



Words in the Dust

Trent Reedy

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Zulaikha hopes. She hopes for peace, now that the Taliban have been driven from Afghanistan; a good relationship with her hard stepmother; and one day even to go to school, or to have her cleft palate fixed. Zulaikha knows all will be provided for her--"Inshallah," God willing.

Then she meets Meena, who offers to teach her the Afghan poetry she taught her late mother. And the Americans come to her village, promising not just new opportunities and dangers, but surgery to fix her face. These changes could mean a whole new life for Zulaikha--but can she dare to hope they'll come true?

Words in the Dust Details

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From Reader Review Words in the Dust for online ebook

Jami says

I received this book through Goodreads. Words in the Dust is the story of a young Afghani girl, Zulaika, with a cleft lip and palate. The story explores her daily life in Afghanistan and the changes brought by the arrival of American soldiers. Zulaika lives in a modest dirt home with her father, stepmother, her older brother and sister (Zeynab), and her two younger brothers. Her mother had been killed years before. Initially, Zulaika's life consists of chores, as school is not even a consideration for most people and certainly not for girls. Her stepmother gives her the daily task of going to the bazaar to purchase the family's supplies, a task Zulaika deplores because people stare at her condition. She also fears seeing two bullies who threaten her and taunt her with names. On one of these visits, Zulaika meets Meena, a former teacher and a friend of her mother, who teaches Zulaika to read and write. During her secret meetings with Meena, Zulaika develops self-confidence and strengthens her connection with her mother, who had such a great passion for poetry that she named Zulaika after a character in one of her favorite poems. When the American soldiers come to town, a soldier happens to see Zulaika, which starts her on a journey to get her mouth fixed, an answer to her prayers. At the same time, the Americans bring opportunities for her father and brother's business as welders and the opportunity for her sister Zeynab to marry a successful Afghani, many years her senior, which seems to be an answer to her sister's prayers. The novel gives great insight into Afghani culture and tradition and the Muslim religion. Yet, it also demonstrates the universality of certain issues - self-esteem, bullying, stepparents. Zulaika is a wonderful, sympathetic face for the true innocents in the Afghanistan conflict.

The author shows the conflict of tradition, fear of the reemergence of the Taliban, resentment of the Americans, as well as opportunities from the Americans. Having been a soldier himself stationed in Afghanistan, the author's descriptions are very realistic. He also does not hold back criticism of Americans who are ignorant of local customs (such as acknowledging men first) and the hard feelings such simple missteps can create. I am amazed that an American man could create a teenage, female Afghani girl whose voice is completely authentic. This book would be a wonderful teaching tool to humanize the conflict and to encourage tolerance and cross-cultural respect. I highly recommend this as a selection for adults, as well as young adults. I found myself racing back to the book to find out what happened next. This is a truly engrossing and fabulous read.

Michael says

If you have middle schoolers/high schoolers who are finally getting tired of reading about vampires and werewolves, steer them to this wonderful novel. The most amazing thing about it is, had it been published anonymously, I would **definitely** have thought it was written by a woman, and **probably** by an Afghani woman at that. Instead, it is the debut novel of a man who served in the U.S. army in Afghanistan.

Which is amazing, since the author so deftly enters the mind of young Zulaikha, a girl whose future looks bleak because of her disfiguring cleft lip. But Zulaikha has great inner strength and is determined to overcome her obstacles as she sets out on a fascinating journey of discovery about herself and her family.

I cried at the end, even though it was uplifting. If you think you have heard enough about war and Afghanistan to last a lifetime, think again. Read this book.

Sierra Abrams says

I won this ARC copy of Words in the Dust from the Goodreads Firstreads giveaway program.

Zulaikha lives in modern Afghanistan, when the Taliban have been brought down and the Americans are still making progress in her country. She lives with her Baba (father), her Madar (mother...but not her birth mother), brothers and sister. Her father and older brother are welders and work hard to provide for the family. Zulaikha would live a very normal life...except for one thing. Her mouth. Her ugly, cleft lip, her twisted teeth, and her disfigured nose. But then the Americans show up, offering a free surgery to fix Zulaikha's mouth. And her sister, Zeynab, might be married to a man of wealth and prestige. Could Zulaikha get the happy ending she and Zeynab had always dreamed about since their Madar-jan died?

