

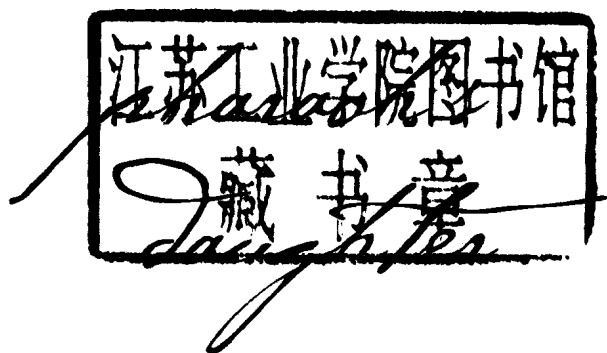
*pharaoh's  
Daughter*

A NOVEL OF ANCIENT EGYPT

"Captivating."  
—*Newsday*

BY NEWBERY HONOR-WINNING AUTHOR

**JULIUS LESTER**



JULIUS LESTER

**G** R A P H I A

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

BOSTON NEW YORK

Copyright © 2000 by Julius Lester

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Graphia, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Harcourt Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2000.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

Graphia and the Graphia logo are registered trademarks of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

[www.graphiabooks.com](http://www.graphiabooks.com)

The text of this book is set in Weiss.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:  
Lester, Julius.

Pharaoh's daughter: a novel of ancient Egypt/by Julius Lester.  
p. cm.

"Silver Whistle."

Summary: A fictionalized account of a biblical story in which an Egyptian princess rescues a Hebrew infant who becomes a prophet of his people while his sister finds her true self as a priestess to the Egyptian gods.

1. Egypt—Civilization—To 332 B.C.—Juvenile fiction. 2. Jews—History—To 1200 B.C.—Juvenile fiction. 3. Moses (biblical leader)—Juvenile fiction. [1. Egypt—Civilization—To 332 B.C.—Fiction. 2. Jews—History—To 1200 B.C.—Fiction. 3. Moses (biblical leader)—Fiction. 4. Bible. O.T.—History of biblical events—Fiction. 5. Parent and child—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.L5629Ph 2000

[Fic]—dc21 99-6403

ISBN 978-0-15-201826-9

ISBN 978-0-15-206662-8 (paperback)

Manufactured in the United States of America  
QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To  
*My Lady, Milan*

# Introduction

ONE QUESTION WRITERS are always asked is, "Where do you get your ideas?" I explain that fiction does not have its genesis in ideas but in feelings, and especially in a need to know something. I also explain that sometimes another person gives me an idea. So it was with this book.

Ms. Barbara Bader is a critic and librarian who reviewed a book of mine, *Sam and the Tigers*, for the *Horn Book*, the eminent journal of children's literature. Although we have never met, she called one afternoon to ask if I would undertake a picture-book retelling of the story of Moses, with Jerry Pinkney, who illustrated *Sam and the Tigers* and other books of mine.

Immediately I was reminded of Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh who finds the baby Moses in a basket in the river Nile and takes him to raise as her own son. In 1979, more than two years before I began studying for my eventual conversion to Judaism, I found myself spontaneously writing about this young woman for a lecture I was preparing for a class I taught then on Black-Jewish

relations. Who was she? What motivated her to defy her father's orders that all Hebrew male babies were to be killed? I knew that the story I wanted to tell was too complex for a picture book, and thus this novel was born.

I wanted readers to experience Moses as a person. This is not easy because all of us have our associations with this figure, sometimes from religious school or films. It is difficult not to see Charlton Heston when one thinks of Moses. To free myself as writer from my own associations, I decided to spell Moses' name as Mosis, a shortened form of Tuthmosis. Mosis is a common suffix in ancient Egyptian, and often men were named for one of the many gods whose names carry that suffix. The suffix means "is born."

It seems that the writer of the Hebrew bible did not know that Mosis was the shortened form of an Egyptian name and associated it with the Hebrew verb *masba*, "to draw out." Thus, in the Hebrew bible, Pharaoh's daughter names the child Mosheh, "because I drew him out of the water." I have removed Moses from sacred history and have sought to put him into human history and thus thought it more accurate to spell his name as *Mosis* throughout this novel.

Writing this book became an experience that wholly involved me—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I became enthralled by ancient Egypt, a civilization that lasted some five thousand years and was probably as close to a paradise on earth as has ever been. But, more important, writing the novel became another journey into understanding who I was as I made the transition

from my fifties and into my sixties. The courage to be who you are is something we learn and relearn throughout our decades, and perhaps that was why I had been drawn to the story of Pharaoh's daughter in 1979. Twenty years have passed and I am still learning who I am, still learning the courage to be.

