Nasreen's Secret Scho

A TRUE STORY FROM AFGHANISTAN

BY JEANETTE WINTER

A GLOBAL FUND FOR
Children
BOOK

$17.99 US • $19.99 CAN • Ages 6–9

Young Nasreen has not spoken a word to anyone since her parents disappeared.

In despair, her grandmother risks everything to enroll Nasreen in a secret school for girls. Will a devoted teacher, a new friend, and the worlds she discovers in books be enough to draw Nasreen out of her shell of sadness?

Based on a true story from Afghanistan, this inspiring book will touch readers deeply as it affirms both the life-changing power of education and the healing power of love.

Nasreen's Secret School

A
TRUE STORY
FROM
AFGHANISTAN

BY JEANETTE WINTER

Beach Lane Books

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

To the courageous
women and girls of Afghanistan

Author's note

The Global Fund for Children, a nonprofit organization committed to helping children around the world, contacted me about basing a book on a true story from one of the groups they support.

I was immediately drawn to an organization in Afghanistan that founded and supported secret schools for girls during the 1996–2001 reign of the Taliban.

The founder of these schools, who requested anonymity, shared the story of Nasreen and her grandmother with me. Nasreen's name has been changed.

Before the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan,

- 70% of schoolteachers were women
- 40% of doctors were women
- 50% of students at Kabul University were women.

After the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan,

- girls weren't allowed to attend school or university
- women weren't allowed to work outside the home

- women weren't allowed to leave home without a male relative as chaperone
- women were forced to wear a *burqa* that covered their entire head and body, with only a small opening for their eyes.

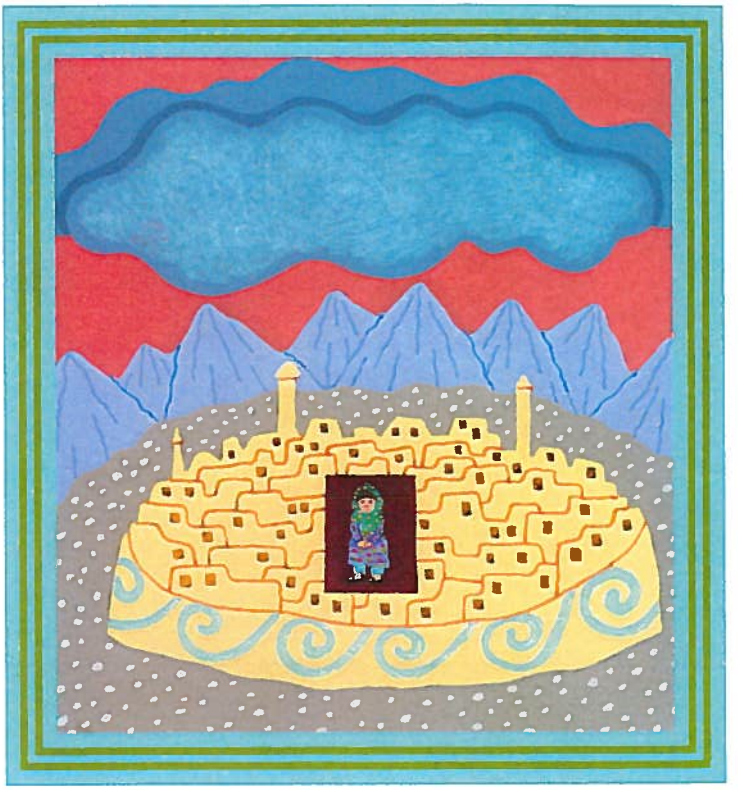
There was no singing or dancing or kite flying. Art and culture, in the birthplace of the immortal poet Rumi, was banished. The colossal Bamiyan Buddhas, carved into the side of a mountain, were destroyed. Years of isolation and fear had begun.

But there was also bravery from citizens who defied the Taliban in many ways, including supporting the secret schools for girls.