I fell in love with this book from the opening words. Literally. "I traced the letters in the dust with my finger, spelling out my name: Zulaikha"

But after that, the story blossoms into a whole world, the world of life in Afghanistan in the aftermath of a war, the world of an every-day-life Afghanistan family. The culture in this is so rich, the characters so well-developed, that you cannot help but believe that it is real.

This is Trent Reedy's first novel, and he did a most excellent job. Telling from Zulaikha's perspective could have been hard, but Reedy was talented enough to pull it off with incredibly smooth writing, characters that grow, a setting that is so different, and hardships that almost everyone can relate to.

Favorite character: It's a tie between the sisters, Zulaikha and Zeynab. I loved Meena for her part in Zulaikha's life; and even though I hated her guts, I thought the girls step-mother had a very important role.

Favorite aspects: The way Zulaikha interacts with her family...she is truly an amazing girl. And the way the reader watches Zulaikha grow is just beautiful... I honestly felt like I was growing with her, every step of the way. The poems were so beautiful and so was the way Zulaikha related to the characters in the poems.

One word to sum this book up: I would have to say a few words: sweet, heartbreak, and lovely. Trent Reedy really has pulled off something amazing here and I can't wait to see whose story he tells next! (This story was based off a girl named Zulaikha who the writer met while serving in Afghanistan who had a cleft lip. The Americans fixed it and he swore to her that he would tell her story... If that isn't a touching story, I don't know what is.)

Recommended to ages 12 and up.

www.yearningtoread.wordpress.com

Naomi says

POTENTIAL SPOILERS...POTENTIAL SPOILERS...POTENTIAL SPOILERS

Bravo, Mr. Reedy, Bravo...WHAT A STORY THIS BOOK IS FOR ALL AGES! To say this book isn't breaking my heart and sucked me in from page one would be a total lie. It has been several months since I have considered a YA book to be a worthwhile read and this one more than exceeds my expectations as a 43 year old woman. I am heartbroken by the treatment of the main character, Zulaikha, yet as the book continues on..that heart break turns to heart-warming as the exceptional young woman she is turning out to be! I know this book will only get better and the 5 star rating will continue to be warranted. To think that this is a book, about a 12 year old girl written BY A MAN..is even more impressive.

ETA: OK, I thought the book made me bawl like a baby. Normally, I skip over author's notes, but this one caught my attention for God knows what reason and made my heart warm...yet again!

Kristi says

I won this book through GoodReads! Having the privilege of a first read was lots of fun! I really enjoyed this novel! The story follows the life of a young Afghan girl, Zulaikha, who, born with a cleft lip, struggles with her own self image as she comes of age. In a country previous wrought by the restrictions of the Taliban, Afghanistan is in a time of change under the presence of the American soldiers. Zulaikha comes into direct contact with American soldiers as they help her fix her cleft lip and provide her father with profitable employment. There is a glimpse of the marriage process in the book as her sister marries young, leaving her starving for companionship. She finally begins to learn to read and write from her mom's friend Meena and desires to go to school to learn more.

This book is a wonderful blend of story and culture. The different cultural aspects were what really intrigued me in this book. While many of the Afghan words stopped me in the beginning (even with the wonderful glossary, it was hard to get into immediately), it was fascinating to see Afghanistan's perspective on American presence. What is even cooler about this book is that the perspective comes from a young girl in a culture that rarely lets women speak or think freely. The encounters with the Americans really highlight the contrast in cultures, as Zulaikha does not understand a handshake or soldiers speaking to her rather than her father. While heartbreaking, I also enjoyed following the parallel tale of her sister as she finds herself in the married state. I could not imagine marrying someone whom I did not see until the actual wedding day!

This novel is incredibly powerful and is a great tool for any middle school classroom. The cultural and political aspects are present and relevant. Beyond that, the themes of identity, personal growth, and independence can all lead to an enriching literary discussion. This novel really makes the reader more understanding of and sympathetic to the citizens of Afghanistan's situation. There is so much hatred directed towards Afghanistan that is based on false misconception and stereotypes. I believe this novel can be used to help eradicate and prevent these assumptions from forming, especially when starting at a young age.

