

Gloria Whelan

Depicting History through Courageous Heroines

Travel to faraway destinations and exciting periods in history in Whelan's gripping novels. **By Monika Schröder**

Many of Gloria Whelan's novels feature female protagonists who narrate engrossing first-person tales set in interesting times and locations. Her heroines live in societies that are on the brink of a fundamental change due to a looming war, a revolution, or modernization. Several of them embark on journeys, some voluntary, others forced, but each journey changes the protagonist and helps her to become more self-confident and self-reliant.

Women's self-realization through education is another common thread in Whelan's novels. "The learning was not wasted on me," reflects the heroine

wedding. Education becomes the key to her survival in a society that holds very few options for widows. Koly learns to read and uses her embroidery skills to overcome her low standing in her husband's family.

Angels in the Square is one of several novels by Whelan set in Russia before and after the Russian revolution. Katya belongs to the privileged aristocracy whose future is in jeopardy once the tsarist regime is overthrown. Whelan describes the Bolsheviks from the viewpoint of Katya, whose mother is a lady-in-waiting for the empress, and from the perspective of her friend, Misha, who sympathizes

"Imagining ourselves into the lives of others is not unique to authors. It's something we all do every day."

—Gloria Whelan

of *Chu Ju's House* after her trying journey through China's countryside. She has learned to make a living off the land and is certain that she will find the money for her sister's education. In the National Book Award winner *Homeless Bird*, Whelan also depicts a teenage girl who overcomes obstacles that traditional societal roles impose upon her. Koly is left a young widow after her family marries her to a sickly young boy who dies soon after the

with the revolutionaries. Another novel set in Russia, *The Impossible Journey*, describes Marya and Georgi's adventurous and perilous journey through Siberia in search of their exiled parents. Whelan portrays the setting realistically; in this case, a remote and hostile part of Russia.

The authentic description of the African landscape and the sights and sounds of an English estate at the beginning of the twentieth century



Photo credit: Ivona Biedermann

give Whelan's *Listening for Lions* a strong sense of place. In Whelan's most recent novel, *Parade of Shadows*, 16-year-old Julia embarks on a journey to the Levant with her father, a British diplomat. Like Rachel in *Listening for Lions*, she gains confidence through a string of experiences that require her to solve problems previously unknown to a sheltered girl in colonial times. Once again, Whelan transports readers to an exotic locale and teaches them about its history through the characters' perspectives. Edith, a British botanist who introduces Julia to the customs and culture, expresses a timely lesson when she says, "Your kind and your countries are forever interfering. One of these days, all of the world will tangle itself in the web of the Levant."

Teaching Strategies

- **Author Study:** Make a chart comparing the age and family situations of the female protagonists, the narrative points of view, settings, and themes in several of Gloria Whelan's novels. Discuss similarities and differences with students. Make another chart with common characteristics of all female protagonists. Ask

students to compare and contrast how the heroines in the different books overcome obstacles or react to the restrictions that society imposes on them.

- *Southeast Asia*: Read *Chu Ju's House* and *Homeless Bird* as part of a unit on contemporary Southeast Asia. These novels can be a springboard for a discussion about the social situations of women and the friction between traditional and modern ways of life in these societies. Students can supplement the novels with research on literacy rates, female life expectancy, and reproductive rights in India and China.
- *Figurative Language*: Gloria Whelan's writing shines with beautiful metaphors and similes, mostly using images of the natural world. Ask students to make a list of metaphors and similes in several of her books. Discuss the role of bird images in *Listening for Lions* and *Homeless Bird*. What other imagery do they notice? How does the use of metaphors enhance the writing? Encourage students to experiment with metaphors in their own writing.
- *Russian History*: *Angel on the Square* takes place in Russia before and after the Bolshevik revolution. Ask students to present a short report about the time period and discuss how Tsar Nicholas II and the Bolsheviks are depicted in the book. The tsar, considered a brutal monarch by the revolutionaries, becomes human to the narrator, who accompanies him and his family into exile. How does Whelan depict the Bolsheviks? In *The Impossible Journey* two children try to find their exiled parents in Siberia. Students can research the persecution of political opposition under Stalin and find out about the peoples of Siberia, who help Marya and Georgi to find their way. Also see Whelan's *Burying the Sun* (HarperCollins, 2004) and *The Turning*

(HarperCollins, 2006), companion novels to these books.