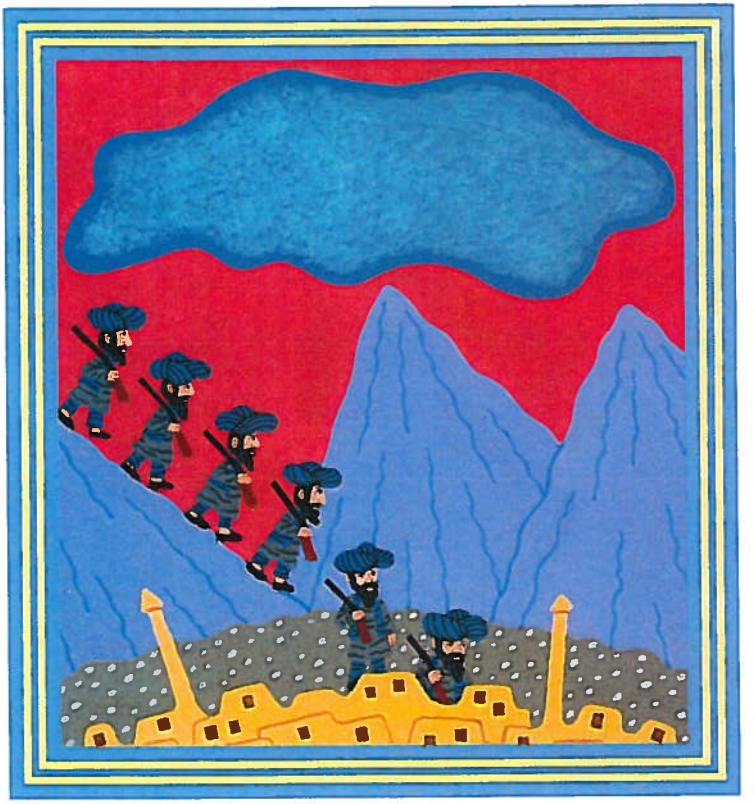
Even now, after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, danger remains. Still, schools are bombed, set on fire, and closed down. Still, there are death threats to teachers. Still, girls are attacked or threatened if they go to school.

And STILL, the girls, their families, and their teachers defy the tyranny by keeping the schools open.

Their courage has never wavered.



My granddaughter, Nasreen, lives with me in Herat,
an ancient city in Afghanistan.
Art and music and learning once flourished here.



Then the soldiers came and changed everything.
The art and music and learning are gone.
Dark clouds hang over the city.

Poor Nasreen sat at home all day,
because girls are forbidden to attend school.
The Taliban soldiers don't want girls to learn about the world,
the way Nasreen's mama and I learned
when we were girls.

One night, soldiers came to our house

and took my son away,
with no explanation.

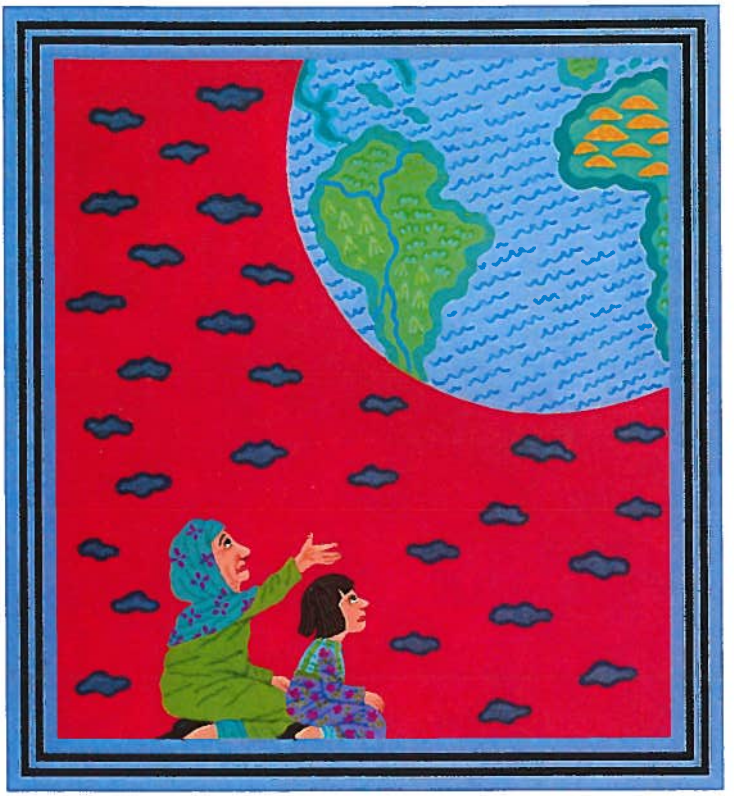
We waited many days and nights for his return.

