

GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

Institutionen för språk och litteraturer

Arabiska

*A Magic Carpet Trip to the Children's Books of the  
Middle East*

-Discovering the voice of Arabic children's books of today

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Kandidatuppsats

VT 2011

Handledare:

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## **Abstract**

In spite of the great literary ancient past of the Middle East, the Arabic children's book of today is still in its infant stages of development, facing many challenges. This essay initially touches on some of these challenges in order to set a framework in the mind of the reader, which will facilitate the appreciation of the very existence of the books that then will be examined. Seven children's books written by Arab authors and illustrated by Arab artists will be analyzed in order to find the voice of the children's books of the Middle East today. My essay will explore the themes that are discussed in the books, how gender roles are displayed, whether there is a religious message, and if society's attitude towards childhood can be traced in the books. In my search for the voice of Arabic children's books, I will answer this guiding question: What are these themes' impact on, and implications for, a child's sense of discovery?

## **Abstract på svenska**

Trots mellanösterns stora litterära förflutna är den arabiska barnboken av idag fortfarande på barnstadiet av sin utveckling och står inför många utmaningar. Denna uppsats rör inledningsvis vid några av dessa utmaningar för att lägga en grund hos läsaren som kommer att medföra uppskattning för blotta existensen av de böcker som sedan kommer att undersökas. Sju barnböcker skrivna av arabiska författare och illustrerade av arabiska konstnärer kommer att analyseras för att finna barnböckernas röst i mellanöstern idag. Uppsatsen kommer att utforska de olika teman som diskuteras i böckerna, hur könsroller gestaltas, om det finns ett religiöst budskap och huruvida samhällets inställning till barndom kan spåras i böckerna. I mitt sökande efter den arabiska barnbokens röst kommer jag att besvara huvudfrågan: Hur påverkar dessa teman och vilka följder får de för barnets upptäckarlust?

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## System of Transliteration

Consonants:

ء	'	ض	ḍ
ب	b	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ظ	ẓ
ث	th	ع	'
ج	j, or -g (Egyptian dialect)	غ	ğ
ح	ḥ	ف	f
خ	kh	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	dh	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	sh	و	w
ص	ṣ	ي	y

Short vowels: َ - a, ِ - i, ُ - u

Long vowels: َ - ā, ِ - ī, ُ - ū

The article “al-“ is not assimilated for “sun-letters”.

“Tā marbūṭa” is written as “-a” in pausa form and as “-at” in “iḍāfa”.

Names are kept according to the source’s own spelling in quotes.

## Introduction

Having spent many years in various Middle Eastern countries and having observed the lack of reading and the want of interesting books – especially for children; this situation was literally brought home to me when I had a child of my own in 2001.

My little son's bookshelf, full of colorful and interesting books in Swedish and English, quickly became a cause of wonder and longing among all those who visited our home, first in Lebanon and later in Egypt. One after another, wistful parents would exclaim, "*If only there were books like these in Arabic!*"

In Lebanon, and especially in Egypt, I discovered that the only children's books available were foreign imports in English or French, and these were located in a few shops in a very few affluent neighborhoods. Nevermo (2009:34) quotes Amira Aboulmagd in saying that Egypt is "*a less than child book-friendly society*", which is attributed to the challenges publishers face in a market that mainly caters to school book libraries – their only predictable source of income, since the population in general has an averse attitude towards books written in wooden Arabic. In fact, Nevermo (2009:36) goes so far as to say that, "*children learn Arabic in such a way that they end up hating the language, in addition to books written in Arabic*".\*

It is not strange then that I only found children's books in affluent neighborhoods, especially when considering Nevermo's (2009:35) assessment of Egypt and its offering of books:

*A land with traditionally high illiteracy, poorly developed libraries and a limited access to books in general for the majority of the population.*

Other than foreign imports, the only children's book material that I found was Muslim religious propaganda or Christian Sunday school material at heavily subsidized prices. According to Alqudsi (1992:157), "*Moralizing and emphasizing social mores and values is a major characterizing theme of Arabic children's literature.*"

Since the glories of a literary ancient past in the Middle East can still be glimpsed through the tales of "Arabian Nights" and the fame of the library in Alexandria of old, I am curious to find out what is written for children of today by Arab authors and illustrated by Arab artists.

Having never found a non-religious or non-historical Arabic children's book for sale in the Middle East during my many years there - in spite of my old habit of combing book shops, book fairs, and second hand shops for any trace; it is with great interest I will now approach the selection of books that I have found here in Sweden, half a world away, in order to satiate my curiosity.

\*This, and all subsequent translations from Swedish, Norwegian and Arabic to English, is my own, unless otherwise noted.

In her dissertation on Arabic children's books published from 1912-1986, Alqudsi (1992:ix) finds that:

*Many current issues of life in the Middle East are completely omitted from books for children. Egypt's economic dilemma, poverty, pollution, and relations with other countries of the world are topics discussed in every house in Egypt. Yet none of these topics seems to appear in children's books.*

I want to find out what Arabic children's books of today have to say.

## Background

Why is it important to find out what children in the Middle East are reading – if, in fact, they are? Before we set off on our journey, we need to establish why there is a need to read. Assuming that the average reader of this essay was put to bed at night with a bedtime story as a child, frequented libraries both at school and in private, and has a mental list of all-time favorite books; that question may seem redundant since reading is such a natural part of this reader's everyday life. Therefore, it is important to remind ourselves of why we read, and in particular, why it is so imperative that children read.

Many authors have compiled lists of the virtues of reading, among them Wolf (1997:201). Several points stand out:

- *Reading develops imagination and creativity*
- *It satisfies curiosity*
- *It facilitates conversations in which a child can express thoughts and feelings*
- *It gives insight into the manifoldness of culture*
- *It enables a child to experience new worlds*
- *It offers understanding of the child's world and its own self*
- *It provides knowledge of children's, women's, and men's lives during different times and in different countries*
- *It grants perspective on daily life*
- *It offers answers to life's great questions*

Chambers (1983:6-7) mentions the previous points, and adds that reading,

*allows us to experience all kinds of human possibilities, from murder to childbirth, without suffering the consequences of undergoing the experiences in real life; is a game-playing activity in which we "try out" various possible solutions to life-problems and see how they might be worked out before having to tackle them in reality.*

Chambers also says that it, "*helps a child to learn to spell and to use the mother tongue with more facility*" which is an important point that we will return to later on.

Reading then, equips a child with necessary tools that will enable him or her not only to do well academically, but will instill an appreciation and understanding of the workings of life around it and in far-off times and places, thus playing a pivotal role in the child's life. In fact, learning to read could be considered a rite of passage such as none other, providing a passport into the realities and mysteries of life and humankind, and one would wish that this privilege was accessible to all children everywhere.

## Description of Circumstances

Now that we have established how important reading is and how influential children's books are in general, let us take a closer look at the situation of Arabic children's books in particular.

An Arabic children's book faces several challenges before it reaches the hands of a fortunate child and hopefully catches its interest.

### *Cost*

From an economic aspect, the book needs to be printed at an affordable price, but still be made of quality paper that can withstand handling, and be illustrated with colors that attract the child's attention.

Right here, we immediately encounter our first obstacle. Not only does the average person in a country like Egypt or Syria earn an abysmally low salary that does not cover basic living expenses, much less allow for the cost of a full color, good quality book on a regular basis. But according to Batran (2008:155) Middle Eastern children's book authors are often forced to publish books out of their own pocket. That challenge, along with a host of other, almost insurmountable, obstacles is part of the reason why the Arabic children's book is still such a rarity and why, when it is found, it is often not up to par with the quality one expects to find in a children's book produced in the Western world.

### *Media*

Another challenge facing the Arabic children's book is that of its insidious rival, the television set. Sunbaked mud huts in Iraqi villages, bare brick shantytowns of Cairo, Bedouin dwellings of Lebanon along with luxurious mansions of the obscenely wealthy of the Gulf - all carry the same crown; that of the ubiquitous satellite dish. The book must contain a story that can compete with the mesmerizing influence that satellite television exerts on children and their families of the Middle East.

As Chambers (1983:6) says:

*It is not a matter of class or money, as is sometimes suggested /---/ there are better-off neighborhoods where the prevailing attitude to literature is so philistine and ignorant that both children and adults are virtually illiterate.*

A bit earlier he says:

*We know now that the best and most lasting success in making literary readers comes when the home is right-minded about the worth of books and reading, too. We have, in fact, at last come to recognize and act on the understanding that any child who comes to school at five years old without certain kinds of literary experience is a deprived child in whose growth there are deficiencies already difficult to make good.*

## Language

With that sobering thought in mind, let us move on to the challenge of language. Since the few books that are aimed at children are written in Modern Standard Arabic instead of the colloquial dialect, it is important that the illustrations enhance the text and help the child to decipher what would otherwise be foreign vocabulary.

The fact is that hardly any Arab children read books in their mother tongue, unless they are fortunate enough to find one in their colloquial language. In other words, they are actually approaching a foreign language when they open up a children's book in Arabic.

Versteegh (2001:115) says:

*The distance between the written standard and normal everyday speech is very large. If in such a community the average level of education is low, access to the written language remains severely restricted.*

He is referring to the concept of *diglossia* in which adult Arabic speakers with more or less ease move up and down a continuum of speech, of which classical Arabic and colloquial Arabic are the two extremes. (Versteegh 2001:190)

Children who are not yet in school have a very small grasp, if any at all, of the classical language. In fact, Henning (1990:2:23) quotes a Cairene study in 1989 in which preschool children only understood ten out of one hundred words in their preschool text books. The study resulted in the Egyptian Ministry of Culture recommending children's book authors to use 2300 words from children's daily language that have been given an honorary official status. Henning understandably calls for would-be children's books authors to acquire a completely new approach to language.

