

THE  
Storyteller  
EVAN TURK

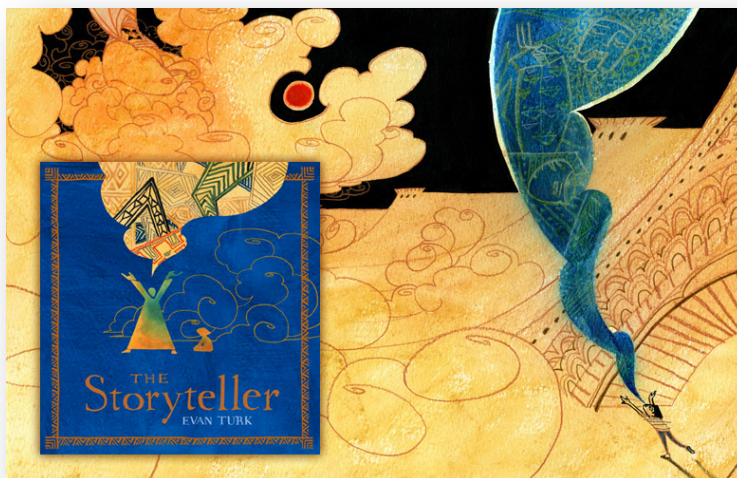
**HAJITEK MAJITEK**  
Moroccan Storyteller Profiles  
& Discussion Questions

"Teaching youth is like carving in stone."  
—Moroccan Proverb

## HAJITEK MAJITEK Moroccan Storyteller Profiles & Discussion Questions

Morocco's public storytellers, or *hlaykia*, have been learning, preserving, and sharing stories for nearly one thousand years.

These stories have been passed down from generation to generation and have become a part of the cultural fabric. The power of these storytellers lies in their audience, or *halka*. With the *hlaykia* in the center, the *halka* forms an expanding circle and is linked with the generations who came before them through the stories.



But these storytellers, like *Ahmed Temiicha*, are disappearing. As audiences drift toward television, movies, and the Internet, there are few for the aging *hlaykia* to pass their stories along to. Only a handful of master storytellers remain. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of storytelling with the craft and commitment of young storytellers like *Mehdi EL Ghaly*.

“[With storytelling] traditions are revived through us...unconsciously. They are somewhere inside of us and they find their way to developing their presence in our daily life.”  
—Mehdi EL Ghaly

## Read & Share

This guide contains two exclusive pieces about and by Moroccan storytellers:

- A profile of Ahmed Temiicha, the most famous storyteller in Marrakech, by Richard Hamilton, the author of *The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco* (IB Tauris).
- A letter to readers from young Moroccan Storyteller Mehdi EL Ghaly.

## Moroccan Arabic Vocabulary

As-Salaam-Alaikum	greeting, peace be upon you
halka	audience, ring or circle
djinn	genie
hajitek majitek	once upon a time
hlaykia	traditional storyteller
riad	house
shukran	thank you

Any words on this sheet in ***bold italic*** can be heard on an audio pronunciation guide on the “Inspiration & Resources” page of TheStorytellerBook.com.

**The Last Storytellers  
of Marrakech**

*By Richard Hamilton*

I found him sitting on a mattress  
in a dark room praying.

It had taken days to track him  
down in the narrow crumbling  
streets of *Marrakech's* medina.  
*Ahmed Temiicha* was once the  
most famous storyteller in  
Marrakech, but when I met him  
he was old, frail and had gone  
blind.



He lived in an old house or *riad*  
with balconies overlooking an inner  
courtyard of peeling walls and cracked tiles. I sat down and listened to his stories. His eyes  
seemed to sparkle as he recounted a long twisting saga called, "*The Apples of El-Ghaliya bent  
Mansour.*" She was an enchantress who lived beneath the seventh sea. She would sleep for a year  
and stay awake for the next one. She would make her bed with half of her hair and cover herself  
in the other half. Seven watchmen guarded seven doors of her underwater palace. Beyond its  
walls was an orchard of golden apples. The hero of the story had to steal one of these in order to  
marry a beautiful princess...

Like tales from 'A Thousand and One Nights', traditional Moroccan stories are fantasies; a world  
where listeners young and old can escape from their everyday lives. But they are also fables,  
parables and morality tales which teach us how to live a good life. The stories of Marrakech are  
especially culturally rich because they have diverse influences: from the Arab Middle East, Sub-  
Saharan Africa and the Berber people of North Africa.

As I listened to Ahmed's stories, I felt as if I was traveling back in time. This must have been  
what it was like centuries ago in remote mountain villages or among the dunes of the desert,  
when camel herders gathered around campfires and told tall tales beneath the stars. It had been a  
privilege to listen to Ahmed in that small room with its broken tiles and old mattresses. By telling  
stories he seemed to keep himself alive, and he enchanted me. In the land of the blind, the  
storyteller is king.

Forty years ago, Ahmed was in good company. There were nearly twenty storytellers or *hlaykia*  
performing in Marrakech's central square, the *Jemaa el Fna*. Now there are none. It is thought  
storytellers told tales here since the founding of the Red City in the eleventh century. From  
generation to generation they would pass on their stories, most of which were never written  
down. But this chain of oral tradition is teetering on the brink of extinction and the culprit is  
technology. Young Moroccans prefer to stare at computer screens or watch TV than listen to a  
*hlayki*. We are witnessing the decline of a rich tradition unable to keep pace with modernity.  
"When a storyteller dies," locals here will tell you, "a library burns." The stories will probably  
crumble like the buildings of the medina or disappear like the peeling paint in Ahmed Temiicha's  
*riad*.