Finally, Nasreen's frantic mama went searching for him,
even though going out alone in the streets
was forbidden for women and girls.

The full moon passed our window many times
as Nasreen and I waited.

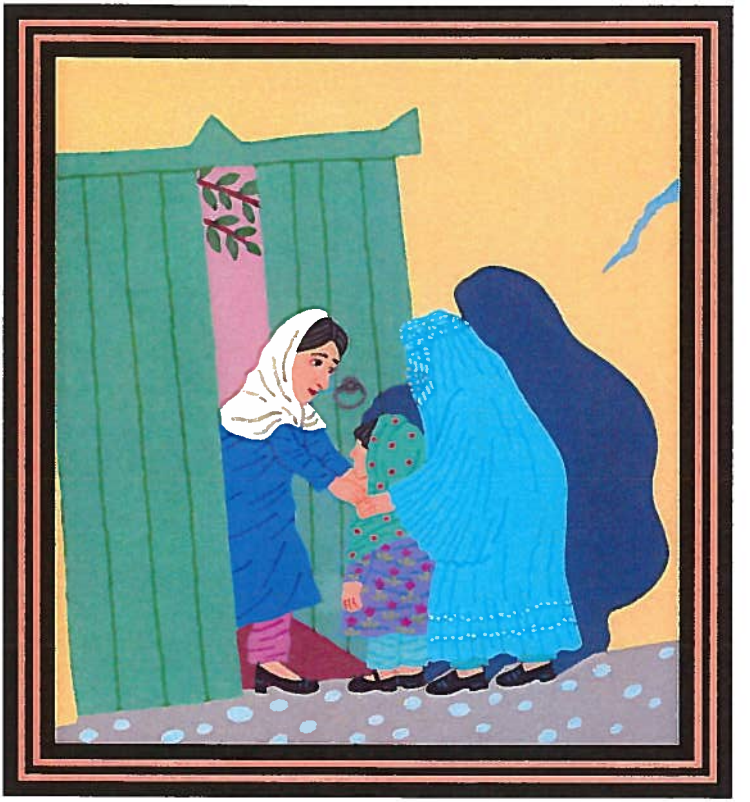
Nasreen never spoke a word.
She never smiled.
She just sat, waiting for her mama and papa to return.

I knew I had to do something.



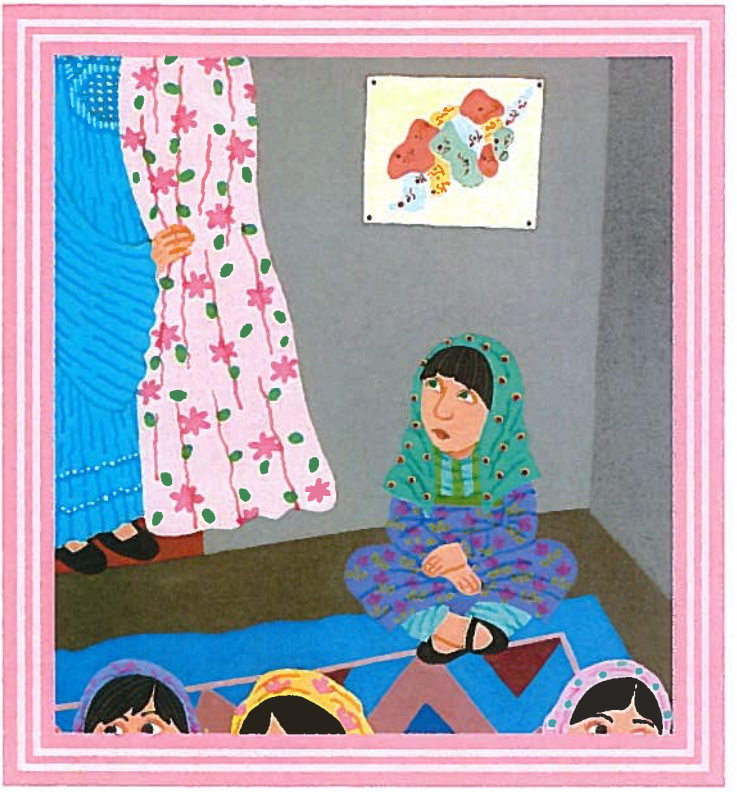
I heard whispers about a school—
a secret school for girls—
behind a green gate in a nearby lane.
I wanted Nasreen to attend this secret school.
I wanted her to learn about the world, as I had.
I wanted her to speak again.