YEAR 29 OF THE REIGN OF RAMESSES THE GREAT,  
4TH MONTH OF SHEMU, DAY 28

## *Prologue*

**I** SIT ON THE STONE BENCH in the garden of the Women's Palace. I have sat here almost every morning since I came to the palace fifteen years ago. Nothing has changed in all that time. The ibises wading in the lake could have been here when Ra'kha'ef built Hor-em-akhet a thousand years ago. In Khemet nothing changes. Past, present, and future merge and eternity is always now. At least that is how it was for me.

But I don't want to think about that. I want to sit here in peace, as I have every day after morning prayers. The baboons chatter quietly in the trees, their strenuous screeching to awaken Amon-Re, the sun god, finished for today. From inside the palace come faint sounds as the servants begin their morning chores. The white light of Amon-Re spreads farther and farther into the black sky. The god has survived another journey through the chaos of night.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice someone come out of the palace. I turn to see who it is. I am surprised.



It is Batya, the oldest daughter of Pharaoh by his dead and still beloved wife, Queen Nefertari. Once Batya was called Meryetamun. For a while we were like sisters. Now we are not. However, there is respect. Sometimes that is better than love.

"Life, prosperity, and health!" I greet her in the usual way of Khemet.

"In peace, Almah," she returns weakly, not meeting my eyes.

Although we are no longer close, I know her well, and if Batya cannot look me in the eye, something is wrong. "What's the matter?"

"It's Mosis," she answers.

"Mosis? Has something happened to him?" I ask, getting to my feet, wanting to go to him.

Batya holds up a hand as if to restrain me. "He is not hurt. It is something else."

"Well, what?" I demand to know. "Tell me what is going on!" I am almost beside myself with worry and frustration. Why is she being so evasive?

"I would rather we were inside. Let me go to my suite. Wait a little and then join me there. It would be better if no one saw us going in together."

"Very well," I agree reluctantly, sitting down again. Why is she playing this game? Intrigue is not a part of Batya's nature. Something serious has happened. But what? Why doesn't she want anyone to see us together? Or is it that she wants to be certain that the just-returned Queen Asetnefret does not see us together? That must be it. Be-

cause I have not lived in the Women's Palace for many years, my being seen there would attract attention, and there is seldom a reward for being noticed by Asetnefret.

ENOUGH TIME HAS PASSED. And even if it hasn't, I can't wait any longer. I get up and, making sure no one is around, go casually but quickly into the palace and to the suite on the second floor where I lived with Batya when I first came here. No one has seen me. Without knocking I let myself in.

My brother sits on a couch, his head down. Batya is beside him. Although I see him every day, I still can't believe how much like a Khemetian he looks. The short wig fits his head as if he had been born into it. Even sitting, his height is apparent as well as his muscled torso and strong legs beneath the linen kilt. With the gray makeup around his eyes, he would look Khemetian to anyone who did not know, look as if he had been born into the house of Pharaoh.

Unfortunately this picture of Khemetian perfection is broken when Mosis speaks. There is no physical defect in his mouth and there are times when he gets so excited or angry that words pour out of his mouth like water from a fountain. But usually he speaks as if his tongue were as heavy as a stone in a pyramid.

"Mosis?" I say softly. "What is it?"

There is a long pause. He does not act as if he has heard me, though I know he has. Finally he says, "I murdered."

His head is down and the words are mumbled. I am not sure I heard what he said. "You did what?"

"I murdered."

His voice has the dull hollowness of footsteps in a tomb. I was not mistaken. That is what I heard the first time. I do not understand. I look from him to Batya, who holds his hands in hers. Mosis? My brother? Killed someone? "That—that doesn't make any sense," I say, bewildered, looking from one to the other. "What are you talking about?"

Mosis looks at Batya. She says, "I don't know. He will not tell me."

I still do not understand. Murder? In Khemet? That is unheard of. I go over and stoop down beside him. "Mosis," I say, taking his hands out of Batya's and holding them in mine. "What happened? What's going on? Please. Talk to me."

"Last night," Mosis answers.

"'Last night'? Yes. Go on."

He starts to cry.

"Kakemour," he whispers in a voice as dry as sand.

"What did you say?" I ask, feeling suddenly light-headed.

"Kakemour," he repeats.

"You killed Kakemour?" I ask, panic rising in me at what this will mean.

He nods reluctantly.

"Why, Mosis?" I ask. "Why? What happened?"