When I left his house that afternoon, I blinked in the fierce sunlight feeling disorientated, as if  
emerging from an afternoon film at a cinema. I walked down a narrow side street, ascended a  
steep ramp and squeezed through a curious hole in the wall to find myself back in one of the  
bustling main thoroughfares of the city. It was as if I had emerged from something out of Ahmed

## The Last Storytellers of Marrakech (cont.)

Temiicha's own stories – a ghoule's grotto, a cavern of treasures guarded by a *djinn* or the underwater palace of El-Ghaliya bent Mansour.

A year or so later I was told that Ahmed Temiicha had died. His library had burned but at least I had managed to save a few of his stories or take a few of his golden apples.

There are some admirable attempts to revive storytelling in Marrakech. In a café in the *Kasbah*, called Café Clock, several young Moroccan apprentices are learning ancient tales from another master storyteller, *Ahmed Ezzarghani*. I hope and pray he succeeds in passing the baton to the next generation and keeping this superb tradition alive.

**Richard Hamilton** is the author of **The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco** (IB Tauris).

### A Letter to Readers from a Moroccan Storyteller

By Mehdi EL Ghaly

*As-Salaam-Alaikum!*

I want to share with you a story about a kid who grew up to be one of his idols.

Not long ago, there was a child, a baby boy, who grew up in a traditional Moroccan house in the old medina of Marrakech. He was so energetic that wherever he went he caused a mess. One night his

grandmother told him, "I want to tell you a story." She began with the words "*Hajitek Majitek*," which mean "Once upon a time" in Moroccan Arabic. The boy started listening, but eventually he fell asleep in the middle of the story. When he woke up the next day, he asked his grandmother for the rest of the story, but she replied that she would continue the story that evening. From that moment on, every evening, with her stories, his grandmother changed and built something within the boy that he would soon discover.



At the age of 9, he went by himself to Jamaa EL Fna, the famous square in Marrakech. There he found storytellers and other performers, and sat in one of the storytellers' circles. He was amazed by the performance that was so different from his grandmother's. He was exposed to two different kinds of stories, their morals, and their performers, which both contributed in developing his love for Moroccan storytelling at such young age. Every weekend and evenings after school, you would find him in one of these circles listening to the stories and learning about his Moroccan culture.

Ten years passed, and he came back to his favorite spot in the square. But he found no storyteller to listen to. He was disappointed, but this was not the end. This child grew up to be a young man who started to look for ways to learn and discover stories, and to share them with Moroccans and non-Moroccans. Learning and working with older storytellers had a special impact on him and he became close with those he looked up to when he was young. Now he does workshops and storytelling performances where he shares his Moroccan culture as an art, as it should be.

### A Letter to Readers (cont.)

This child is me: *Mehdi EL Ghaly*. The journey hasn't been easy, but it was full of art and lessons that have built me into the storyteller that I am today. There are still a lot of things to learn and share with people. We have gotten carried away with all that the world has to offer, and that has pulled us away from the source of our identity: our culture. I want just to tell you this: Our culture is us, and we are our culture. We need to care about it more than we do.

*Shukran,*

*Mehdi EL Ghaly*

**Mehdi EL Ghaly** is a Moroccan storyteller and a university student, passionate about his Moroccan Culture.

### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. A Moroccan proverb says, "When a storyteller dies, a library burns." What did Morocco and the world lose when master storyteller Ahmed Temiicha passed away?
2. Mehdi EL Ghaly learned his craft from his grandmother and from the remaining storytellers in Jamaa EL Fna, the famous square in Marrakech. Who tells stories in your life?
3. Is there a story from your family that has been passed down or retold? Maybe it is the story of the day you came into the family or the story of what country your family came from. What does that story tell you about yourself? What would you lose if you never knew that story?
4. Mehdi EL Ghaly says, "We have gotten carried away with all that the world has to offer." What do you think he means? Do you sometimes find yourself not wanting to listen to the person in front of you because you have a new text or video you want to watch? What might you lose if you stop listening?
5. Imagine yourself in the storytelling square of Jamaa EL Fna or the square pictured in **The Storyteller**. Describe the scene with all of your senses. Now describe yourself alone with your phone. Describe the scene with all of your senses.
6. In **The Storyteller**, the fountains dry up when people stop listening to storytellers. What fills the fountains again? Imagine if someone kept you from stories for a whole week. Imagine if you could not have stories from books, movies, music, or from your friends. Would you be "thirsty"? Explain.

### Suggested Activities

1. **Audio Diary.** Every day of our lives is filled with stories. What do we want to remember? Consider collecting a day's worth of stories. Don't want to write in a journal at the end of the day? That's okay. Many of the best storytellers use the oral tradition. Use a voice recorder to create an audio diary of daily storytelling!
2. **Elders as Storytellers.** In every culture stories get handed down from our elders. Encourage or assign readers to interview older community members. You can find the Elders as Storytellers suggested activity on the "Inspiration & Resources" page of TheStorytellerBook.com.