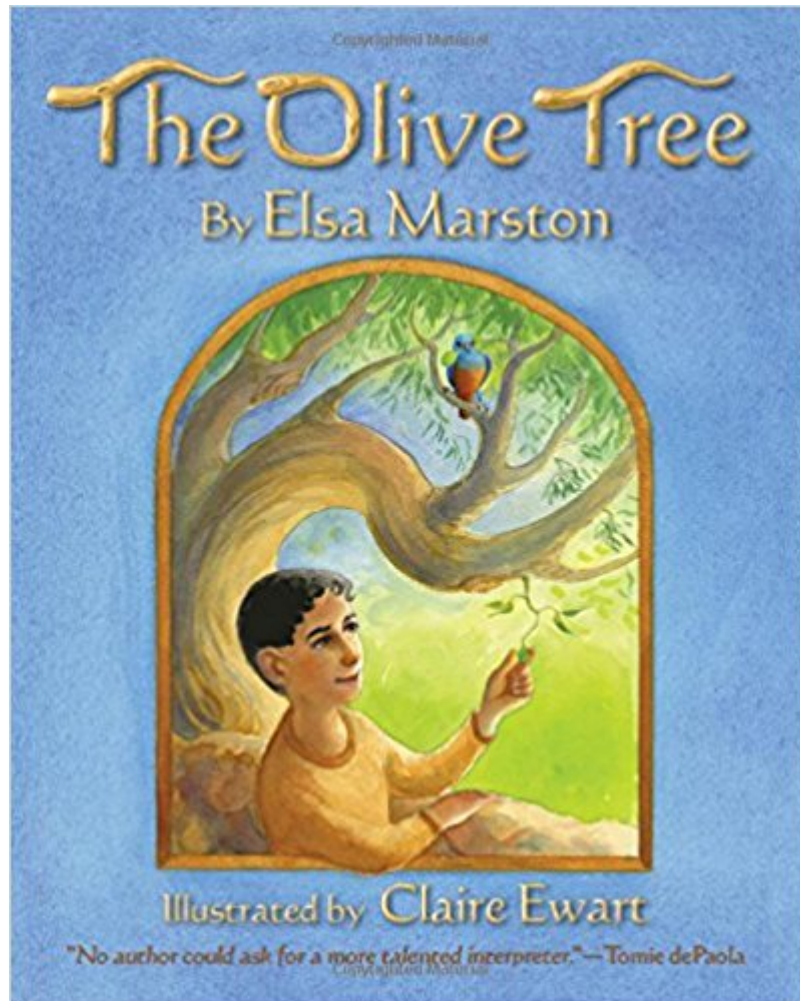




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The Olive Tree



Synopsis

The house next door to Sameer's had been empty for as long as he could remember. The family had gone away when the war began. But now they were back, and he was ready to have fun with his new playmate. Together they could climb the big olive tree that overlooked both their gardens, and eat the delicious olives it produced. The only problem was that Muna, the little girl next door, didn't want to play and she didn't want to share the olives. She said they belonged to her family alone— that is, until one fateful night when lightning struck the tree. Poignantly told by award-winning author Elsa Marston and with beautiful paintings from award-winning illustrator Claire Ewart, *The Olive Tree* follows two children as they learn to share and work together by looking past their differences. It shows young readers that compassion and understanding lie at the heart of all friendships.

Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 2

Customer Reviews

K-Gr 3 • This story, set in the contemporary Middle East, is about two neighbors and the ancient olive tree that stands between them. One family had "gone away during the troubles" but has now returned. In the meantime, Sameer and his family have enjoyed the best olives in Lebanon. Claiming ownership of the tree and its fruits, young Muna refuses to share, until a majestic storm, gloriously illustrated in swirling blues, destroys the troublesome tree. While the adults drift sadly back to their own houses, the two children work together to clean up the broken branches and stack

them for firewood, each at the other's house. The style of writing is simple, direct, and accessible. Large watercolor paintings vary in viewpoint from one family's side of the wall to the other, until the tree is gone and Sameer and Muna cross over to each other's houses. Both mothers wear hijab, an authentic cultural detail for a country in which 54 percent of the population is Muslim. However, there is no explanation of "the troubles" or why Muna's family, "different from most people in the village," had gone away. Pair this title with Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland's *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (Clarion, 1992) to provide background on family life during the 1975 Lebanese Civil War. — Toby Rajput, National Louis University, Skokie, IL

Elsa Marston is the author of over a dozen books of fiction and non-fiction for children and young adults, many of which incorporate her lifelong interest in Middle Eastern history and culture. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Middle Eastern Outreach Council Book of the Year on three occasions, a VOYA award, Bank Street College Best Book of the Year, as well as awards from Highlights Magazine and the International Reading Association. Elsa's late husband was from Lebanon, and the two of them would often travel together to the Middle East. She attended Harvard University, the American University of Beirut, and Indiana University. She lives in Bloomington, IN. Claire Ewart is a well-known illustrator and author of books for children. She has illustrated books for famous authors such as Paul Fleischman (*Time Train*) and Tomie dePaola (*The Legend of the Persian Carpet*), who said of her abilities as an illustrator, "No author could ask for a more talented interpreter." Ms. Ewart has also written and illustrated several books of her own, including *One Cold Night*, *The Giant*, and *Fossil*. Her work as an illustrator has been included on Best Book lists from *School Library Journal* and *Parent's Magazine*, and also featured on the PBS television shows *Reading Rainbow* and *Storytime*. Ms. Ewert is a recipient of the Celebrate Literacy Award from the International Reading Association. Claire Ewart's illustrations have been featured in museums and galleries, and included in the Society of Illustrators show "Original Art." Her portfolio was featured in the 1992 edition of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. She lives in Fort Wayne, IN.