So one day, Nasreen and I hurried down the lanes
until we came to the green gate.
Luckily, no soldier saw us.

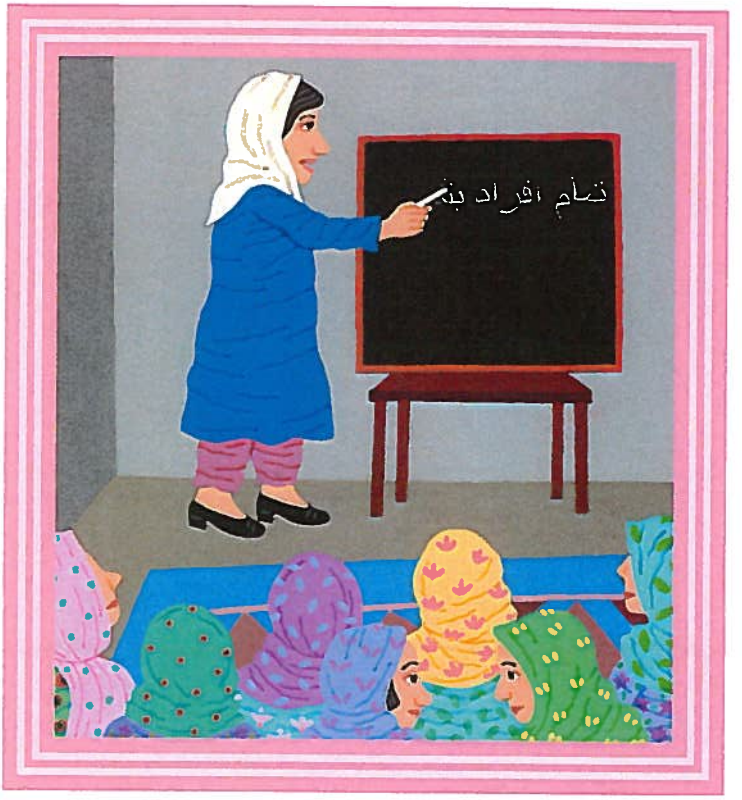


I tapped lightly.
The teacher opened the gate,
and we quickly slipped inside.

We crossed the courtyard to the school—
one room in a private house,
filled with girls.