Chambers (1983:18) also makes a heartfelt appeal to value words and language:

*Words are powerful, forming and motivating our behavior. In this sense, language is magic. When we come to deal with our imaginings, our thoughts, emotions, past and present experiences, in an attempt to sort them out, the power of language is indispensable. Until we have forged these experiences into words we are not sure what we think, feel, know.*



Language then, is the key to unlocking the world of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that reside within the child, thus enabling it to relate to life and the world around it.

### *Adaptation*

Along with speaking the child's language, a book needs to speak on the level of the child, or at least *with* the child – not *at* the child.

Edström (1980:185-186) says that, “*the one who writes for children must have a kind of flexibility that enables the text to connect with the child's level and to the adult world.*”

Earlier, she says:

*There is a tendency to see adaptation as a restricting, simplifying instrument. But consideration of the readers does not need to solely mean an endeavor to limit the choice of words, cut down on length of sentences, thinning out the style. This business of writing for children can also mean to respond to a stimulating challenge. Among the best authors adaptation evidently functions as an asset, as a call to new, creative solutions.*

Henning (1990:2:22) says that children's books in Arabic are written in a style that is not adapted to children: “*the adult author often has not succeeded in finding the wellspring of childishness.*”

The challenge is to write in such a way that the child can relate to and that broadens its horizons, even conveying a message, without leaving the child feeling preached at.

It is of crucial importance that the Arabic children's books succeeds in communicating its message to its target audience; the child, where the child's approach to the world, and to life, remains intact.

### **Purpose**

Beyond the pragmatic components that make up a children's book is a deeper dimension that I would like to explore – that is, the purpose of the story.

Eisner (1996:50) describes how a storyteller binds the reader's interest to the story by what he describes as “*reader-control*”:

*The key to reader-control is relevance to his interest and understanding. There are a few fundamental themes (of which there are hundreds of permutations) which can be called universal. These include stories that satisfy curiosity about little known areas of life; stories that provide a view of human behavior under various conditions; stories that depict fantasies; stories that surprise; and stories that amuse.*

Eisner is instructing the would-be author and illustrator on how to present a story so that it catches the reader's interest with universal themes. His purpose with those universal themes is to find a common ground with the reader, a place where the reader can explore human behavior or

fantasies while perhaps being both surprised and amused. Is that the purpose of stories directed at children of the Middle East?

Abboushi's comparative study of Swedish versus Palestinian children's books discusses the Palestinian society's view of desirable and undesirable behavior of children. He makes it clear that the aim of the Palestinian children's books he analyses is to sternly steer the child in the desired direction towards the ideal of a "super-child" (Abboushi 2000:2:51). Abboushi goes on to say (2000:2:52-53):

*The Palestinian society expects the child to be well-behaved, obedient, and quiet. If the child does not conform to society's expectations he will be punished and beaten.*

Abboushi then goes on to examine, among others, a story about a boy called Dakdouk. He discovers that (2000:2:54):

*What happens to Dakdouk also sheds light on familial and social discrimination. Dakdouk naturally stands for the unproductive, "unimportant" child, but also any citizen whose role in society is not tangible and thus not duly appreciated: the philosopher, the writer, the artist.*

Abboushi's findings are jarring - the very antithesis of the purpose that Eisner encourages authors and illustrators to strive for; that of facilitating a literary arena for exploration, creativity, and entertainment. Yet, one is reminded that Abboushi has specifically targeted the concept of mischief in the books he has examined, and the hope still lingers that the findings would not remain the same after a more general analysis of Middle Eastern children's books involving varied concepts.

We find an echo of Abboushi's "super-child" when Henning (1990:2:22) discusses the origin and purpose of Jordanian children's books:

*When one in the 1930s deemed it necessary to have supplementary reading books in the schools the task was assigned to trusted school teachers. Very often the result was excellent texts about virtuous characters that behaved nobly, written in a highfaluting language. But they were not children's books in our sense of the term! And they were least of all directed towards preschool children, those whose desire to read needs to be stimulated and whose reading habits need to be founded. Thus it has continued since then. /---/*

*An awakening of sorts took place in 1979, decreed as the Year of the Children by the UN. Since then the production of books directed towards children has increased heavily, but **regrettably without either form or content changing character.**\**

Just like Abboushi, Henning draws attention to the prevalent traditional approach to children's upbringing that is found in the culture and also in Arabic children's books (1990:2:24):

*Arab children's upbringing is traditionally founded on obedience and threats. There, one does not have the concept of discussing and reasoning with the children, something that we find creates independent children. The adults rule over the children's world, the children need to adjust as fast as possible to the existing adult world. The children become dependent; their sense of discovery is stalled or suffocated.*

\*My own emphasis added.

Henning anchors this approach to childhood and upbringing firmly in the arena of religion (1990:2:23): “*Children’s upbringing is something that quite clearly falls within the bounds of Islam.*”

Out of fairness, it is important to note that Middle Eastern Christians would also consider children’s upbringing to fall within the bounds of their faith and would use a similar approach.

Thus, we understand from previous research on Jordanian and Palestinian children’s books that the purpose of the story presented to a child is one of either moral or religious instruction intended to mold the child into conformity and quiet obedience, shunning the concepts of exploration and discovery.

I want to find out what modern Arabic childhood literature speaks about today. I want to examine if these seven books that I have chosen from varied countries encourage the child to explore childhood and enjoy that fleeting time of learning through play and discovery, or whether these books are used as a tool to impose society’s rules on the child and thus turn the child into an adult before time.

## Method

I will purposely avoid books about classical folktales, history, and overtly religious propaganda, focusing instead on original writing and original illustration.

I have chosen seven children’s books from the foreign language section of the main library in Gothenburg. The reason that I chose these seven books is that they were the only ones that met the criteria I was looking for. Each book is written by an Arab author and illustrated by an Arab artist from various Middle Eastern countries. All other books I found were either a few folktales or history books, and the majority was a collection of Swedish children’s books that had been translated into Arabic.

These are the books that I will examine (with my own translation of the titles):

Rizqallah, A., ”الفنان والألوان”, 2006

(The Artist and the Colors)

Soft cover

24x26cm



21 pages

First edition

The book was illustrated in Egypt, but printed in Beirut, Lebanon by Dār al-Naḥḍa al-‘Arabiyya.

The main character of this simple story is inspired by the colors he sees around him and paints pictures using those colors. It is aimed at children age 5 and up.

The Coptic author/ illustrator was born in Assiut, Upper Egypt but studied graphic art in Cairo. He has worked as an author and illustrator for a publisher of children’s books in Cairo and has also written and illustrated for children’s programs on Egyptian National Television.

He lived in Paris from 1971-80 where he exhibited his artwork in many European cities and was published in several art magazines. He taught art at Strasbourg University and has also directed the Egyptian Cultural Center in Paris since he returned to his homeland.\*

al-‘Ashmāwi, A., “تَفَضَّلْ مَعِي”, 2004 (Come with Me)

Hardcover

24.5x22cm

22 pages

First edition

Published by Dār al-Shurūq , Naṣr City, Cairo, Egypt.



Ḥassan packs a picnic basket and sits down under a tree in the jungle. He discovers that there are benefits to being an all-eater after meeting both herbivores and carnivores. From 4 years old and up.

I have not been able to find any information about the author or the illustrator. On the other hand, the publishing house has an Arabic website with all its children’s books that might be of interest and can be found at: [www.kids.shorouk.com](http://www.kids.shorouk.com)

\*Further information can be found on his website: [www.adlirizkallah.com](http://www.adlirizkallah.com)

Thābit, M., “يا فراشة طيري طيري”, 2001 (Fly, Fly Butterfly)

Hardcover

21x22.5cm

24 pages

Published by a Catholic publisher; Elias Modern Publishing House, Cairo, Egypt.



On February 21, 2011, their website: [www.eliaspublishing.com](http://www.eliaspublishing.com) had this to say about the book:

*Fly, Fly Butterfly is the story of an absent-minded boy who is so preoccupied with wanting to know about the world, that he even forgets whether he is on his way to or coming back from school.*

*This smart, curious and funny little character should whet children's appetite for knowledge and encourage them to read books, while reassuring them that even intelligent and/or special kids have difficulties too. The story is written with humor and in a simple language that is easy and entertaining to read.*

The book is aimed at 6 to 12 year old children.

It is the winner of the Suzanne Mubarak Children's Books Award.

No information is offered on the edition, author or illustrator.

Faqīh, M., “علاءٌ يَحْتَفِلُ بِعَرَسِ الْأَشْجَارِ”, 2001

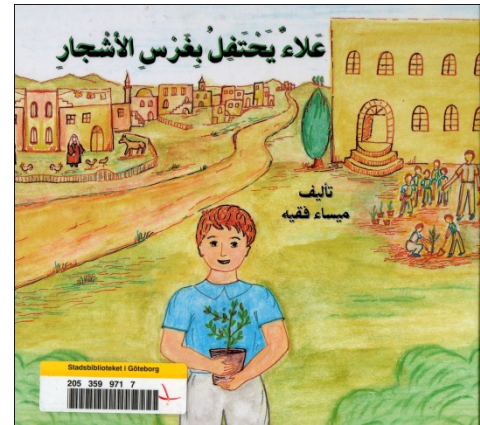
(‘Alā’ Celebrates the Tree Planting Day)

Hard cover

22.5x24.3cm

23 pages

Published by Dār al-Huda, Kfar Qar’a, Palestine.