Harley May says

A poignant and relevant read for both children and adults in today's political climate. As an American, I hear the word "Taliban" and get angry. Before reading this book, I had no idea what the Taliban had done to ravage Afghanistan's people and culture.

Trent Reedy is a quiet force and tells a beautiful story. Please read it.

Ladyellie says

Wonderful book, It's a great addition to my classroom library. My students enjoy reading books about other cultures and try to understand lives lived by others especially in situations such as Zulaikha's. She is a strong and brave girl, and is a great example to all the teenager girls who are going through tough times on a larger or smaller scales.

Mike Mullin says

I count this among the finest first novels I've yet read. I was most impressed by the tremendous empathy, Trent Reedy, a U.S. soldier, was able to find for his main character, Zulaikha, a young Afghan girl. He wrote so deeply in her perspective that if I were told that the book was written by Zulaikha, I'd completely believe it.

Part of what makes the writing so outstanding and believable is the level of detail Words in the Dust incorporates. Reedy has obviously spent countless hours researching the daily lives of the Afghan people which, when added to his personal experience in the country, makes the story utterly engrossing and realistic.

Don't skip the amazing Author's Note at the end. The idea that a soldier could arrive in Afghanistan to "focus on hunting down terrorists" and leave with a quixotic drive to tell the story of one small child brought tears of joy to my eyes.

Cheryl Klein says

The usual caveat: I edited this, I'm biased, etc.

But what makes this book really, really good is first, how beautifully low-key and specific it is about Zulaikha's life in western Afghanistan -- how she and her sister do housework all day, her stepmother's coldness, the teasing and low self-esteem that come with her cleft palate; and then how naturally the world opens up for her, through learning to read at last and surgery to fix her face; and how wonderful and also painful are the changes that follow. Trent pulls no punches about anything, but neither does he punch where only a gentle nudge might do. And every one of his characters is round and real.

I first read this book in November of 2009, right when President Obama was deliberating about how to

proceed in Afghanistan, and it complicated my opinions of that in a way I'm really grateful for. I hope lots of readers will let their opinions be complicated too.

Marsha Nelson says

Words In The Dust brings to life two young girl's plights in Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion. One crippled by a birth defect, the other crippled by the culture. It gives a realistic look at what the Americans do well including medicine and jobs. But it also shows the ways in which their understanding of the culture is lacking and disrespectful to the Afghani people. I really enjoyed this book and plan to share it with friends.

Angela says

A solid contribution to the small (but growing) "downtrodden Middle Eastern girl" genre. Zulaika has an interesting story arc, in that in the beginning her hopes and dreams are rather modest and it's only as she's exposed to the world outside of her home that she begins to dream of going to school and getting her cleft palate fixed. Her desire to gain an education doesn't come out of nowhere or from a desire to be like her brothers - it seems it generally hadn't occurred to her prior to hearing that the American soldiers were insisting a school be built for girls.

But I think my absolute favorite part of the book may be Reedy's author's note. Reedy writes of his time in Afghanistan as a member of the National Guard and how he was initially disappointed that his mission wasn't to fight terrorists - instead he was working with Afghan communities to build schools and hospitals. I always find it interesting when someone can admit that perhaps they didn't always have the noblest of intentions.

Ellie Revert says

The author is a National Guardsman who served in Afghanistan in 2004, not killing bad guys, but working to improve life for the good Afghans. He tells a story about a girl that moves my heart. She was born with a cleft palate, and the US soldiers wanted to help her, and they did. Lots to learn about their culture, and he does it in a beautiful way. There are some very tough parts in that, of course. I would love to convince my SYC Book Club to select it for next season. Be SURE to read the author's notes at the back of the book--you could even read them first.

Suzanne says

I learned a lot about Afghanistan and the complexity of the issues there. This was really a well written and tender book.

Sara says

Zulaikha's life, by any measure, is limited. She is taunted by boys who call her "Donkeyface." She is bound by culture, laws, time, and war. Barely any stories of girls in Afghanistan survive the scouring forces that turn their lives into wind-blown dust. And yet, here, despite the odds, is a life painstakingly held to the light.