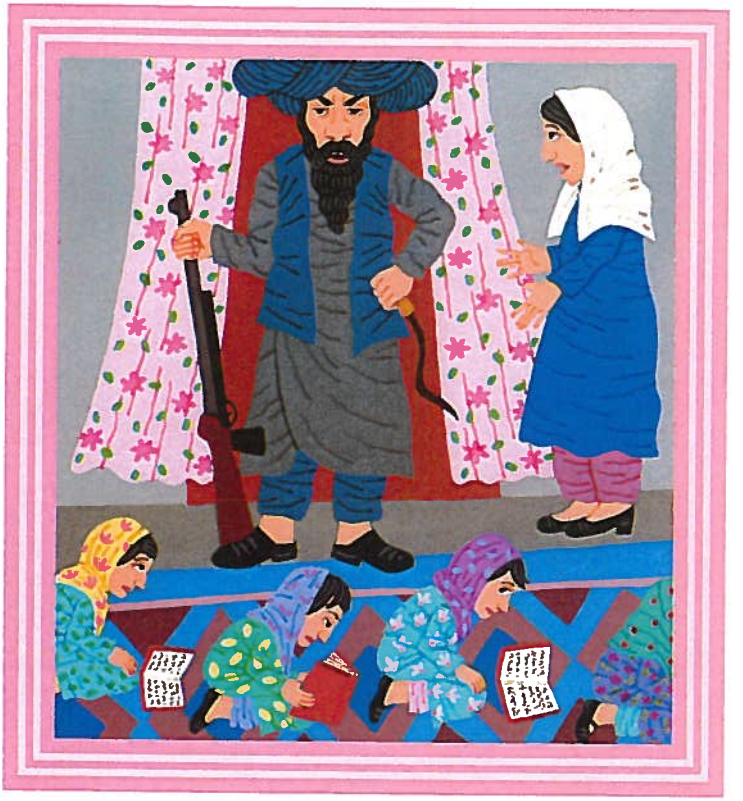
Nasreen took a place at the back of the room.
Please Allah, open her eyes to the world,
I prayed as I left her there.



Nasreen didn't speak to the other girls.
She didn't speak to the teacher.
At home, she remained silent.

I was fearful that the soldiers would discover the school.
But the girls were clever.
They slipped in and out of school at different times,
so as not to arouse suspicion.
And when boys saw soldiers near the green gate,
they distracted them.

I heard of a soldier who pounded on the gate,
demanding to enter.



But all he found was a room filled with girls
reading the Koran, which was allowed.
The girls had hidden their schoolwork,
outwitting the soldier.

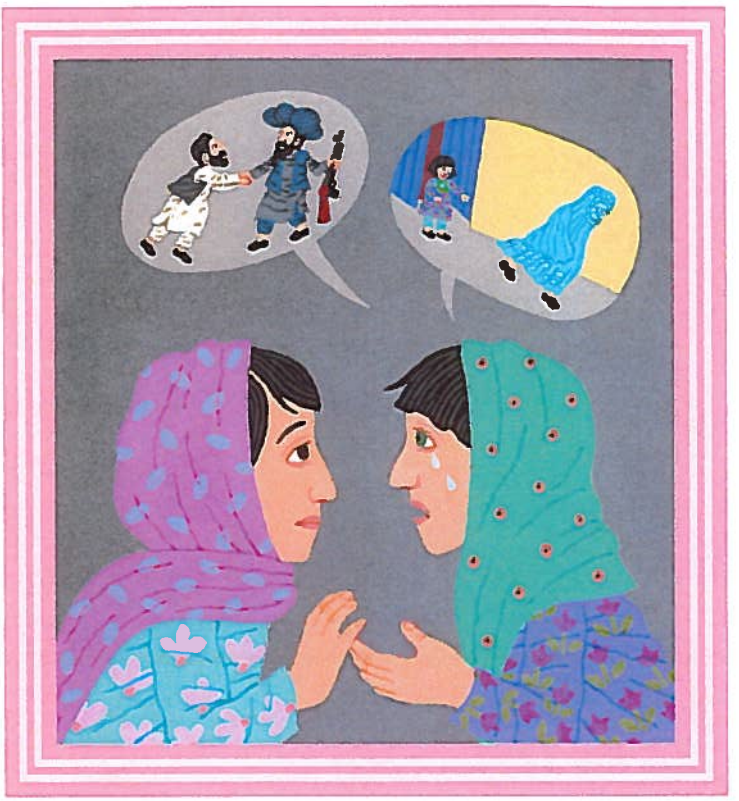
One of the girls, Mina,
sat next to Nasreen every day.
But they never spoke to each other.
While the girls were learning,
Nasreen stayed inside herself.

My worry was deep.