‘Alā’ participates in the commonly celebrated Tree Planting Day by planting a tree at home. From age 5 and up.

No information is found on the edition, publisher, author, or illustrator, but the book belongs to the Arab Teachers Preparatory Institute, called Pearl House.

al-Qusūs, W.T., “صندوق جدتي... حكايات”, 2004

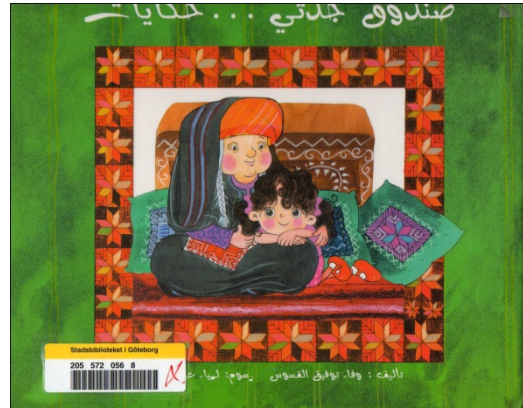
(My Grandmother's Chest... Stories)

Hard cover

23x27.6cm

39 pages

First edition



Published by Dār al-Hada'iq, Beirut, Lebanon.

A little girl, Zāin, visits her grandmother and finds an old chest with saved objects, among them a piece of fabric with traditional Bedouin embroidery. The grandmother tells a story about what each color in the pattern symbolizes. From age 4 and up.



No information is provided on the illustrator, but there is a letter from the author on the back cover of the book. Interestingly, the grandmother in the story is based on the author's own grandmother, Ummu Z'al – a testimony to their close and nurturing bond. Ummu Z'al modeled her “*beautiful and noble heritage*” with such love that the author grew up with a deep appreciation for everything that grandmothers make by hand.

While preparing for her master's degree in puppetry during her studies in America, the idea for the story was born. The author was asked to travel and present her beautiful culture through the creative medium of theater – an image in direct contrast to the prevailing Western notion of what is believed to be the typical Arab woman, “*that she is covered in a black abā'a, running behind the man without an identity or personality*”.

The author decided to use the Jordanian and Palestinian folk costume in her performance in order to represent her rich culture. This led to the idea of basing the story on her grandmother, and further to turn her idea into a children's book with the hope that it would inspire those who work in the field of child education to teach children about their roots in order to preserve their identity and their cultural heritage.



al-Qusūs, W.T., “تَلَج... تَلَج”, 2006 (Snow... Snow)

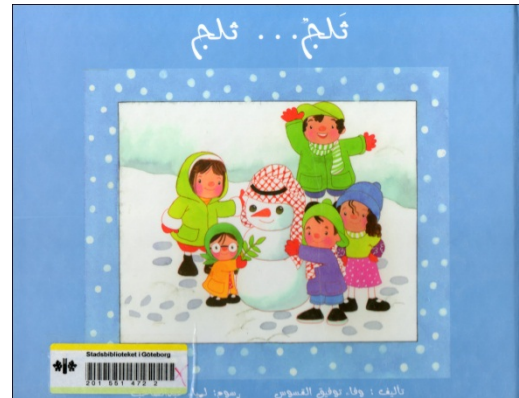
Hard cover

23x27.7cm

31 pages

First edition

Published by Dār al-Hada'iq, Beirut, Lebanon.



All the relatives visit grandma and grandpa for an afternoon. Grandma cooks delicious food and suddenly it begins to snow so that none of the guests are able to leave. From age 6 and up. No information is offered on the author or illustrator (although they are the same as in the previous book).

Barrāj, S.M., “لَمْ أَكُنْ أَقْصِدُ...”, 2008 (I Didn't Mean to...)

Soft cover

29.8x29.8cm

17 pages

Second edition

Published by Dār al-Naḥḍa al-‘Arabiyya, Beirut, Lebanon.

This story is about a little girl whose escapades lead to the plumber, carpenter and painter being called in. From age 3 and up.



There is no information provided on the author and illustrator.

I will analyze themes that are discussed, how gender roles are displayed, examine whether there is a religious message embedded in the story, and how the stories reflect society's attitudes toward childhood.

Since the artist is also a storyteller, I will examine if the illustrations help to draw the characters, and if the setting is recognizable to a Middle Eastern child so that the child can relate to the book.

Ultimately, the question that will guide me is this:

What are these themes', and their illustrations', impact on, and implications for, a child's sense of discovery?

## Previous Research

Very little research has been done on the topic of Arabic children's literature, which is why I will be reading several books on child literature in general in order to help me to analyze the stories that I will examine. I will also read several articles on child literature, with special focus on the two articles that I have found that compare Arab child literature to Swedish child literature. I will then comment on the social values that influence the different approaches to children's books.

Sāmeḥ Abboushi has written a very interesting comparative study on the concept of mischief in some Swedish and Palestinian children's books, which is also the title of his essay in 2000. He helps to shed light on, "*the discordant social and educational values of each culture*".

He writes:

*Instead of a child-in-the man we meet a man-in-the child – another reflection of values in the society of present day Palestine. /---/*

*The child is not considered an independent person with particular characteristics but rather an ignorant and instinctive creature who should look up to adults and imitate their behavior. /---/*

*The child who enters the world of adults at an early age is the ideal. (Abboushi 2000:2:55)*

I want to find out if the same conclusion applies to the books that I will be reading for this essay.

## Literature Analysis

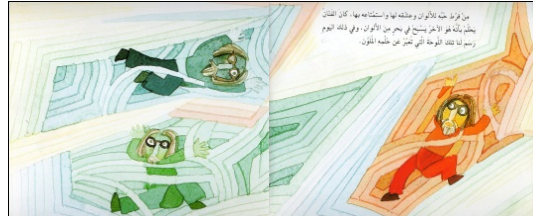
As we embark on our journey, we settle in comfortably and direct the magic carpet of our mind towards the distant, dusty shores of Egypt. It is only fitting that we should begin there, as it is the cradle of civilization - at least according to the Egyptians - and the very first known children's book was found there among the Pharaohs around 4500 years ago. (Henning 1990:2:22)



## The Artist and the Colors

In the “The Artist and the Colors” one is instantaneously struck by the unusual abstract and artistic watercolor design which fills the cover and pages with geometric patterns. It is refreshing to see something so obviously painted by hand instead of by computer design.

One wonders, and, after a hasty perusal of his website, all doubt is banished that the author and illustrator, Adli Rizqallah, has painted a self-portrait in the amusing protagonist with his heavily rimmed, round spectacles that one recognizes as an old intellectual.



The theme of the book is the colors with which it is illustrated. Indeed, it is a passionate ode to color and creativity. It is lovely to see that he literally paints outside the lines – especially as parents and teachers in the Middle East often punish children for doing that very thing! If the culture calls on children to conform, then this book is the exact contrast to that social expectation. It is most likely not a coincidence that this book is printed in Lebanon, rather than in a closed society like Syria or a traditional society like Egypt. It is also possible that some of the author’s own inspiration has been formed by his years spent in France, thus imbibing his art with both eastern and western influences. Rizqallah gives his artist free rein to relish and play with color and pattern in an almost psychedelic fashion, which results in a book that stimulates creativity.

Even though it is a book for children, it is thought provoking that the protagonist is an older man, instead of a little girl. It is commendable that the author shows that a man can play, love, and be passionate about art, instead of relegating art to the pastime of little girls. So often art is ditched for the traditional academic subjects and especially boys are discouraged from creative pursuits. The majority of education in the Middle East is based on memorization – “*the perfect enemy of imagination*” as Batran (2008:151) would have it - and independent thought is not encouraged. Instead, Rizqallah pulls the child along into a fantastical world, stirring up an appreciation for art, and igniting a spark of creativity – and for that, he deserves recognition.

At points, the author gets carried away in his attempt to describe his love for color and uses words that may well go over the head of young readers, even if they will catch the intent and feeling behind the words rather than their literal meaning. Words like; “عَشِيق-*passionately loved*” pg.7, “شَاعِرِيّ-*poetic*” pg.9, “تَمَوُّجَات-*undulations*” pg.13, “أَوْحَتْ-*imbued*” pg.15, “فَرَط-*excess*” pg.16, and “تَجْرِيدِيَّة-*abstract*” pg.20, might be more understandable to the adult reader, but that, conceivably, may be exactly the intent of the author who is trying to inspire young and old to follow him into the world of art.

The story ends abruptly with critics deeming his art “*abstract*” and one is left wondering if that has a positive or negative connotation. Interestingly, the back cover contains a set of instructions for the adult reading the story to the child. It says:

*“To the adults that like storybooks for the young, here is the following:*

- 1. First the adult reads the text, without reading it to the child.*
- 2. The story is to be told to the child in colloquial dialect, which is the language of speaking.*
- 3. It is the right of the narrator to add, and to abridge, as he wishes. Talking is an open relationship between the adult and the child. Depend on it together.*
- 4. It is possible to present the book in an experimental school for its viewing without going into details that muddle the free imagination of the child.*

It is clear that the purpose of this book is to inspire children to think and experiment outside of the box on a subject and in a way that is quite uncommon in the Middle East, and the author/illustrator must be applauded for his effort.

## Come with Me

In the following story, “Come with Me” by Amāni al-‘Ashmāwi, Ḥassan prepares a picnic basket and sits down in the jungle to eat. It is a nice touch that the child is portrayed as being able and independent enough to pack his own lunch, instead of having it made for him by his mother or other female family member.

