry. Each of the stories has an illustration and they are usually a page long.


Climo has written several Cinderella books, and while this is probably not the most culturally accurate, it does deal with veiling and is a sweet story that many children will recognize. The details added to this version are good and young listeners and readers will enjoy them.


Younger children who are comfortable on a computer will enjoy this story of a woodcutter with terrible luck and how he fixes it. I think the notion of a lost necklace being blamed on a child who didn’t take it will resonate. The story does involve a dervish, (Mushkil Gusha is hailed as their patron), but does not contain any other religious references.
A very short, simple retelling of the classic story. Rustem is mentioned often in Persian literature; this is a good introduction to his character. Hosted on a website for children and safe to share with all ages.


Win as many hearts as you can, for breaking hearts is no art.