When school closed for the long winter recess,
Nasreen and I sat by the fire.
Relatives gave us what food and firewood
they could spare.
We missed her mama and my son more than ever.
Would we ever know what had happened?

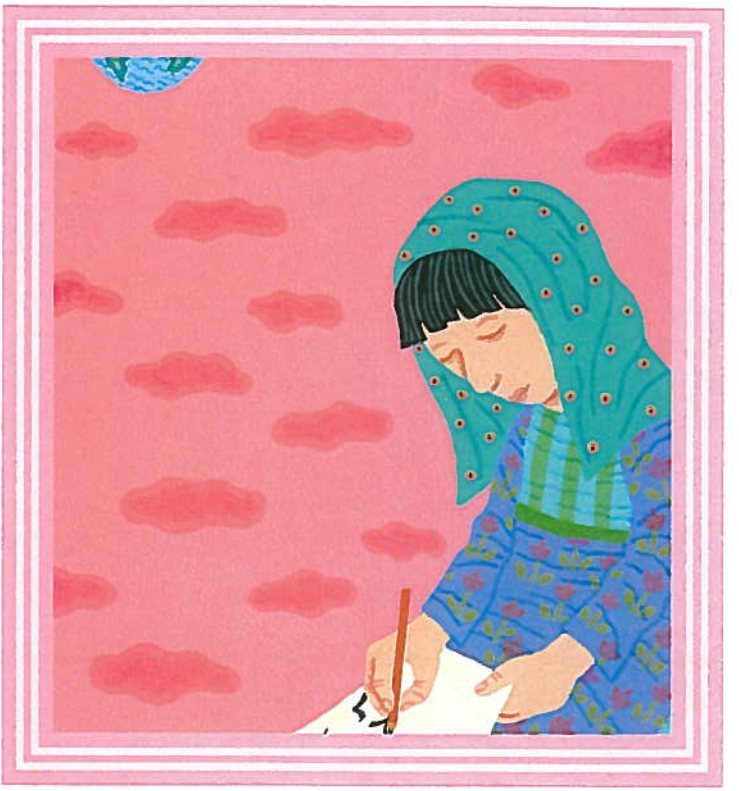
The day Nasreen returned to school,
Mina whispered in her ear.

And Nasreen answered back!

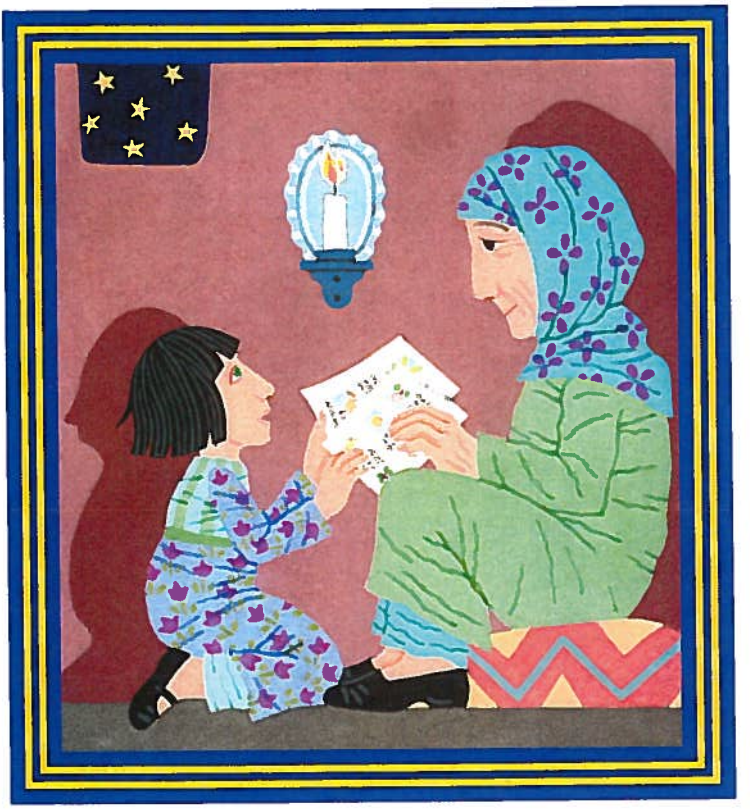


With those words,
her first since her mama went searching,
Nasreen opened her heart to Mina.