The author was a soldier in the Iowa National Guard and is a Facebook friend. The editor is Cheryl Klein, my editor for Operation Yes. The book is graced with the poetry of Afghanistan-born poet, Jami; peopled with characters as fully realized as your own family, and infused with a quiet, watchful intensity. I don't know how to stop wanting to be more than I am; perhaps that's why I ached so much for Zulaikha to have more than she does.

The entire post at my blog:
[http://saralewishholmes.blogspot.com/2...](http://saralewishholmes.blogspot.com/2013/09/donkey-face.html)

Jeanine says

Words in the Dust by Trent Reedy.

This is of the YA genre but I still enjoyed reading it.

DONKEY FACE! Donkey Face! Can you imagine hearing that chant every time your mother sent you to the market? Neither can I but Zulaikha lived with it. Always pulling her chador tighter across her mouth.

Zulaikha is a young Afghani girl with a cleft palate. Zulaikha's life is not easy. Her brother and others make fun of her. The Taliban while no longer in power has violently taken her mother from her and she lives her life keeping house for her very traditional father and his wife who is very mean to Zulaikha.

One day on her way home from market Zulaikha meets her Muallem (teacher). Can this women teach her to read and write? Will her father find out and forbid her?

Zulaikha just wants to be normal like her sister. To plan to get married one day. To perhaps get an education and learn to read like her mother could. Who would want to marry someone with a donkey face? To have to watch someone eat the way she does? Then one day while on an errand to the market Zulaikha is spotted by an American Solider who sees her deformity and learns who she is and helps her father get her surgery. But will this surgery make her life better? You must read the book to find out!

The author Trent Reedy was inspired by a girl he met during his tour of duty in Afghanistan, and Zulaikha's character is based loosely on her experiences.

Mitali says

As Katherine Paterson puts it in her introduction to this heartwrenching debut novel, you will never read the

news about Afghanistan again without remembering that you have a friend there -- a girl named Zulaikha with whom you hoped and suffered and rejoiced and prayed.

Sarah says

Sweet and caring Zulaikah is the second-oldest girl in her large family. They live in a small village in Afghanistan—a country that places a lot of importance on marriage prospects for their children. For Zulaikah, this reality is hard to take because she has a cleft palate, which makes her less desirable for a match in marriage. After watching her sister get married to an older wealthy man, Zulaikah wonders what her life will become other than helping to raise her younger siblings and doing chores.

Things change completely when two things happen: first, when American soldiers arrive in their village, one of them notices Zulaikah's mouth and offers her father the chance for her to have free surgery to fix her problem; and second, when she meets a former university professor in her village who offers to teach Zulaikah how to read and write. All of a sudden, her future is looking much brighter—but will her father allow her to follow her dreams?

This is an excellent book. It's fascinating how different a teen girl's life in Afghanistan is from a teen girl's life in the United States—but there are also many similarities, too. Those who enjoyed this book might also like *Where the Streets Had a Name* (Abdel-Fattah) and *Jungle Crossing* (Salter).

Betsy says

A children's book, written by a soldier about an Afghani girl, set in the recent past. That's a toughie. There are a lot of easier books out there to review too. Why aren't I writing one about the adorable little girl who wants to be Little Miss Apple Pie or the one about the cute dog that wants to find its home? Well, sometimes you have to step out of your comfort zone, which I suspect is what author Trent Reedy wanted to do here. With an Introduction by Katherine Paterson and enough backmatter to sink a small dinghy, Reedy takes a chance on confronting the state of the people of Afghanistan without coming off as imperialist, judgmental, or a know-it-all. For the most part he succeeds, and the result is a book that carries a lot more complexity in its 272 pages than the first 120 or so would initially suggest. Bear with it then. There's a lot to chew on here.