Bibliography

Angel on the Square. 2001. 304p. HarperTrophy, paper, \$7.99 (9780064408790).

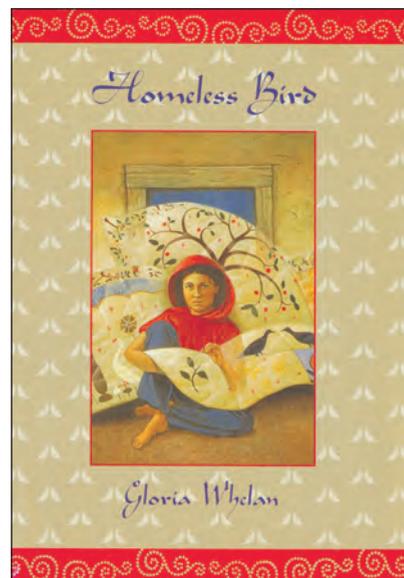
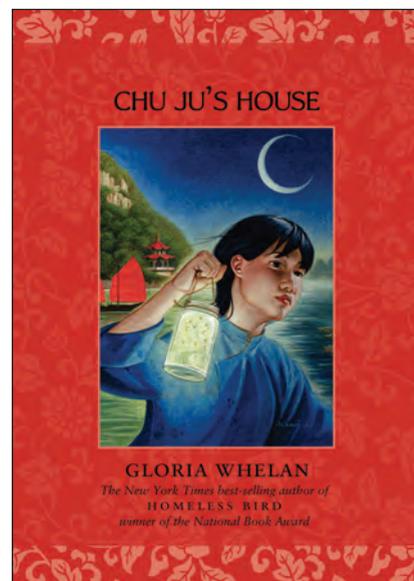
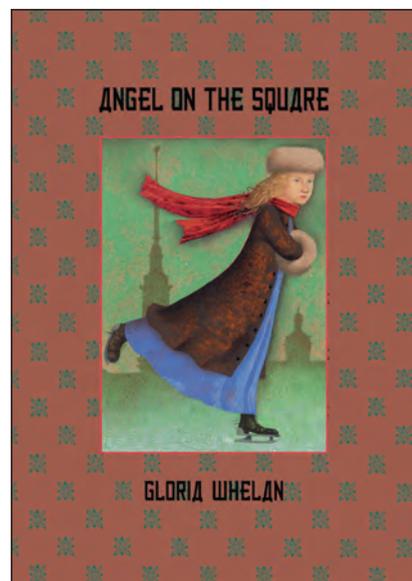
Gr. 5–8. In 1913 Russia, 12-year-old Katya joins her mother, who becomes a lady-in-waiting, to live a spoiled life with Tsar Nicholas II and his family. While prerevolutionary unrest spreads across the country, Katya's negative view of the workers' motives for revolt is challenged after her friend Misha takes her to see the squalid conditions in which members of these social classes live. She and her mother stay with the royal family until they are finally taken to Siberia by Lenin's soldiers. Later, Katya realizes that her own family contributed to the suppression of peasants on their estate.

Chu Ju's House. 2004. 240p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (9780060507244); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (9780060507268).

Gr. 6–9. Fourteen-year old Chu Ju lives in a village in modern China. When her mother gives birth to a second daughter, her grandmother wants to sell the baby, since the government allows only two children per family and a daughter is considered "worthless." Chu Ju decides to run away to give her baby sister a chance to stay with her family. Chu Ju moves from village to village, first working hard on a fishing boat, then suffering cruel conditions at a silkworm farm, before staying with a widow on a farm, where she is able to make a life for herself and eventually provide funding for her sister's education.

Homeless Bird. 2000. 240p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (9780060284541); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (9780064408196). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library.