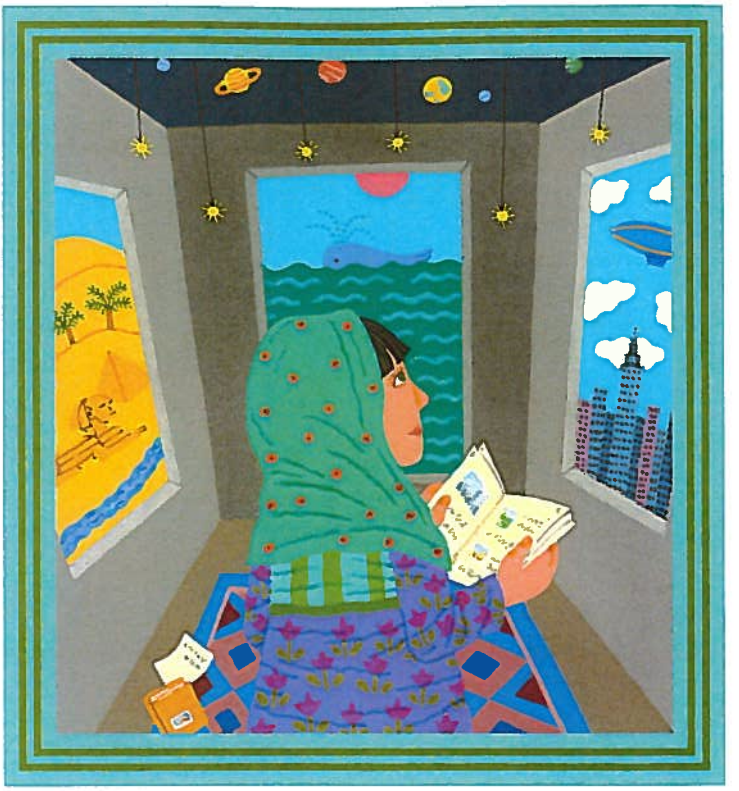
And she smiled for the first time
since her papa was taken away.



At last, little by little, day by day, Nasreen learned to read, to write, to add and subtract.



Each night she showed me
what she had discovered that day.



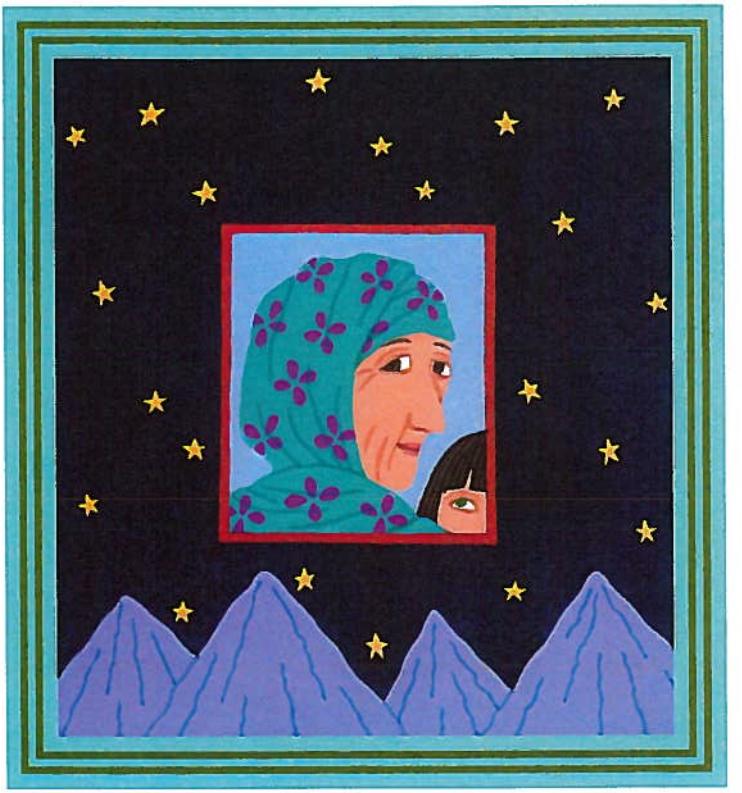
Windows opened for Nasreen
in that little schoolroom.