A succession of oversized animals passes by, and Ḥassan offers them a bite of his food with traditional Middle Eastern hospitality. One by one, the animals inform him whether they are a carnivore or herbivore, which he accommodates by offering either a piece of meat, or, lettuce and a carrot.



The author starts off well enough with simple sentences and many verbs, obviously targeting the young reader. Small children love rhymes, repetitions, and patterns, and al-‘Ashmāwi successfully builds up a patterned story as Ḥassan goes through the same conversation with each animal in turn.

بَعْدَ قَلِيلٍ..مَرَّ أَسَدٌ..فَقَدَّمَ لَهُ حَسَنٌ خَسًا وَجَزْرًا, وَقَالَ: "تَفَضَّلْ مَعِي".

قَالَ الْأَسَدُ: "أَنَا حَيَوَانٌ لَاحِمٌ..أَكُلُ اللَّحْمَ فَقَطْ."

فَقَدَّمَ لَهُ لَحْمًا, وَأَكَلَ هُوَ خَسًا وَجَزْرًا.

أَكَلَ الْأَسَدُ مَعَ حَسَنِ، ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ: "شُكْرًا لَكَ" ..وَسَارَ فِي طَرِيقِهِ.

*After a little while...a lion passed by...so Hassan offered it lettuce and a carrot and said:*

*"Have a bite with me!"*

*The lion said: "I'm a meat-eating animal...I only eat meat.*

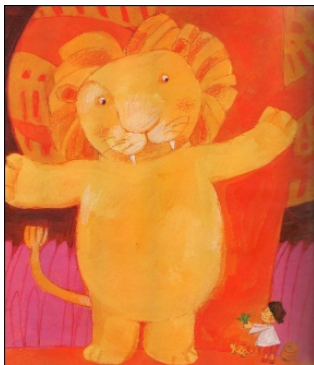
*Then he offered him meat and he ate the lettuce and carrot himself.*

*The lion ate with Hassan then said to him: "Thank you!" ...and went on his way.*

According to Edström (1972:46), *"The ancient epic tools of formulas, repetitions and type representations give clarity and stability to the narrative."*

We can attest to that the story line is both clear and stable and that the author has succeeded very well in the adaptation directed at young children. Yet the repetitions build up a momentum and as a result one anticipates a surprise to break the pattern as a crescendo on the final page. Instead, Hassan thanks God for making him a human being that can eat all kinds of food and the story ends there, reminiscent of the finger-wagging of childhood intended to make one eat up all one's food on the plate.

It is a disappointing anti-climax, as the educational purpose of the book in teaching about herbivores and carnivores would not have suffered from adding a funny twist to the story, such as a monkey pinching food out of Hassan's basket behind his back. In fact, it might encourage a child to read it over and over again, enabling the child and the adult reader to find a common source of amusement while learning the intended lesson. It is quite irking that the book ends merely with a nod to religion and a bow to good table manners. It had the potential to be so much more, if just a hint of playfulness or satisfied curiosity had been added to the mix.



We will not linger over the text, but instead examine the illustrations by Lajainā al-Āṣīl that explode across the pages in an exuberant riot of colors. al-Āṣīl transforms this simple plot into a joy to look at. She generously fills the pages with full color illustrations that cover the page, and sometimes double pages, with rich, warm, and inviting colors. The animals are oversized, perhaps to emphasize how young Hassan is or that they are normally daunting animals in real life. However, the friendly expressions on their faces quickly render them unthreatening and even attractive to the youngest reader.

The artist skillfully displays faces in close-up, which reveals her familiarity with the psychology of small children, and even though, and in fact because of, the childlike drawings that are reminiscent of a child's simple lines and profusion of color, one immediately recognizes the hallmarks of a professional illustrator with full command of her craft and intimate understanding

of her target viewers. Just the illustrations themselves would make this book an addition to any small child's bookshelf.

## Fly, Fly Butterfly

We now turn to the last book from Egypt in our collection. The title and the simplistic and childlike - almost cartoonish, illustration lead one to believe that the book is aimed at three year olds. Instead, it unexpectedly is targeting six to twelve year olds.

The author, Mona Thābit, quickly plunges us into a rambling narrative that is quite torturous at times. Sāmiḥ, the protagonist, is an eleven or twelve year old boy – he cannot remember which himself – that, in a play on words, is called Sarḥān , which means absentminded.

With no help of the partly computer-generated and one-dimensional illustrations by Moḥsin Rifʿat, a picture is meticulously painted of a precocious child whose thoughts flit like a proverbial butterfly from subject to subject while losing track of his responsibilities and the world around him. One wishes the author would have made up her mind about which subject to focus on, but instead we are lead into the dizzying labyrinth of Sarḥān 's musings on everything from the discovery of the law of gravity to his desire to build houses on the moon to get away from the crowds on earth.



In spite of the needless attention to unimportant details that pad out the pages, the characters remain flat and unrealistic. The author goes into minute detail to describe the flutter of butterfly wings and the beating of Sarḥān 's heart, but tells us nothing that deals with real feelings, thoughts or emotions.

Sarḥān 's pointless prattle is reminiscent of the voice of a cartoon, but does not make up a captivating read. Instead it is used, quite unsubtly, to build up a description of the ideal child – at least the ideal of Egyptian society.

This ideal child is supposed to be clever, funny, innocent, and sociable. The author goes to extreme lengths to convince us of how clever Sarḥān is by his talk of inventions, desire to read encyclopedias and write research, his wish to travel, and by the stilted portrayal of creative imagination. However, she must at least be credited for attempting to stir up interest for such things in the readers - no matter how dubious the result is.

Nevertheless, when she goes on to exhibit Sarḥān 's academic prowess one is left with a distinct sense of overkill as he, very predictably, is the best at every single subject, every single year, and always wins the top award, while being singled out and admired by his headmaster who, of

course, is amazed that absentminded Sarḥān has pulled it off once again. For all the Egyptian children that struggle with extremely long school days, daily excruciating memorization homework, expensive, mind-numbing, and futile night classes, and fateful exams that at an early age determine that child's professional future and social standing - besides the parents' welfare after retirement; this rendering of Sarḥān's successes might be more of a proverbial punch in the solar plexus than an inspiration to hit the books even harder. How refreshing it would have been to have a protagonist that children could relate to, instead of this, almost impossible, ideal!

Egyptians are famous for their good natured sense of humor and there are indeed flashes of funny moments in the book. However, one's smile quickly stiffens into cramped lips because of Sarḥān's general gaiety that is so utterly contrived. Yet this very gaiety, along with the childlike illustrations, and the portrayal of a twelve year old chasing and chatting with a butterfly, is designed to prove Sarḥān's innocence to the reader. Since the book has no overt religious message (possibly because the author is Christian but wants the book to appeal to all faiths), yet is intended as a tool of moral instruction, Sarḥān's sterling quality of character has to be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, which is why this pre-teen is being presented as a child just barely out of diapers and with similar activities to that of a recent toddler. It is on this point that the adaptation of the book fails so spectacularly. It is also on this point that it would be of great interest to poll Egyptian twelve year olds to find out their real interests, dreams, thoughts, and hobbies. Ewers (2009:154), says:

*A child-suitable genre must on one hand correspond in terms of its structure to the ability of children and young people to process it, and on the other be attractive to the target group in terms of its motifs and themes. /---/*

*The points of reference for the intended readers are their level of knowledge, their experience of life, their likings and interests, wishes and desires, fantasies, and dreams of the future.*

Had the author been guided by those points of reference, and had she succeeded in reaching her target readership, then we would have held an entirely different book in our hands.

Having trudged through Sarḥān's thorough account of the origin of his nickname – the only consistent feature that has steadfastly run through the book, the effect is all the more stunning when Sarḥān makes a confession towards the end of the book:

"الآن يا أصدقائي. أعترف لكم بشيء هام. أنا لستُ سرحان. في الحقيقة.. في أغلب الأحيان  
"أمتلئ" السرحان.. لأهرب من زملائي، أو جيراني، الذين لا يحبون الهوايات المفيدة.. فأنا لا أحب  
تضييع الوقت في لعب الكرة، ولا في الترترة.."

*"Now, my friends... I'll confess something important to you. I am not absentminded. Actually...most of the time, I pretend the absentmindedness...in order to escape from my classmates, or neighbors, that don't like constructive hobbies... I don't like to waste time on playing soccer or on (idle) prattle..."*

Notwithstanding the fact that his prattle fills every page of this book, here, the reader is intended to sympathize with Sarḥān /Sāmiḥ for his vexing predicament of having to disentangle himself from the, purportedly, frivolous pursuits of children his age. Once again, his example is held up as the standard for children to strive for – his one supposed flaw is actually another character trait in disguise that the reader is supposed to emulate. Unfortunately, Sarḥān ’s deception fails to be either endearing or generate any feelings of sympathy. Instead it alienates him completely from the Egyptian society that loves nothing more than spending time with family, friends, and neighbors while passionately supporting soccer events. If any Egyptian child finds a moment to spend away from his or her studies, those would be two of the activities he or she would pursue. After reading this book, the pleasure of social contact and sports has been tainted by the lingering aftertaste of Sarḥān ’s aspirations and his judgment of those whom have any other.

All the influential characters in the book are male, such as the old professor who lends books to the boy, the admiring headmaster, and Sarḥān himself. Sarḥān ’s worried mother appears briefly at the end of the book, having searched for him once again. She is illustrated in a housedress and a scarf that clearly identifies her role as a dutiful housewife, busily cooking while cleaning her home. Nothing else is said about her, and it is obvious from the story, that his and her world only intersect at the kitchen door step, but beyond that she seems to have no particular place of influence in his life and certainly not in the stimulation of his interests.