Gr. 6–9. This National Book Award winner takes place in modern-day India. Thirteen-year-old Koly is



Getting to Know Gloria Whelan

Gloria Whelan is an award-winning author who has published more than 30 children's books. In addition to books that take place outside of the U.S., she has written several novels set in her native Michigan. She currently resides outside of Detroit. The interview below was conducted by e-mail. —Monika Schröder

MS: The novels in this selection are all set in exotic places. Have you visited or lived in all of these countries? What research do you do to enhance the historical settings for your novels?

WHELAN: I have visited Africa and Russia. I have not been to China or India. I try to immerse myself in the country. I get a cookbook and cook the food. I read bird books. I read novels and memoirs and books about the politics and geography of the country. I talk with people who have lived in the country. The research is a kind of treasure hunt. I am looking for specific things, but at the same time I discover things that I know I must put into the novel. When I discovered that the cocoons of the silkworms were tickled with feathers to expedite the molting, that went into *Chu Ju's House*.

MS: How do you manage to portray such a wide range of characters and settings so realistically?

WHELAN: I'm sometimes asked, "How can you write about the Russian revolution?" or "about a widowed girl living in India?" I don't see how one can say authors have no right to imagine themselves into the lives of others. Imagining ourselves into the lives of others is not unique to authors. It's something we all do every day. Without our identification with other people, without being able to imagine how others feel, there would be no compassion.

MS: The female protagonists in the novels embark on transformative journeys. Have you had personal experiences that are similar?

WHELAN: I believe becoming an author has been my transformative journey.

MS: Koly and Chu Ju overcome obstacles through determination and education. Are you optimistic about the progress that women have made in Asian societies?

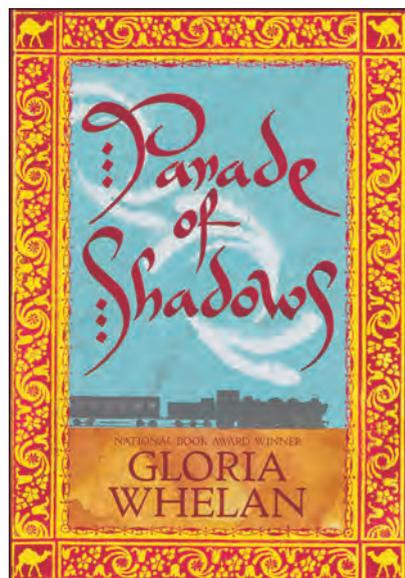
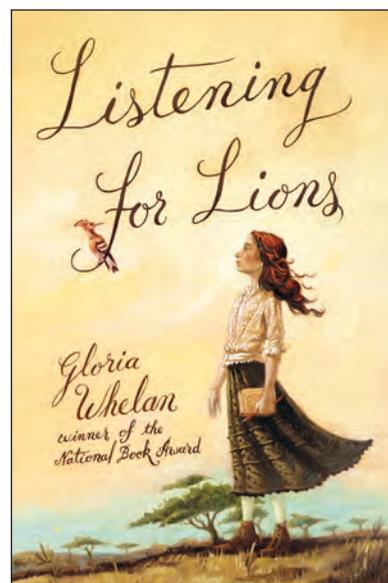
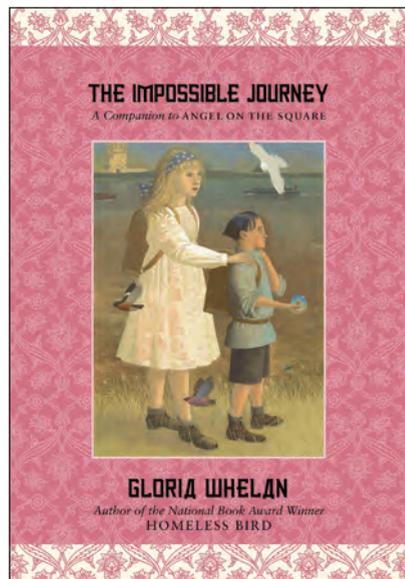
WHELAN: When I call for technical help with my computer, it is not unusual to hear the voice of an Indian woman. I am sure the women in Asian societies will have to struggle as women have in our society, but yes, I am optimistic.