She learned about the artists and writers
and scholars and mystics who, long ago,

made Herat beautiful.

Nasreen no longer feels alone.
The knowledge she holds inside
will always be with her,
like a good friend.

Now she can see blue sky
beyond those dark clouds.



As for me, my mind is at ease.
I still wait for my son and his wife.
But the soldiers can never close the windows
that have opened for my granddaughter.

Insha'Allah.

The phrase *Insha'Allah* on page 38 means "God willing."

The Global Fund for Children (www.globalfundforchildren.org) is a nonprofit organization committed to advancing the dignity of children and youth around the world. The Global Fund for Children pursues its mission by making small grants to innovative community-based organizations working with some of the world's most vulnerable children and youth.

BEACH LANE BOOKS
An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

BEACH LANE BOOKS is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Book design by Ann Bobco
The text for this book is set in Bernhard Modern BT.
The illustrations for this book are rendered in acrylic paint.
Manufactured in China
24 26 28 30 29 27 25 23
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Winter, Jeanette.
Nasreen's secret school : a true story from Afghanistan / Jeanette Winter.—1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN: 978-1-4169-9437-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Girls' schools—Afghanistan—Juvenile literature. 2. Girls—Education—Afghanistan—Juvenile literature. 3. Taliban—Juvenile literature. 4. Afghanistan—Social conditions—21st century—Juvenile literature. I. Title.
LC2410.A3W56 2009
371.823'4209581—dc22
2009008285
0817 SCP

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New York City, where she ha
illustrated many books for cl
on true-life stories, including
acclaimed *Mama, Wangari's*
and *The Librarian of Basra*, w
ALA Notable Children's Boo
winner of the Bank Street C
Education's Flora Stieglitz S
for nonfiction.

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committed to advancing the dignity of ch
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mission by making small grants to innova
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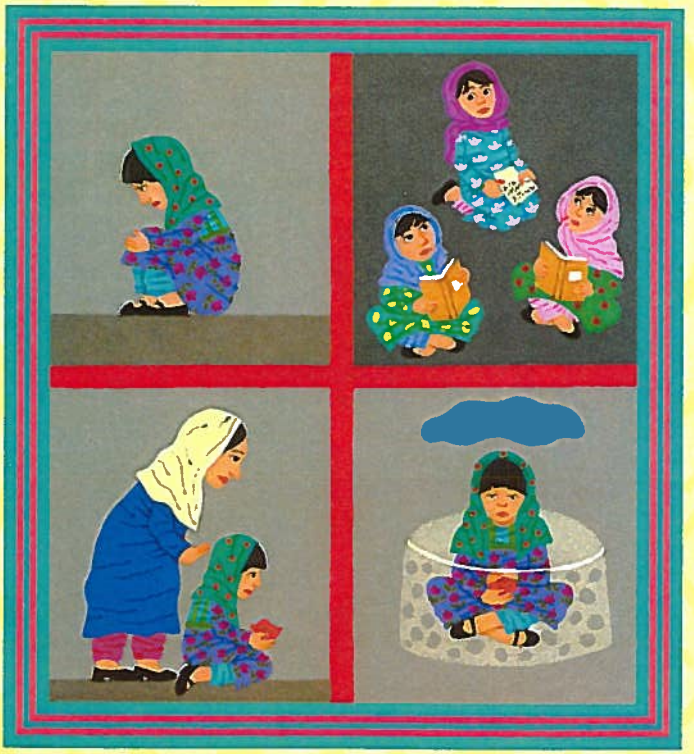

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US $17.99 / $19.99 CAN

ISBN: 978-1-4169-9437-4

EAN 51799

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