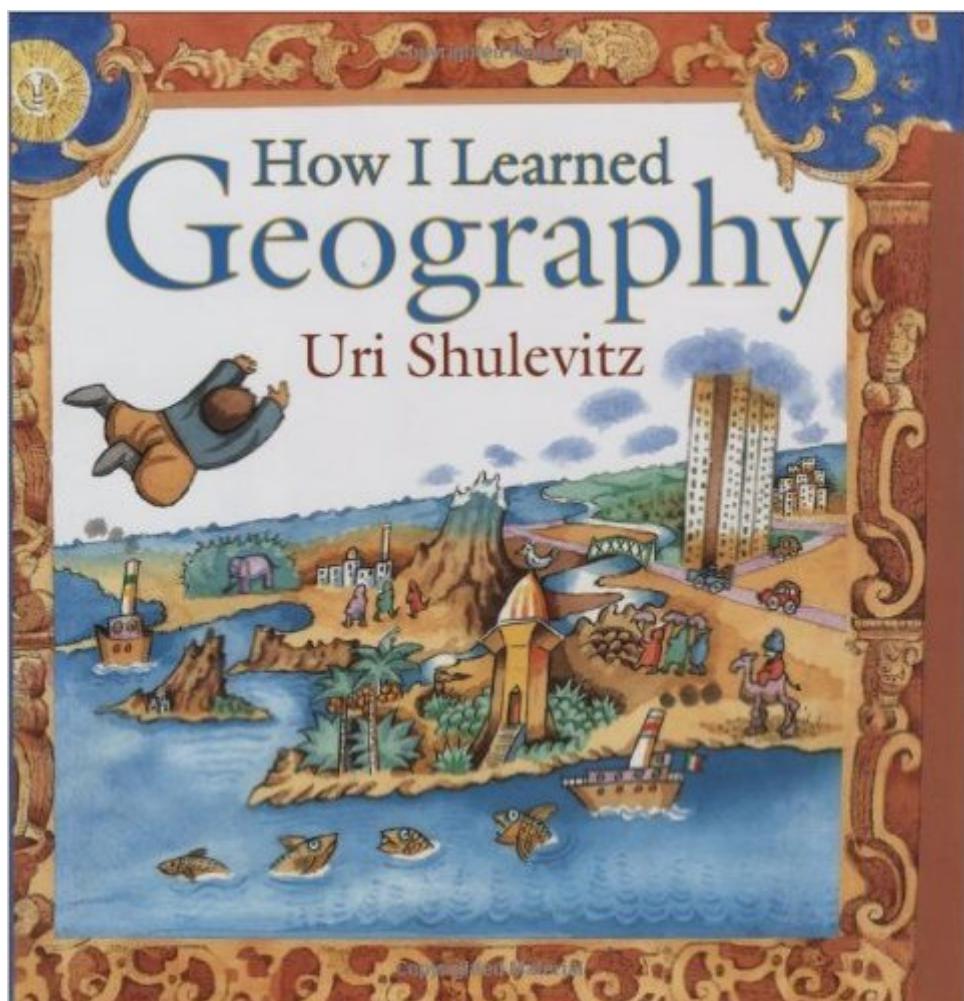


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# How I Learned Geography



## **Synopsis**

Having fled from war in their troubled homeland, a boy and his family are living in poverty in a strange country. Food is scarce, so when the boy's father brings home a map instead of bread for supper, at first the boy is furious. But when the map is hung on the wall, it floods their cheerless room with color. As the boy studies its every detail, he is transported to exotic places without ever leaving the room, and he eventually comes to realize that the map feeds him in a way that bread never could. The award-winning artist's most personal work to date is based on his childhood memories of World War II and features stunning illustrations that celebrate the power of imagination. An author's note includes a brief description of his family's experience, two of his early drawings, and the only surviving photograph of himself from that time. *How I Learned Geography* is a 2009 Caldecott Honor Book and a 2009 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## **Book Information**

Lexile Measure: 660L (What's this?)

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Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars Â See all reviews Â (36 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## **Customer Reviews**

Your story is your own, and when you choose to share it with the world you may find it hard to stop. There is no subject you are better familiar with, of course. Human beings can write diaries with a lifetime's worth of memories. They can pen autobiographies that go from cradle to near grave and still find enough information for a couple thousand pages more. Maybe that's why I have so much