MS: Booklist said Listening for Lions is "fueled with old-fashioned girl power." Do you agree?

WHELAN: I think the "old-fashioned" part comes from echoes of books like *The Secret Garden*, which was very much in my mind as I wrote the novel. Also, I wanted to show that as Rachel struggles she can draw on the strength she derived from her parents. When she is forced to choose between good and evil, she knows good and she knows evil. I'm very much drawn to authors like Henry James or Graham Greene who explore such choices in their work.

MS: Your novels are all written in the first person. Why do you prefer this point of view?

WHELAN: Once I start writing I so identify with my principal character that I can't endure a third-person distance. For me the first person is a kind of ventriloquism.



excited to be getting married, but her parents cannot afford a big dowry, and the family of her soon-to-be husband demands all the family's treasures. On her wedding day Koly realizes that her husband is a sickly boy who is younger than she and her family were led to believe. When her husband dies, Koly is confined to one of the most restricted identities Indian society has to offer, that of a widow. After much hardship, Koly manages to learn to read and uses her embroidery skills to make a living, eventually finding true love in Raji, a rickshaw driver who wants to take her to his village as his wife.

The Impossible Journey. 2003. 256p. HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (9780064410838).

Gr. 5–8. In 1934, the parents of 13-year-old Marya and her younger brother, Georgi, are detained by Stalinist secret police. When the children receive a letter from their parents they embark on a journey through Siberia in hope of finding them. Marya and Georgi find ways to survive in the Siberian wilderness and encounter the Samoyeds, a Siberian native tribe of reindeer herders.

Listening for Lions. 2005. 208p. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (9780060581749); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (9780060581763).

Gr. 5–8. Thirteen-year-old Rachel lives in British East Africa in 1919. After her parents die during an influenza epidemic, the neighboring Pritchards take Rachel in and trick her into impersonating their deceased daughter, Valerie. The Pritchards force Rachel to leave her beloved Africa and to travel to England, where her mission is to convince Valerie's grandfather to reinstate them in his will. The old man is sick, and Rachel is worried that his finding out about the plot will cause his death. They form a close relationship, and she begins to share his love for birds and entertains him with stories of Africa.

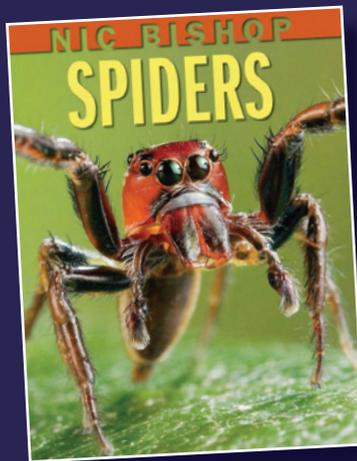
Parade of Shadows. 2007. 304p. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (9780060890285).

Gr. 7–10. In the spring of 1907, 16-year-old Julia Hamilton convinces her father, a Middle East expert at the British Foreign Office, to let her accompany him on a trip to the Levant. Instead of the exotic and carefree trip she had hoped for,

Julia experiences mystery, a murder attempt, conspiracy, and romance. Whelan weaves the complex political realities and history of the Ottoman Empire before World War I into the story. 

Monika Schröder is the elementary-school librarian at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India.

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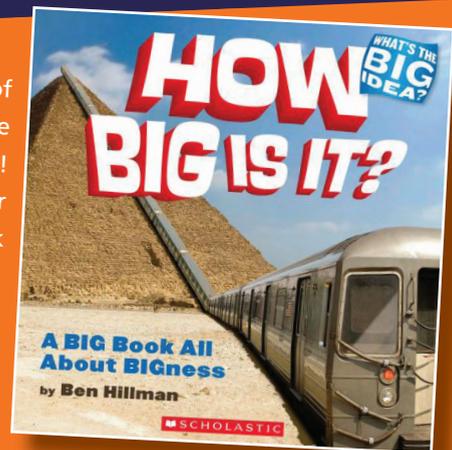


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