The only other female character in the book is the butterfly that Sarḥān chases. He asks her why she looks so sad when he catches her. She answers in a language that he does not understand, that if it was not for her gluttony she would have flown so fast that he would not have been able to catch her, and laments the fact that she is not slimmer. One would have wished for her femininity to be portrayed in any other way than bemoaning her weight issues, but that sums up the gender representation of this book.

It is with incredulity that one contemplates that this book is the winner of the Suzanne Mubarak Children’s Books Award. One cannot help but wonder what the competition must have been like for this book to have been chosen. If it were not for the fact that this book is advertised as one that will stimulate children to read and whet their appetites for knowledge, it would be easily put to the side and quickly forgotten. However, since it failed to reach that goal and to connect with its targeted age group, it stands out, but for the wrong reasons. One can only surmise that it was the intention that was rewarded rather than the actual achievement of the book.

## **‘Alā’ Celebrates the Tree Planting Day**

Our magic carpet now follows the gluttonous butterfly up and away towards the rolling green hills of Palestine to the north. Here we find a boy on his way home from school where they have

just celebrated the annual Tree Planting Day. In his hands he clasps a small potted tree and is eager to plant it and watch it grow at home.

One soon discovers that the long title actually does not match the simple plot of the story which is that 'Alā' rebels against his grandfather's wisdom. As a result, things go badly and his plant almost dies. When he obeys his grandfather's advice, the plant grows into a tree in the garden.

The author, Maisa' Faqīh, uses stilted sentences and the text is very clearly the words of an adult instructing a child; talking *at* the child, not *with* the child. One can easily envision the self-righteous tone as one belonging to the adult reader of the story, just as one effortlessly conjures up the vision of the listening child that, most likely, tunes out this lecture in book format.

What the story lacks in plot is, regrettably, not remedied by the illustrations. The poor color quality makes it difficult to ascertain which medium Amal Sham'a uses, but it seems to be a mixture of ink, water color, and colored markers. However, the problem does not lay in the tools that are used, but rather in the lack of technique and concepts of basic illustration. Even though the landscape is easily identified as a typical Palestinian rural milieu, the rendering of composition, perspective, and human anatomy places the illustration firmly on an amateur level. However, one is reminded that Palestine has no previously established tradition of children's book illustrators, and in the light of that fact, it is encouraging that this attempt has been made at all. Hopefully, when the Arabic children's book attains a more respectable status in society, the skills of would-be authors and illustrators will be nurtured and equipped through courses designed specifically to meet that need.

The most noticeable feature of this book is its portrayal of gender roles. The only female in the story is the mother who is unable to identify what kind of plant it is (pg.6):

"أهِيَ سَنْتَلَةٌ تُفَاحٍ ... أَمْ خَوْخٍ ... أَمْ لَيْمُونٍ؟"

*"Is it an apple plant... or peach... or lemon?"*

No matter how ignorant this mother may be, it is extremely unlikely that a Palestinian woman would be unable to identify a native plant by its leaves – especially when the plant bears the iconic and telltale leaves of the olive. Instead, one can only conclude that her sweetness and supposed ignorance are used as a prop to set the stage for the entrance of the grandfather in order for his wisdom and experience to shine all the brighter in comparison to the mother's dullness.



The story is a study in patriarchal dominance and interaction, which is none more evident than in the illustration on pages 8 and 9. Here we find the grandfather dressed in the traditional robes and headdress of rural Palestinians while seated in a large armchair. His age, and therefore, his respectable status in

society, is brought to our attention by the lines of wrinkles in his face, his reading glasses resting on the book in his lap, and the walking stick leaning against the armchair. He is seated next to a bookshelf that contains books and a clock that, perhaps, symbolize knowledge and time/age being on his side. His instructions on the proper care of the plant are underlined by his admonishing index finger.

On the left side of the illustration, we find 'Alā', whom is interestingly placed on a pillow on the floor, even though there is an empty armchair at his disposal. Here we find a cultural cue that signals the only appropriate place for a young child to sit - a level lower than the adult. It would be disrespectful of him to sit in the armchair as it would place him on the same level as his grandfather, suggesting equality with his elder, which is why he physically places himself a step below to show his reverence. Still, since the floor is considered inherently dirty in a traditional Arab culture, the pillow is stationed between 'Alā' and the floor as a precautionary safety measure against contamination.

The author then proceeds with the story that reveals how 'Alā's stubborn refusal to obey his grandfather has the plant shriveling up and at the point of death before long, and how the situation is turned around for the better when he obediently plants the olive plant in the garden.

Very predictably, the moral of the story is to listen to one's elders. This is, of course, good advice for any child, however, because of how the mother and grandfather are portrayed, it seems like a message of warning from a patriarchal society. The book fails to be either entertaining or inspiring, and I doubt it would be picked up again for a second read.

## My Grandmother's Chest... Stories

With a ruminating shrug, our imaginary carpet now lifts off of the floor from under the feet of 'Alā's grandfather and sets off on a giddy journey across the glorious mountain tops to a little Bedouin home nestled among the trees in a Lebanese village. Straight out of the patriarchal Palestinian household we have just visited, we now step into a matriarchal mountain abode and join Zaīn as she skips along to meet her grandmother. Right here we encounter the central theme



of the tale, that of the present meeting the past; the story of roots revisited and heritage being handed down to a new generation.

Zaīn is a happy and active little girl who loves to play and to explore. She and her grandmother have a very affectionate relationship and Zaīn loves to snuggle up on her grandmother's lap and listen to her stories. We soon discern that the story is actually recreating the age-old practice of oral storytelling, and the concept is a success, both because it has an air of authenticity and also because the illustrator, Lamiā' 'Abd al-Ṣāhib, enralls the reader with her lovely and intricate renderings of this creative legend.

Interestingly, the author, Wafā' Tawfiq al-Qusūs, sets the stage for the tale by having Zaīn kick a ball so hard that it flies through a window and lands somewhere inside the house. Even if it is a matriarchal story and all the subsequent characters are female, it is refreshing that this girl gets to play ball instead of deeming it a boy's prerogative. Perhaps this is also a sole peg for a boy to pin his interest on and thus be drawn in and stay to listen to the remainder of the ensuing story.

While searching for the ball, Zaīn finds her grandmother's old chest, and, unable to contain her curiosity, she opens it behind her grandmother's back. She pulls out the objects and finds a small piece of embroidered fabric and declares it too tiny to make a Barbie-outfit. After being gently admonished for treating valuable things so carelessly, the grandmother settles down to tell her the origin of the fabric which had once been part of her own mother's wedding gown that she embroidered at Zaīn's age.

As the grandmother interprets the symbolism of the typical Bedouin peasant embroidery, where every pattern has significance, she points out the pattern of the roses from the great grandmother's garden. The author uses a touch of humor to emphasize the contrast between the different generations in Zaīn's response (p.12):

"هَلْ يَعْني هَذَا أَنَّ عَلَيَّ أَنْ أُطَرِّزُ حَبَّاتِ البَنْدُورَةِ عَلَى ثَوْبِي لِأَنَّنا نَزْرَعُها فِي حَدِيقَتِنَا...  
أَوْ أَنْ أُطَرِّزُ رُجَاجَةَ كُنْشَاب... ((تينا)) هَذَا مُضْحِكٌ!!"

*"Does this mean that I should embroider tomatoes on my gown since we grow them in our garden... or that I should embroider a bottle of ketchup... Granny, that's funny!!"*

Employing a rhyming formula in order to delve into the tale, the grandmother asks Zaīn on p.14:

"كَانَ يَما كانَ فِي قَدِيمِ الزَّمانِ بَدنا نَحْكي وَلا نَنامُ؟"

*(Kān yāmā kān, fī qadīm iz-zamān, biddnā nihkī wilā n-nām?)*

*"Once upon a time...should we tell or go to sleep?"*

Naturally, Zaīn is eager to hear the tale, and the grandmother begins to spin the plot. She resorts to the ancient pattern of folktales which is elucidated by Edström (1980:25):

*Another type of composition in the children's book is that which links an episodic freedom with a collective grasp, a sort of frame story. The pattern can often be described according to the structure of home-departure-adventure-return. It is not infrequently connected to the folk tale.*

Thus the story is told of a poor little girl called Zeīna – the name undoubtedly chosen to help Zaīn identify with the character, who lives in a virtual paradise of flowers, birds, and green trees. The idyllic sense of wellbeing is quickly shattered when a drought causes nature to dry up and the little girl's mother becomes sick and lays on her deathbed. The distraught Zeīna ardently wishes to help her mother and her people, and then hears a voice imploring her to cry even harder. Unlike an animal fable, an endlessly popular theme in the Middle East - especially among the Syrians (Henning 1990:2:23), in this story nature itself speaks and appears with feminine facial features. The voice comes from the dry earth who pleads with Zeīna to cry harder to ease its dryness and give it comfort.



In an instant, we have suddenly been flung from a realistic tale into a mythical world where the poor, powerless girl suddenly has acquired the unusual power of being able to speak to nature. She sets off on an adventurous odyssey to plead with the sun to not dry out the earth, the clouds to bring rain, and the lazy wind to come out from hiding and begin to blow.