respect for the picture book autobiography. Particularly when it's not even a look at an entire life, but a snatched moment in a person's youth that made them who they are today. Look back on your own life. If you had to synthesize it down to the one moment that defined who you are right now, what would it be? For Caldecott Award winner Uri Shulevitz, it all comes down to a map. And so, with brevity and wit and a feel for what makes a picture book worth reading, Mr. Shulevitz recounts a time of trial from his life that is touching in its seeming simplicity. When young Uri Shulevitz fled Moscow with his family to the relative safety and security of then Turkestan (now Kazakhstan) they had little money and littler food. One day the boy's father goes out to buy bread, but when he comes home it is not with anything edible but with a map. Uri is furious at this dad and has to put up with his neighbors noisily smacking their lips as they devour their own minuscule dinner. Yet when Uri's father hangs the map on their wall, it offers the boy unexpected joys. Through its presence he goes round the world, exploring everything from cold mountain peaks to the thrill of beautiful temples. The map offers the boy escape from his hard life and perhaps helps to set him on his way as an artist and illustrator. An Author's Note explains more about Uri's life with a photograph and two drawing samples, one from age ten and one from thirteen. My co-worker Rebecca made a remarkable point about this book. She recounted to me a story in which a person referred to himself as poor. His mother was quick to correct him, saying that they weren't "poor" they were just broke. If you are broke you're simply going to bad times, but if you're poor then that's a state of mind from which you can never escape. As Rebecca puts it, the moment Uri's father bought that map instead of bread he made a conscious choice to be broke. Not poor. Many of us will recognize Mr. Shulevitz's work because of his remarkable Caldecott Honor winning book *Snow*. That was a book of cold blues and an almost Maurice Sendakian feel for children's playfulness. *How I Learned Geography* replicates that playfulness, but the art is where Shulevitz does what may well be his best work. The watercolors in this book run the gamut from the blood red overtones of a morning sky to the bleak sand-colored roofs of Turkestan homes. Because the map has long since been lost to time, Mr. Shulevitz had to replicate it here from memory. It really is a splendid, colorful creation too, and when Uri recites the exotic names he finds there in a kind of incantation, he is seen flying over its flattened surface. I loved the tiny details of this imaginative journey. Look at how Shulevitz has somehow created the undulating lines of little ripples of sand in a burning desert. And the view of the city with all its buildings becomes a model of impossible angles and jutting towers. Little Uri even engages the reader directly when his father first comes home with the map. As his mother holds out her hand for the bread that will not come, Uri looks directly at the reader and points to his father, as if to say "What is up with this guy?" The natural comparison to make when considering this book is to hold it

up against Peter Sis' *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*. This isn't a particularly fair comparison, though. Sis' autobiography had an adult slant to it. He was actually summing up his early life in a thousand bits and pieces, as opposed to Shulevitz's minimalist view of his own. And while *The Wall* had child-friendly sections below each picture, it didn't feel like something made with an entirely child-aged audience in mind. What's so interesting about *How I Learned Geography*, in contrast, is that it feels wholly and entirely child-friendly. Yes, it has an Author's Note in the back that's directed at adults, but the book itself has a wonderfully young feel. Sentences are simple and beautiful and short. The flights of fancy Uri goes on are so much fun to read that kids will find quite a lot to grab onto and love in this author's story. It's a remarkable mix of memory and storytelling that works beautifully in its current elegant format. It's one thing to have a life worth telling and another thing entirely to know how to tell it. In *How I Learned Geography*, Uri Shulevitz presents his masterpiece. Image, heart, and story combine to show us the best of the autobiographical picture book format. A book that will touch all who read it because it reminds us that once in a while our dreams bleed into our reality. A beautiful piece.

This is the jolting start to a book with the innocuous title "How I Learned Geography". Shulevitz continues, "Everything we had was lost, and we fled empty-handed". The picture on this first page evokes an almost unimaginable pain and loss. Three figures, faces contorted into masks of suffering, are fleeing from a conflagration. As the father leads the way, the mother turns to hold the hand of a child, who is running to keep up. There is nothing else; the ground is grey and the sky is red. Should your kids be reading this? Well, yes. It's a story of loss, of survival, but ultimately of redemption and freedom. And it's a true story, an autobiography of events that took place when the author was four or five years old. (This is explained in a helpful author's note that provides the historical context.) "We traveled far, far east to another country, where summers were hot, and winters were cold, to a city of houses made of clay, straw, and camel dung, surrounded by dusty steppes, burned by the sun". This is the city of Turkestan, where the subsequent action unfolds. The Shulevitz family has nothing, is hungry, and truly subsists as strangers in a strange land. And then - freedom. The vehicle is a map of the world, and fuel is provided by the imagination of a young boy. And so the circumstances are overcome, and in the end we sense that all is well. While the content of this book might be seen as weighty, there can be no doubt that it is very worthy.

A young boy and his parents flee their country with only the clothes on their backs during the war, winding up as refugees in a new land with hot, dusty summers and cold winters. They are given

shelter by strangers but the adjustment is difficult, with little food to eat and no toys for the boy to play with. When the father goes to market one day to buy bread and returns instead with a large world map, the boy and his mother are confused and angry. But over the course of time, the map provides the boy with endless opportunities to use his imagination for forgetting about his hungry stomach and escaping to exotic countries. In this unique book, Caldecott winner Uri Shulevitz draws on his memories of escaping from Poland to Turkestan during World War II and starting over in an entirely different social and economic setting. The simple text, rich illustrations, and author's note in the back yield a powerful set of lessons in economics about how a child faces and deals with scarcity, hunger, and poverty. Teachers and parents seeking books with social studies content that younger readers can understand will value *How I Learned Geography* for their collections.

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