
Response to “Secrets in The Day of Ahmed’s Secret”

by Ted Lewin

Dear Peter and Marge,

Just a few things I'd like to say before I respond to the article. All the books I have written and illustrated come from my travels and personal experiences and observations all over the world. I am an outsider in these places, but I am also a careful and sensitive traveler. Your “Model for Critical and Socio-cultural Analysis” struck me. I must say that for the past thirty or more years, I have used a model just like it for gathering material for my books. That said, there is an inherent problem in illus-

“To discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from fiction” is exactly what I spend my life trying very hard to do.

trating manuscripts by other authors, especially nonfiction, or stories set in real places. If a manuscript is nonfiction or specialized in subject matter, I rely heavily on the author's expertise. In the case of “Ahmed,” I hadn't yet been to Cairo. In researching *Cowboy Country* by Ann Herbert Scott, for Clarion Books, I worked closely with the author who knew and interviewed many of the old buckaroos. I spent two weeks in northern Nevada on a working ranch—talking for hours to the old buckaroos and asking their opinions on every detail, from the type of sledge used in the winter, to the length of their chaps, and I took a hundred rolls of film to document people, places, and details.

Unfortunately, in “Ahmed,” I had to rely on material given to me. In fact, this was a prerequisite for taking on the job. Judy Gilliland had spent five years in the Middle East and two years in Cairo and knows the city and culture well. I was given lots of photographic material and assured that it was all correct and could be used as background material for the book. I believe she vetted my sketches.

I'm happy for the opportunity to get the incorrect city gate off my chest. It is actually the gate to the Jewish quarter in Fez, Morocco. It's called “the blue gate.” I almost fell over when I saw it on a trip to Morocco and realized it wasn't in Cairo! The picture of that gate was included in the photo reference that was given to me as research on Cairo. No one picked it up in the sketches. I can only say that it was an honest mistake. There was absolutely no intent to suggest that North Africa is monolithic and without cultural differences.

El Hussein Mosque

If my painting is incorrectly oriented, it's because I had only the reference given to me. The picture I used may have been reversed. I had never actually seen the building. It was not a question of artistic license. Artistic license should never be used in a case like that.

First page

The first line in “Ahmed” reads “Today, I have a secret.” That is why I've shown him smiling. I think that reading anything more into it is a stretch.

Child labor

I think that showing Ahmed in dirty clothes would stereotype him as a dirty street urchin who is forced to work which would not be in the spirit of the story and was not in my experience when visiting Cairo. He's wearing everyday clothes that are slightly rumpled and not freshly scrubbed. You mention that in Muslim societies, cleanliness is highly valued. I'm not sure that depicting him in dirty clothes would not be offensive.

Camels

The authors of *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* wrote that there are cars and camels and caravans of camels in the city, so I depicted them. I love to draw camels, and kids love to look at them. I now know after visiting Cairo that camels are no longer found there. I visited the camel market near Cairo and the one at Daraw, outside of Aswan. I met dozens of camel drivers with their camels. They will be included in my next *Market!* book. Are they stereotypes?

Noise

I guess the author should comment on this, but I feel that it is an outsider viewpoint to think that all Cairenes are obliv-