The girl's feeling of desperation and helplessness has impelled her to stretch the boundaries of reality until she has created a new existence where she can influence events – even the forces of nature. Wishful thinking has endowed her with superhuman powers and she succeeds in outsmarting the stubborn wind and challenges it to blow. When the angry wind finally dances and blows, the clouds release their drops and Zeīna climbs down to earth by holding on to the silver strings of rain.



In a crescendo of creativity and imagination, the flowers that have now returned send color in the shape of threads as a gift to reward Zeīna for what she has done for them. She collects the colored threads into a ball of yarn and decides to embroider her adventure on a traditional black Bedouin gown.

It is a lovely fantasy and here we have finally found a story that carries through well all the way to the end, with illustrations to match. It is interesting and unpredictable, to a certain extent, while keeping a positive tone and an even pace. Most of all, it encourages creativity and indulges the nature of childhood. Children will want to read this story again, and

may even acquire a new appreciation for Bedouin embroidery and, consequently, for minority traditions among their people, possibly using their own imagination to interpret the patterns they will encounter after having read this book.

## Snow... Snow

We are on our way again, and this time we burrow deep into our magic carpet as it soars through the chilly air toward the evergreen mountaintops of yet another village in Lebanon. A delicious aroma wafting above the pine trees entices us to follow its trail through the dark rain clouds and we soon arrive at a typical Lebanese stone house on one of the highest hilltops. The stone steps lead up to a home with arched windows that is framed by surrounding pines and a pair of grandparents are standing in front of the open door with arms stretched wide in a warm welcome.

Wafā' Tawfīq al-Qusūs is once again inviting us into a day in the life of a Lebanese family, and this time the book opens with a special dedication:

"إلى كُلِّ جَدٍّ وَجَدَّةٍ... يُلوّنون حياةَ أحفادِهِم بِالْحُبِّ وَالْفَرَحِ"

*"To every grandfather and grandmother... that color their grandchildren's life with love and joy"*

Serendipitously, we discover that Lamiā' 'Abd al-Ṣāhib has once again teamed up with the author to illustrate this happy narrative of a little boy telling us about the best day of his life. Coincidentally, his name is also 'Alā', but in this story his interactions with his grandparents are polar opposites to the ones of the Palestinian 'Alā we encountered earlier on.

In contrast to the cold and rainy weather, the hearth of the home is warm and welcoming and filled with family, fun, and laughter. 'Alā' and his family, including aunts, uncles and cousins, all arrive to eat dinner at the grandparents' house. The lively bunch sits down at the dinner table, in no particular order, to dip their hands into the huge tray of *Maṣāf*, the traditional Bedouin meal of meat, rice and yoghurt. This meal is served on a wide round tray, which means that the eaters are encircled around it, in no order of rank, and all share the meal out of the common dish, implying equality and mutual respect.

The elders gladly hold younger children on their laps, and everyone laughs indulgently as the small children spill food and wind up with sticky faces and fingers. Here, the children are not expected to be little adults, and in fact, the adults act like children at times, such as on pg.6 when 'Alā' 's father excitedly exclaims:

"تعالوا بسرعة، أنظروا الثلج يتساقط بغيرارة، يبدو أننا لن نتمكن من العودة إلى منازلنا هذا المساء."

*"Come quickly! Look at the snow that is falling copiously! It seems like we will not be able to return to our homes this evening."*

In a buzz of contagious excitement, everyone rushes to the windows to see for themselves. While the adults worry about how to get to work the next day, the children giggle as they try on odd-sized sleepwear and bounce on the spread out beds and mattresses. The ceaseless playing continues well into the night, interspersed with futile injunctions from the adults, pg.10:

"اهدأوا, الوقتُ مُتأخِّرٌ, ناموا."

كَانَتْ هَذِهِ الْجُمْلَةُ تَأْتِي بِشَكْلِ مُتَوَاصِلٍ مِنَ الْكِبَارِ, وَتَدُلُّ عَلَى انْزِعَاجِهِمْ مِنْ أَصْوَاتِ ضَحِكِنَا. مَعَ هَذَا, اسْتَمَررْنَا فِي الضَّحِكِ وَاللَّعْبِ حَتَّى غَلَبْنَا النُّعَاسُ فِي وَقْتٍ مُتَأَخَّرٍ جِدًّا.

*"Calm down, it's late, go to sleep!"*

*This was the sentence that kept coming in a continuous fashion from the adults, and proved their exasperation by the sounds of our laughter. Nevertheless, we continued to laugh and play until sleep overcame us at a very late hour.*

Remarkably, it is evident that the children are not afraid of the adults' signs of irritation. There is no threat hanging in the air, and the children's behavior is not held up as a bad example. Instead, it is part of the fun that on this evening anarchy reigns and the children's rambunctiousness is readily condoned. According to Abboushi (2000:2:55) this is an admirable approach that stands in stark contrast to the traditional Palestinian view of mischief:

*Imagination, spurred by spontaneous play and merriment has no limits, it encompasses mischief, boldness, unconditional friendships, generosity, kind-heartedness and bravery. /.../*

*As adults, we should understand and safeguard these aspects regardless of whatever annoyance they may cause us.*

With that spirit of understanding, we find a much more open and unrestrictive attitude toward childhood in this Lebanese book, while it proudly portrays the positive aspects of the traditional culture in terms of environment, dress, and food. In fact, even though one usually associates the sight of a *kaffiyeh*, the traditional checkered head-dress, with sand and sun; it is amusing to find it adorning a jolly snowman on the book cover. In a sense, it is a perfect example of how this book has managed to combine Middle Eastern and Western traditions in a seamless ensemble.

On the whole, the portrait of childhood in this book is encouraging the reader to relish every moment of it. There is not a television or computer to be found, homework is not mentioned at all, and instead the children play outside until their cheeks are rosy from the frosty air.

As for gender roles, gone are the intimidating and awe-inspiring nuances of the Palestinian grandfather, as well as the shallow and dowdy template mother-figures of the ignorant Palestinian mother and worried Egyptian mother in the previous stories. Instead, we are even given permission to laugh in a good-natured way when 'Alā's father steps outside to negotiate

the snow-covered stairs. The father, quite unceremoniously, slips on the stairs and all the children burst out laughing. Moments later, the grandfather goes out to help and meets an identical fate to the increased merriment of the watching children. The grandchildren urge the grandmother to help the men to get up, but she leaves them to fend for themselves while she goes off to the kitchen to get on with her own business.



It is a refreshing, and certainly unexpected, reversal of traditional Arab roles to find the grown men in need of a helping hand from an older woman, which she chooses to ignore, all to the background chorus of the children's laughter. In fact, in complete contrast to the Palestinian grandfather, this Lebanese grandfather has slipped on his bottom to the lowest level of them all, while the grandmother and children tower above him. And yet, the tone of the text and illustration is not disrespectful, but manages to poke gentle fun at the men without committing any cultural taboos.

Even though there are, what we might consider more Western attitudes toward family and gender interaction in this book; both the author and illustrator go out of their way to show that this is very much a traditional Lebanese household and setting. It is clear that to them, and to the joy of the reader, tradition and a tolerant childhood are not contradictions in terms.



The book ends with the grandfather roasting chestnuts as a treat for his grandchildren. He kneels, while surrounded by them, and it is evident that he loves to serve his family and that he does not find it beneath his dignity to stoop to their level. On this nurturing note, we take leave of this happy home where every family member is of equal value, regardless of age or gender.

## I Didn't Mean to...

It is not without a little trepidation that our flying carpet lands in the home of a naughty little girl in our final book, which is also from Lebanon. As the title implies, the girl is not intentionally bad, but her pranks and escapades spin the reader's mind as she runs riot - much to her mother's chagrin. This book undoubtedly tickles its readers, which is also evident by the fact that this book is the only one in our collection that has managed to achieve a second printing.

The author, Samar Maḥfūz Barrāj, along with the illustrator, Lina Marhaj, have produced a book that would easily be found on any Western bookshelf. Batran (2008:153) says that,

*It is often difficult, by looks or content, to differentiate between Lebanese children's books and books from other parts of the Western world.*

Here we have such a book. Its glossy pages in trendy and contemporary color schemes and illustrations could easily have been produced in any Western country, especially since there is nothing inside the book that identifies it as Lebanese. It employs an effective episodic story line that fits right in with Edström's (1980:23) description of that style of children's book:

*Many stories, not the least for smaller children, consist of a collection of episodes. It may be comical escapades and light everyday adventures, in which the individual situation is the essential thing. The conjoining factor in the account may be the character gallery, the environment, the narrative itself, a certain style, a psychological theme.*

In this book, "I Didn't Mean to...", we find a remarkable similarity to the popular American "Little Critters" library of children's books written and illustrated by Mercer Mayer. For example, in "Just a Rainy Day" (1991) from the "Little Sister" series, Mayer also tells the story of a little girl who unintentionally executes one hilarious prank after the other, to her cat's and little brother's fascination, and the mother's consternation. "I Didn't Mean to..." has an identical set of characters (daughter, mother, brother, and cat), performing identical roles, and it is no wonder that the book has won popularity. Its narrative style using repeated patterns of pranks with a surprised punch line to carry the story forward is a treat for any child to read. The only difference between this book and that of Mercer Mayer is that the Lebanese book has emphasized the lesson learned after every escapade, making its didactic purpose inescapable, pg.2-5:



عِنْدَمَا أَدَخَلْتُ الْمَعْجُونَ فِي الْمِصْفَاةِ،

لَمْ أَكُنْ أَقْصِدُ...

تَجَمَّعَتِ الْمِيَاهُ فِي الْمَغْسَلَةِ.