Zulaikha would stand out in any crowd. It's not her fault, but born with jutting teeth and a cleft upper lip she finds herself on the receiving end of the taunts of the local boys, and sometimes even her own little brother. Then everything in her life seems to happen at once. She's spotted by an American soldier, who with his fellows manages to convince their captain to have Zulaikha flown to a hospital for free surgery. At the same time she makes the acquaintance of a friend of her dead mother, a former professor who begins to teach her girl how to read. Top it all off with the upcoming surprise marriage of Zeynab, Zulaikha's older sister, and things seem to be going well. Unfortunately, hopes have a way of becoming dashed, and in the midst of all this is a girl who must determine what it is she wants and what it is the people she cares about need.

I approach most realistic children's fiction with a great deal of trepidation, particularly when it discusses topical information. The sad truth of children's books is that they are perfect containers for didacticism, even if you did not mean for that to be the case when you begin. With that in mind I read the first 120 pages of the

story warily. I wasn't certain that I liked what I saw either. Seemed to me that this book was indeed showing an in-depth portrait of Afghanistan, beauty, warts, and all, while the Americans were these near saviors, picking a poor girl out of the crowd upon whom to bestow free surgery out of the goodness of their golden glorious hearts. Fortunately, by the time we got to page 120 we saw the flip side of the equation. Yes, the Americans are perky and western and what have you. They're also doofuses. Sometimes. They sort of blunder about Afghanistan without any recognition of the cultural courtesies they're supposed to engage in. They merrily serve their Muslim guests food made out of pigs, unaware of what they're doing. At one point Zulaikha's father grows increasingly angry with them for their distrust of common Afghan workers (watching builders at gunpoint so that none of them steal tools) as well as their conversational blunders. Don't get me wrong. The Americans are generally seen as good blokes. But I was worried that this book was going to be one sweet love song to the American invasion, and it's not that. It's nuanced and folks are allowed to be both good and bad. Even the ones writing the book.

I still got nervous, though. I desperately did not want this to be a Poor Little Backwards Afghanistan story, so it's interesting to watch Reedy at work. He draws very distinct lines between the Taliban and everyday Afghans, which is important. A lot of kids (heck, a lot of adults) have a hard time realizing that citizens of Afghan and the Taliban are not one and the same. At the same time, he has to show the state women inhabit without pulling out any real judgments. The name of the game here is to show and not tell. I think we're all familiar with the awful historical novels where a girl will randomly say something like "corsets restrict more than bodies . . . they restrict minds!" (I actually saw this in a book once) without any outside influences. Such moments are good for drama but are terribly unbelievable. If Zulaikha for one moment suddenly threw down a chadri and stomped on it, the moment would feel forced and false. So I was very impressed by the ending (which I won't give away here) since it invoked books like Anne of Green Gables in terms of its happy, if complicated resolution.

It will be interesting to watch American kids read this title, though. For one thing, how will they react to the physical violence of women? Even "good" male characters in this book will occasionally hit their wives or children. We don't see a lot of domestic violence in children's books where the abuser is not only forgiven but also beloved. It's a cultural reality that some would rather their kids not face, but at the same time it happens. And it seems to me that what Reedy wants more than anything here is for child readers to make up their own minds. I can see more than reader getting a little miffed that the neat and tidy comeuppances they're accustomed to are no longer at play.

This brings up the question of the age of the readership too. The suggested age of 9-13 is probably dipping a bit low. Aside from the aforementioned domestic abuse there's also sex. Not that any is ever viewed, but it's alluded to once in a while. Now typically kids read into a book like this only as much as they themselves know. Only a few would understand why Zulaikha's sister Zeynab blushes so much when receiving wedding night information. Fewer still will understand the significance of the wedding cloth stained with her sister's blood (though I suspect a few might ask their parents about it). And then there's the moment when Zeynab, in the midst of her marriage, tries to explain to her sister some of her difficulties with her husband. "Every night . . . He wants me to have a son, but I don't know . . ." A little old for the readership but, again, a kid sees in that only as much as they necessarily know. Some will comprehend Zeynab's meaning. Others will merrily skim through, oblivious.