My granddaughter has a myriad of friends of all different nationalities. She lives in an area where a lot of different cultures are available. But, that is not so for many children, and I think it is very wise to open up their worlds to different cultures. One of the very best ways to do this is through books, and the author of this book has been writing for everyone. Elsa Marston, the author, grew up in Massachusetts. She knew as a child she wanted to be a writer, and while she was home with her

children she started writing stories. She is particularly interested in the Mideast and Arab American stories. Sameer and his mother often talked about the beautiful house next door. The neighbors had gone away during the troubles, and it stood empty. During this time, they discovered the neighbor's tree had branches that hung over their property, and this tree had the most delicious olives they had ever eaten. One day the neighbors returned, and Sameer was very excited to meet them. He hoped they had a boy to play with. They found the neighbors very quiet, and they did not reciprocate to invitations to visit. They also had a girl, Muna. One day, Sameer was in his yard collecting the olives that had fallen. Muna told him that those olives belonged to her family and not his. Sameer tried to explain that his family had taken care of the tree while they were gone and had enjoyed the olives. Muna was not impressed, and stated again, the olives were hers. When you read this story you will learn what happened between Sameer and Muna. Did they resolve their differences? Parents/teachers will enjoy reading this book to their children. The children will have many questions. One of the best parts about this book is the lesson or moral to be learned. The illustrations by Claire Ewart are beautiful, lovely colors that provide a wonderful background to the storyline. The children may have many questions about olives, 'the troubles' and the country, Lebanon, that this story comes from. Be prepared! Highly Recommended. prisrob 10-29-14

"The Olive Tree" is a lovely new book that will encourage children between the ages of four and eight to see how children can learn to be friends even with differences and disagreements. The book also will help children and their parents to explore difficult themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, Elsa Marston, an Indiana-based author of many children's books with Middle Eastern settings wrote the story while Claire Ewart, also based in Indiana, prepared the illustrations. The book is set in Lebanon at the end of the long civil war. The conflict is barely mentioned and is referred to only by the term "the trouble". A family who had left their village during the trouble because they were different from their neighbors returns home. Sameer, a young boy, hopes his returning neighbors will have a friend for him to play with. The neighbors, however, are cool and reserved. Their daughter, Muna, shows no interest in befriending Sameer. Sameer and Muna quarrel when olives from a tree on Muna's side of the wall fall into the yard of Sameer's family. The relationship between the two children becomes icy. Then, when a severe thunderstorm destroys the old olive tree, Sameer and Muna find a way to patch up their disagreements and to become friends. Marston tells the story in a simple, subdued way. Ewart's illustrations are in a beautiful pastel watercolor that capture the native Lebanese dress and the rural surroundings. The illustrations are primarily in light, welcoming colors with the exception of the two-page spread of the

storm which is in a dark foreboding blue over a rich green. The drawings complement the story. The olive tree is, of course, a universal symbol of peace. Children will learn how the destruction of the tree helps bring friendship between distrustful neighbors. This little story has its own history. Marston first wrote the work in 1992 for "Highlights for Children" magazine where it won a contest for children's fiction. In 1994, the story received the Paul Witty Short Story Award from the International Reading Association. "The Olive Tree" has now been published for the first time, in 2014, in picture book format, with permission from "Highlights for Children". The publisher of this book, Wisdom Tales Press, specializes in books for children that explore different religious and spiritual traditions from around the world and that encourage young people to think about ethical issues. Wisdom Tales Press kindly sent me a copy of "The Olive Tree" to review. Robin Friedman

The story takes place in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975-1990. The family who once lived next to Sameer had moved away during the war, and while they were away, Sameer's family had enjoyed the fruits that fell from the neighbors' olive tree. When the neighbors moved back into their home after the war, Sameer hoped they had a son his age who he could play with. But the neighbors had a daughter, Muna, and she wasn't friendly at all, claiming that Sameer's family had no right to the olives that fell on their side of the wall that separated their properties. When a fierce storm destroyed the tree and part of the stone wall between Sameer's and Muna's homes, it looked like a tragedy, for the old olive tree had produced many fine olives in its lifetime. Sparked by the storm's outcome, could the two families, led by Sameer and Muna, somehow learn to put aside their past grievances and work together in a spirit of cooperation and respect? The story has both literal and figurative interpretations. The olive branch has traditionally been a symbol of peace, and in the story it did serve to bring Sameer's and Muna's families closer together. The wall that was destroyed had separated the two families physically, but in a larger sense, the wall represented the barriers that separate people, not just in the strife-torn Middle East, but anywhere in the world where prejudice and distrust keep people apart. Ultimately, "The Olive Tree" is a simple children's story that conveys a very timely and uplifting message for both children and their parents. Kudos to the author and the illustrator for a story that gives hope for a troubled world. A review copy of the book was provided by the publisher.

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