

BOOK REVIEW

We're Riding on a Caravan: An Adventure on the Silk Road

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Author: Laurie Krebs

Illustrator: Helen Cann

Publisher: Barefoot Books

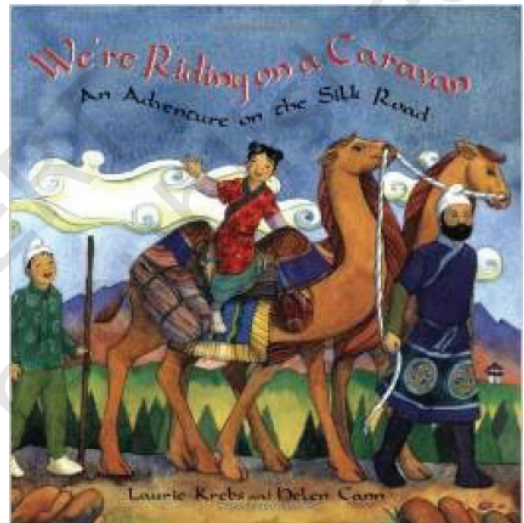
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Folk tales and narratives are expressions of the close contact between the world of nature and the world of human existence. The roots of literatures across the world can be traced to rich narratives shared orally across societies and over centuries.

The 'Silk Road' is a term used to designate a group of trade Roads that stretched from eastern Asia to the Mediterranean Sea. Centuries ago, merchants, missionaries, craftsmen and travellers made their criss-crossed voyages among the cities of Asia. They journeyed through mountains, forests, steppes and deserts. They travelled as far east



as China and as far west as Europe, on horses in groups or on camels in long caravans. Along the way, in taverns, inns, resting places and oases, these travellers exchanged stories. These would be told and re-told, with details added perhaps, yet essentially remaining the same. Over the centuries, the shifts from oral to literature and later from writing

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to print, have had wide-ranging impacts on all aspects of culture and education.

In this book, the history of the 'Silk Road' is introduced to young readers through the concept of a caravan. The narrative is told from the perspective of a Chinese family of silk traders from Xi'an. Each year, they begin a long journey to deliver precious silks to a bazaar at Kashgar. As the seasons change, they trade their silk for various necessities along the way. In the story, the landscape is ever-changing; they come across huge sand dunes surrounding the oasis at Dunhuang, they pass through the vineyards and grape-drying huts of Turpan, they view the high mountains near Kashgar, where they sell their silk at the famous market. Then, they begin preparations for their journey back home.

There is one large illustration on every page. The illustrations are bright, colourful and multi-patterned. The illustrator has used various mediums such as watercolour, graphite and collages, often with marbled or decorative papers of vivid hues, which lend a brilliant richness and texture to the pictures. The pictures of various animals carrying sacks through the landscapes emphasize the distances covered. The architectural styles along the journey are imaginatively captured by the watercolours. The variety of fabric patterns, pots and baskets indicate the mingling of numerous cultures in Kashgar, while details such as leaves

that resemble peacock feathers are eye-catching.

The text is presented with rhyming verses, with a two-line refrain. The sing-along refrain,

*'We're going on a caravan, a bumpy,
humpy caravan*

*We're riding on a caravan to places far
away'*

Occurs at the end of each page, and is in consonance with the plodding of a long journey. The story is engagingly told and is quite informative. The short descriptions of places visited are accurate. Additional information about the 'Silk Road' and the making of silk is provided in an appendix. The young audience is introduced to the geography of the Road and the goods that were traded, including carpets from the Middle East, horses from Arabia, ivory from India, and silk from China. Teachers and parents will welcome a concluding map, an endnote on Chinese silk, some legends, brief notes on each of the featured cities and a little bit of history. It is hoped that this well-illustrated and interesting book will fuel kids' enthusiasm to learn more.

However, life in this caravan is highly romanticised—especially in the illustrations—depicting a world much more beautiful than it is in reality. There is no mention or even a hint, of the hazards of such a long journey through unknown lands. It is also regrettable that no dates are given for what is obviously a historical tale. In addition, no sources or bibliography are included. Despite its drawbacks,

this book is an excellent way to introduce children to the 'Silk Road'.

Laurie Krebs, the author, draws inspiration for her books from her own love of travelling to fascinating places and her adventures around the world. The author hopes that the readers of this book, particularly children, would begin to understand and respect various cultures, including those other than their own.

Children's literature is a relatively recent literary form as research studies on child psychology and language learning increased, the sensitivity to children's minds and an awareness of their cognitive needs began to develop. Children, by their very nature, enjoy letting their imagination run free; they enjoy tales of bygone years, of adventure, and of unfamiliar lands.

Further, children's aesthetic sense about printed matter is shaped by books. They begin to look carefully at colours, illustrations, fonts and book layouts and cover designs. The intricate illustrations, collages, watercolours and textured patterns used in the books dealing with the 'Silk Road' invite readers to share the author's delight in the subject with the young readers.

The book provides an overview of children's literature that offers

insightful glimpses into the Silk Road, the people who travelled or lived in its regions, places found along it, and the folktales, myths and legends that may have migrated along these Roads and thus contributing to a better understanding of various cultures and civilisations over the years. History, often perceived by children as boring, comes alive through this book, as it is full of colourful illustration and interesting pieces of information.

Books for young children are produced, marketed and circulated for readers of ages ranging from 4 to 10, although readers from other age groups would continue to go back to them as well. The readership, in a sense, is quite special. The material is meant for readers whose minds are still developing, in that their ideas about themselves and the world are still in the process of being formed. It is ironic that in today's world most of the information exists with ignorance. The younger generation should be made aware of the ancient highway of the world that was the 'Silk Road'. One of the ways to do it is through children's literature that introduces snippets and snapshots of the 'Silk Road' to young and impressionable minds.