لَمْ تَعْرِفِ وَالِدَتِي مَاذَا

حَصَلَ لَكِن...

عِنْدَمَا جَاءَ السَّمَكْرِيُّ،

فَكَانَ الْمَغْسَلَةُ وَأَخْرَجَ الْمَعْجُونَ الْمُلَوَّنَ مِنْهَا

رَاصِقَتْنِي أُمِّي بِنَظْرَةٍ لَمْ أَفْهَمْهَا فِي حِينِهَا.

لَكِنِّهَا بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ شَرَحْتُ لِي مَا الْخَطَأُ الَّذِي قُمْتُ بِهِ فَفَهَّمْتُ.

*When I put the play-dough in the drain,*

*I didn't mean to...*

*The water filled up the sink.*

*My mother didn't know*

*What had happened, but...*

*When the plumber arrived,*

*He unscrewed the sink and took out the colored play-dough from it.*

*My mother glared at me with a look I didn't understand at the time.*

*But afterwards she explained to me what I had done wrong, and then I understood.*

The little girl goes on to lock her bedroom door and lose the key, which leads to the carpenter being called. Here, the illustrator invites the reader into a search for the key, and at various times throughout the story, we find the cat bringing along the missing key without



anyone else noticing. It is a clever way to capture the interest of a small child, and also creates a humorous bond between the reader and the illustrator that are both in on the secret of the whereabouts of the key, offering an added twist of suspense and surprise. Along with the missing key, the illustrator also adds other comical details, such as the frowning wedding picture of the mother that angrily observes her daughter drawing on the living room wall.

It is a funny book, in spite of the didactic overtones, and both the author and illustrator succeed in conveying the mischief in a playful style. The humor often lies in the contradiction between the words and assessments of the little girl as compared to what we actually see happening in the illustrations. A young reader can certainly recognize the comedy and the inappropriateness of the little girl's pranks, which is why the effort to literally spell out the didactic lesson is quite redundant. Perhaps this is where the book exposes its Middle Eastern background after all.



It is the end of the story that leaves one more than a little disturbed. After having inadvertently set fire to the kitchen, and finally gone to bed with a chewing gum in her mouth, the little girl wakes up with the piece of gum stuck in her hair. After her mother's unsuccessful attempt at removing

it, the girl is taken to the hairdresser to have her hair chopped off. She finds it very upsetting to lose her beautiful hair, and the book ends with her new-found resolution, pg.16:

"في المرّة المُقبِلة، قَبْلَ أَنْ أَقُومَ بِأَيِّ عَمَلٍ طَائِشٍ سَأَفَكِّرُ بِالْعَوَاقِبِ..."

"Next time, before I pull any pranks, I will think about the consequences..."

It is not the resolution in itself that raises questions, but rather her very short hair. Österlund (2008):

*The underlying question in the debate on the powerful girls of picture books is, of course; what is really meant by a strong girl. The description of girls is rendered difficult by the society that still, in spite of the reigning ideology of equality, subjugates girls. This does not mean that all characters that are described must be emancipated, but only as a note of attention to the trap in describing powerful girls since the activities of girls, decades after Pippi Longstocking, are surrounded by a list of limiting expectations.*

*Because of that, **girls that are made powerful often lose their femininity**\*. The energy of action is acquired by the loss of their girliness and they become transvestite heroes in reversed roles.*

It does not seem coincidental that the story ends with the hair episode that cuts the girl to the core and causes her to, ostensibly, repent and reform after losing her femininity. The burning question is why the little girl looks like a boy at the end of the book. Is the author implying that bad girls are like boys, but that good girls are feminine and attractive? That her behavior has caused her to be masculine and ugly? The practice of using these very words is a common tack that old-school cultures resort to in order to socialize girls in the Middle East. Chambers (1983:30) describes socialization thus:

*Socialization is the name we give to the way children learn to behave like the adults around them, taking for their own attitudes, values, customs, and mores of the social group to which they belong.*

\*My own emphasis added.



It seems unduly harsh that the little girl's unintentional mischief is punished by the removal of her most characteristic outward sign of femininity – something that evidently is integral to her own sense of identity and wellbeing.

Consequently, what seemed to have all the hallmarks of a modern and progressive approach to childhood suddenly reverberates with echoes of repressive theories of upbringing from the stricter schools of traditional thought in the Middle East. It leaves us with a lot of food for thought as we now steer the magic carpet of our mind back home to where our expedition began.

## **Empirical Study**

On the following page an empirical table has been compiled in order to examine the themes, as well as the illustrations, that are found in the seven books that have been presented in this essay. This table will facilitate the comparison and contrast between the books, and also lead to the unearthing of the innate message and voice of this collection of Arabic children's books.

	The Artist and the Colors	Come with Me	Fly, Fly Butterfly	'Alā' Celebrates Tree-planting Day	My Grandmother's Chest... Stories	Snow... Snow	I Didn't Mean to...
Suitable Title	5	5*	1	2	3	5	5
Successful Adaptation	3	5	1	2	5	5	5
Mentions God	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Strong Religious Message	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Equal Gender Roles	5	N	1	1	N	5	5
Female Gender Suppression	0	0	2	5	0	0	3
Directed towards Boys	N	N	4	3	1	N	2
Directed towards Girls	N	N	1	3	5	N	5
Positive towards Childhood	5	4	3	2	5	5	4
Moral Edification	N	3	5	5	2	N	5
Text that encourages creativity	5	1	3	1	4	3	2
Professional Illustration	5	5	3	0	5	5	5
Illustration that encourages creativity	5	5	1	0	5	5	5

0 – Not at all

1 – Seldom/Very poor

2 – At times/Poor

\*The title works in Arabic, but in English it should read "Have a Bite with me".

3 – Sometimes/Satisfactory

4 – Often/Good

5 – Very often/Very Good

N – Not applicable

## Table Analysis

### *Suitable Title*

The title is the first identifying feature of a children's book, or any other book for that matter. "*The Artist and the Colors*" is a very literal title that sums up the story but gives no further hints about its contents. "*Come with me*" is also literal, but does not translate well. In Arabic, the expression for inviting someone for a bite to eat, "تَفَضَّلْ مَعِي" could also mean an invitation to join someone, or to come along. However, since the plot of the story involves asking various animals to eat, the proper translation of the title in English would be "*Have a Bite with me*". Nevertheless, since the book is written in Arabic, for Arabic speaking children, it still gets full points for its title.

"*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" is a very poor title for the book, since it does not represent the actual plot. In fact, the said butterfly only appears at the end of the book, and has no vital role in the story line. The title mirrors the poor adaptation of the book since it deceptively portrays itself as being meant for a younger readership than is actually intended. The title will certainly not succeed in attracting the attention of the targeted six to twelve year old readers.

"*Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" is an unwieldy mouthful, even in Arabic, which might scare off a small child just beginning to read. Moreover, it does not actually represent the real plot and is thus a poor choice for a title.

"*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" is a satisfactory title, if not very creative, whereas "*Snow... Snow*" fits the book perfectly, and is quite intriguing for a book from the otherwise sunny Middle East. Yet, another captivating title is "*I Didn't Mean to...*" which successfully stirs up interest and curiosity, and furthermore sets the reader up for a humorous set of episodes that the protagonist never meant to instigate.

### *Successful Adaptation*

"*Come with me*" (2004), "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" (2004), "*Snow... Snow*" (2006), and "*I Didn't Mean to...*" (2008) are all excellent adaptations – a nice surprise after reading the generally dire predictions to the contrary from other authors that have written on the subject of Middle Eastern children's books, such as Abboushi (2000:2) and Henning (1990:2). One is reminded that those evaluations were written several years before the books that are mentioned here were printed, and it gives hope for the future releases of new Arabic children's books. Even if it has been a long time coming, one hopes that this progress in adaptation will continue forward unhampered.

“*The Artist and the Colors*” seems to be targeting both children and adults which makes the adaptation difficult to evaluate.

“*Alā’ Celebrates Tree Planting Day*” presents a poor adaptation and oversimplifies its blatantly obvious patriarchal message. As for “*Fly, Fly Butterfly*”, it manages to spectacularly fail at adapting its presentation of the protagonist to its target age-group.

### *Mentions God*

One only finds God mentioned in “*Come with me*” and “*Fly, Fly Butterfly*”, and then only in passing. The reference to God is used as a manner of speech, much in the same way as Americans might say: “*Gee whiz!*” instead of “*Jesus*” where the expression has been watered down to a point at which it has lost any religious significance.

### *Strong Religious Message*

Interestingly, none of the seven books have a strong religious message. A few of the authors are Christian and are most likely intentionally keeping a neutral tone in order for their books to gain general acceptance among the Muslim majority. However, it is also possible that the Main Library of Gothenburg, where I found the books, has intentionally selected books that are not religious in order to placate the general trend of the present day atheistic society of Sweden. If one was rifling through a similar library box in a large city in the Middle East it is very probable that the proportion of religious themes would have been significantly higher in the randomly selected books, and thus one cannot say that this data would be representative of books found in the Middle East.

### *Equal Gender Roles*

“*The Artist and the Colors*” portrays the artist as emotional, sensitive, passionate, and creative – qualities that are often designated to a female domain. Even if the protagonist is an older man he plays and explores much like a child. It is clear that the author/illustrator makes no distinction between young or old, male or female, but his sole aspiration is to draw everyone in to his world of art.

“*Snow... Snow*” is a pleasant surprise in its portrayal of a Lebanese Bedouin extended family that clearly values its individual culture and traditions while providing an arena where all ages and genders are embraced. This book shows that it is possible to combine tradition and tolerance – that one does not exclude the other, and as such it serves both as an example and an encouragement.