The writing is strong, though sometimes a little predictable. The minute Zulaikha's sister questioned the wisdom of bothering to educate women I thought, "Uh-oh. Nothing good's gonna happen to her." Sort of the case, I'm afraid. Reedy also spends a lot of time looking at the characters' day-to-day lives. This is understandable since it gives you a better sense of everyday living, but it does have the unfortunate downside of feeling like there's a bit of unnecessary padding here. The inclination is to skip all this description and get

to the plot, though fortunately that instinct doesn't have to kick in very often. Reedy's book always keeps moving, never dies, and feels very much like a first novel. A good first novel, though. An interesting one.

Reedy's Author's Note brings up an essential point that is worth discussing and that I was very pleased to find him address right off the bat. After mentioning that he wrote this book because of another girl named Zulaikha with a cleft lip that he met while serving in Afghanistan between 2004-2005 he goes on to say that he made a promise to her in his head that he would write this book. He goes on, "Of course, another problem I had in keeping my promise is that I have never been a girl and I am not an Afghan. Many would say that stories about Afghan girls should best be told by Afghan girls. I agree completely. I would love nothing more than to read the story of the girl who we helped in her own words. However, the terrible reality is that by some estimates, 87 percent of Afghan women are illiterate." He goes on to mention other statistics as well and then says that he has done his best to be respectful of the "culture and traditions of Afghanistan." There was a bit of discussion last year about authenticity in children's literature. Reedy himself brings up the point about whether or not it is ever okay to write about someone else's life and experience if they are not your own. And what if the group you write about has, until now, remained largely silent in the American publishing world? Is it better that no one writes anything, or should someone try? Reedy compensates for what he is not by mentioning his advisors, his personal history in the region, the poetry used in the book (even going so far as to say which translations he used, for which I was VERY grateful) and then includes a recommended reading list about Afghanistan that includes books for both kids and teens as well as adults. You cannot say he has not covered his bases. If your objection is what he is and how that is not the same as the person he has taken the voice of (or given voice to?) then none of that will change your mind. For others, it gives the book a kind of legitimacy that the mere words upon the page would not have.

Disfigured girls have a way of cropping up in Middle Eastern children's fiction these days. It might be very interesting to pair this book alongside the set in Palestine novel *Where The Streets Had A Name* by Randa Abdel-Fattah. Of course, in Abdel-Fattah's book the heroine's face was injured late in life and is easy enough to hide for the most part under make-up. The best pairing, however, would probably be with N.H. Senzai's *Shooting Kabul*, a book inspired in part by the author's husband's experience fleeing Soviet controlled Afghanistan. *Words in the Dust* is even more contemporary than those two novels, and it covers new ground. Zulaikha's is a voice we've not heard in recent children's books. Here's the hope, then, that she is just the frontrunner of more good things to come. A strong debut.

For ages 11 and up.

Sara Latta says

"HEEEEEE-HAAAAAW!...Donkeyface!"

For Zulaikha, a 13 year-old Afghan girl with a severe cleft lip whose front teeth stuck straight out from her mouth, the torment came on a regular basis. In her society, women are expected to marry, but who will ever want her? Even her little brother makes fun of her. She yearns to learn to read and write like her mother, killed by the Taliban because she dared to read, but that too seems to be out of her reach.

"*Words in the Dust*," (Arthur A. Levine Books, 2011) the debut novel by Trent Reedy, is a remarkable portrait of life in contemporary Afghanistan. When an American serviceman spots Zulaikha, he and his fellow soldiers arrange to have her flown to a military hospital for free surgery. She eventually gains the pretty face she desired, but will she ever be able to attain the education she so desperately desires?

To read the rest of the review, published in the News-Gazette (Champaign, Illinois), please visit the book

shelf on my site, at <http://www.saralatta.com>

Kristen says

I won this book on the Goodreads Giveaway.

When I first started this book I was skeptical because it was the first-person narration of a thirteen year old Afghan girl, written by a member of the US military. I got it in the mail last night and figured I would read a little bit before bed. Well, I ended up reading the whole thing in one sitting. I was enchanted by the young girl and everything that she and her older sister, Zeynab had to go through.

I felt like I was really inside of her home and watching her interact with her family. I also felt the pain when she told of the hurtful things that people said to her because of her cleft lip. This book had some dark moments, but also some hopeful ones. It was a great read and I look forward to more from Mr. Reedy.