# *Part One*



## *Chapter One*

**M**Y PARENTS TALKED in the darkness for a long time, their voices moving in and out of my sleep like the back of a hippopotamus rising and sinking in the Great Hapi. Abba, Father, spoke softly and slowly, while Ima, Mother, talked rapidly, as if she had to get all the words out before she forgot them. My brother Aharon, and sister, Miryam, are seven and four and hear nothing, not even the sounds of their own sleep. My baby brother, Yekutiël, is barely three months old. He sleeps through everything.

I am Almah, and I used to sleep like Yekutiël, but now that I am twelve I lie awake in the darkness. Something is wrong. Every evening after Abba comes home from working on the pharaoh's temple in Pi-Ramesses, men come to talk. My father is named Amram, and he is a leader of our people, the Habiru, "the people from the other side." ("The other side of what?" I asked him once. He said we have a land of our own, and one day our god, Ya, will send a redeemer who will lead us out of Khemet and into our land. Abba said that in our land the rivers

flow with milk and honey. When I asked, "What is a redeemer and when is he coming?" he looked away.) Abba and the men talk long into the darkness, but their voices are low and I cannot hear their words. Yesterday I asked Ima what they were talking about. She looked at me as if I were bad luck that had come to life.

I get up when I see the blackness on the ceiling change to gray. Miryam has a leg on top of mine, an arm flung across my chest. Aharon lies pressed against me on the other side. Abba snores softly. Gently I move Miryam's arm and leg and get up. She and Aharon do not waken, but they sense I am leaving and move closer to each other. Aharon has only a little while longer to sleep before it will be time for him to get up and go with Abba to work in Pi-Ramesses.

Rubbing my eyes I walk into the kitchen and get the water jar. I go out the back door, past the bread oven built against the house, through the doorway in the wall, and into the narrow street. Pale pink tinges the eastern sky where the sun will rise.

Our house is on the corner of the Street of the Serpent and the Street of the River, at the farthest end of the village. It faces the Great Hapi, though at a safe distance. The river has started rising, which means the new year has begun. In Khemetian it is called the season of Akhet. The river will rise until it threatens to flow over the top of the road that protects us. That has never happened, though. But for almost two months it will be as if we are living next to the Great Green Sea. Then slowly, so slowly that we will not notice at first, the river will return

to its bed and leave behind the thick black mud in which we will plant.

Other girls and women walk by me, water jars atop their heads like hair piled high, on their first of many trips to the river for water. Though one or two glance at me, they do not speak.

Instead of following them, I cross the street to a small path and disappear among the canebrake and the long sharp leaves of the papyri that tower above me. The birds send warning calls from the tops of the papyri. I would think they would know me by now.

Eventually I come to a stream, one of the branches of the Great Hapi where the river is not as wide or deep. The others are afraid to come here for water. Because of the snakes. They say I come here because I think I am better than anybody else and don't want to be around them. (*"Who cares if you can speak Khemetian? If you were a real Habiru, you would not speak the language of people who hate us."*) I tried to explain that it is quiet here and that I like the music of the silence and the music of the birds. They did not believe me. Perhaps because I was not telling the truth.

I look carefully for any snakes or crocodiles that might be hiding in the thick bulrushes. Then, looking around once more to be sure no one is watching, I take off my dress and face the sun. It seems to be reaching for me through the papyri as its warmth pours over my new-swelling breasts and the wispy hair that says I am becoming a woman.

This is the real reason I come here for water. I have never told anyone. It is my secret. Mine and the sun's. I



raise my arms high over my head and move them outward in a circle as if I am holding the sun, but it does not burn me because I love it and it loves me. I close my eyes and tongues of warmth cover my body. I think I could stand here like this for the rest of my life.

However, sooner than I would like, I get nervous that someone will see me. I know they can't, but that does not matter. I force my eyes open and slip my dress on. Then I fill the jar, put it on my head, and start for home.

When I reach the kitchen, I pour the water into a larger jug. I will carry water from the river many times today until the big jug is filled. Now, however, I take the bread, cucumbers, and dried fish from the baskets where they are kept, slice them, and put them on a reed plate. Then, filling a bowl with water, I go up the stairs to the roof, where Abba is kneeling and facing the sun.

Each morning, when he hears me go out to get water Abba gets up. He likes to begin the day praising and thanking Ya. It looks as if he is praying to the sun, but the Habiru are not like Khemetians, who say the sun is a god named Amon-Re. Abba says the sun is a light in the sky that Ya made.

I put Abba's breakfast down. His eyes are closed and his lips move rapidly, but I cannot hear any words. I squat nearby and wait.

Before long Abba opens his eyes, turns, and smiles at me. "Good morning, Almah."

"Good morning, Abba."

I hand him his breakfast. He sits down opposite me