“*I Didn’t Mean to...*” presents a strong girl and a strong mother figure, acknowledging that such persons exist. It shows that a girl is able to do things that are often attributed to boys’ shenanigans, and in that sense the theme of gender roles is equal in this book. However, the issue of socialization and punishment/removal of femininity raises serious questions as to what

the book intends for a girl's gender role to really be. In spite of the modern and humorous approach leading up to the final episode, one is left wondering how equal the gender roles really are, and if this book is actually relegating girls into a certain set of contained behaviors after all.

"*Come with me*" does not have a gender theme that runs through the story. Nevertheless, it is a positive sign of equal gender roles and independence that the protagonist prepares and packs his own lunch instead of being served by female family members.

"*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" has a completely female cast of characters and remains neutral on gender specific tasks, which is why the question of equal gender roles does not apply.

In "*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" women are presented as concerned with cleaning, cooking, and weight issues. Intelligence, creativity, exploration, and achievement are presented as being male territory, and as a result one finds the book a very poor representation of gender equality.

"*Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" is yet another example of very poor representation of gender equality. Here, the mother figure's supposed ignorance is simply used as a prop to display the brilliance of the grandfather's wisdom. The story is rife with patriarchal symbolism and admonishment, and here one does not find tolerance included in all the tradition that is presented.

### *Female Gender Suppression*

In one sense, this question might have been answered in the previous category of equal gender roles. However, here I will be looking for signs of intentional suppression of the female gender.

In "*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" the female gender is portrayed as having no interests beyond household duties and looks. It is a narrow view of females, although not outright suppression, which is why it rates a two on the scale of 0-5.

"*I Didn't Mean to...*" rates a three on the scale. Most of the book presents girls and women as being strong, but especially because of the hair incident at the end of the book, where the girl is divested of her femininity, one must acknowledge that there sometimes is suppression of the female gender to be found in this book.

"*Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" does not only have an extremely patriarchal message, even warning, but also presents the ignorant mother in such a way as to clearly suppress the female gender.

### *Directed Towards Boys*

The majority of the seven books are directed at a general readership. Nevertheless, since "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" is such a matriarchal story and every character in the book is female one could easily consider it directed towards girls. Notwithstanding that fact, the author

never expressly states what gender the book is directed towards and might be hoping to catch boys' interest by introducing the story with a girl playing ball. So, while leaving the door open for boys to step in, the story still is very much a feminine world and centers around the theme of traditional embroidery which is very much a female activity in the Middle Eastern culture.

Likewise, "*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" does not expressly state which gender it is directed towards, and the protagonist is most likely supposed to be held up as a good example for both boys and girls. However, because of the pointed focus that is narrowed in on the male characters of the book and the dismissal of the female characters, it very much comes across as a book intended for boys.

### *Directed Towards Girls*

"*I Didn't Mean to...*" is all about girls; hence, one assumes that it is mainly directed at girls too. Even though "*I Didn't Mean to...*" will be enjoyed by any boy, as well as any girl, the underlying message about how girls ought not to behave is so overpowering that it seems intentionally written with girls in mind.

### *Positive Towards Childhood*

"*The Artist and the Colors*", "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*", and "*Snow... Snow*", all incidentally printed in Lebanon, relish childhood and childishness, and thus serve as a great inspiration. They give the reader permission to indulge in the joys that childhood holds, and do not seem threatened by childishness or intent on taming childish instincts into a certain social mold. Given the recent history of the Arab children's books, it is a great relief that books such as these three can be found.

"*Come with me*" and "*I Didn't Mean to...*" are also among the books that portray childhood in a lively way, with the exception of their finger-wagging moral lessons to finish off each story.

"*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" is, on one hand, positive towards childhood, in the sense that the protagonist is very childish. On the other hand, he is *too* childish, while simultaneously rejecting children's ordinary pursuits. However, the author is in fact trying to stimulate children's interest in the workings of the surrounding world, and for that she is given credit.

"*Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" does not come across as positive towards childhood. The book's main focus is to teach children how to be mature and responsible, discouraging exploration and insisting on obedience. Simply put, this book would have children be little adults.

### *Moral Edification*

"*The Artist and the Colors*" and "*Snow... Snow*" both stand out for not containing a moral instruction to legitimize their existence or to drill in a lesson. Instead, they are simply inviting the reader along to share the thrill of a special experience. In fact, the only didactic purpose that

can be detected is Adli Rizqallah's heartfelt attempt at infecting others with the contagious condition of his passion for art and color.

"*Come with me*" remains neutral until the very end where it seems to perfunctorily insert a moral lesson in an off-hand way, as if it would be unthinkable to present a book without an obvious instance of moral edification to validate its *raison d'être*.

"*Fly, Fly Butterfly*", "*'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*", and "*I Didn't Mean to...*" are all books that seem to be written solely to get their moral message across, even if the last book manages to do it in a comical way. At times, their moral message comes across quite brutally, and it is clear that employing the medium of the book is simply a socialization strategy used to present an illustrated lecture.

### *Text that encourages creativity*

"*The Artist and the Colors*", closely followed by "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*", goes to great lengths to encourage creativity.

"*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" does attempt to stimulate creativity and exploration.

"*Snow... Snow*" does not literally spell out its encouragement of creativity; however, that message breathes throughout the whole story, which is why it is still credited for its intent.

"*I Didn't Mean to...*" is presented creatively, but jumps at every opportunity to clamp down on the protagonist's creative, yet admittedly mischievous, behavior.

The text of "*Come with me*" is strikingly uninspiring and does not encourage creativity – in utter contradiction to the vivid illustrations.

"*'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" seems to sacrifice the concept of creativity on the awe-inspiring altar of absolute obedience, thus discouraging any excursions beyond the beaten track of dutiful docility. Here, compliance is prized above creativity.

### *Professional Illustration*

One happily finds that the majority of the seven books are professionally illustrated – a fact that does not mirror my general findings in the box at the Main Library of Gothenburg, nor Middle Eastern children's books in general. This can be explained by my avoidance of books with obviously historical, religious, and fable subjects – all typical and traditional themes. This led my selection to consist of mainly modern books with less common themes. Their modernity predisposed these books to be professionally illustrated.

"*Come with me*", "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*", "*Snow... Snow*", and "*I Didn't Mean to...*" are all excellent renderings of the texts that bring the storybooks to life and will appeal to

any child. In fact, in the case of “*Come with me*” the illustration is so delightfully executed that the book will be cherished for its artistic presentation, rather than for its text.

“*The Artist and the Colors*” contains unique and unusual illustrations that are not often found in children’s books. Nonetheless, they are definitely professionally executed by the hand of a true artist.

“*Fly, Fly Butterfly*” is illustrated by a graphic artist who relies heavily on computer-generated images along with disappointing color schemes and occasional ink line drawings. The illustrations are professional in the sense that they are produced by a person employed as an artist, but not with the standard that is implied by the word.

“*’Alā’ Celebrates Tree Planting Day*” is plainly illustrated by an amateur as is evidenced by the unprofessional display of composition, perspective, and human anatomy.

### *Illustration That Encourages Creativity*

The same five books that were professionally executed in the previous category also inspire creativity in the reader.

“*Fly, Fly Butterfly*” is disappointingly dull with flat, colorless, and unoriginal illustrations. Moreover, there are instances where the illustrations do not adequately display the focus of the text.

“*’Alā’ Celebrates Tree Planting Day*” does not inspire creativity in the reader in the sense that the professionally illustrated books do. Paradoxically, however, the very amateurishness of the illustrations may cause aspiring, but untrained, children’s books illustrators to think: “*If she can do it, then so can I!*” Thus, such people may attempt a project they would not have dared to otherwise. There is always room for more illustrators, as well as authors. One would just hope that adequate training will be provided to channel hibernating ideas and creativity in the right direction. After all, the arena of Arabic children’s books would do well with the addition of more players, ideas and creativity.



## Conclusion

When we set out on our journey to discover the voice of Arabic children's books of today we were guided on our quest by five angles that we wanted to explore:

1. Book themes
2. Portrayal of gender roles
3. Presence of a religious message
4. Society's attitude towards childhood
5. Impact on, and implications for, a child's sense of discovery

### *Book Themes*

On the question of book themes we find that three books are concerned with the theme of **obedience**; "*Come with me*", "*'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*", and "*I Didn't Mean to...*".

Two books; "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" and "*Snow... Snow*", both by the same author and illustrator, deal with the theme of **heritage and ethnicity**.

One book, "*Fly, Fly Butterfly*", encourages **education**, and only one book encourages **exploration**; "*The Artist and the Colors*".

Thus, we find that a majority of this selection of Arabic children's books focuses its theme on behavior and obedience. It is not a surprising finding based on previous research, but all the same one would have hoped for a different result given the modernity of the books and their mostly creative illustrations.

### *Portrayal of Gender Roles*

After a closer look at the selection, one realizes that three out of the seven books present women as undisciplined, ignorant, shallow, and even unfeminine. This grim perception is found in "*Fly, Fly Butterfly*", "*'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*", and "*I Didn't Mean to...*".

"*Fly, Fly Butterfly*" and "*'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*" attribute intelligence, creativity, exploration, achievement, and authority to males, leaving females cowering in their ungenerous shadow.

Only two books, "*My Grandmother's Chest... Stories*" and "*Snow... Snow*", both by the same author and illustrator (as previously mentioned), portray women as capable and genders as equal in value. Interestingly, these books hail from Lebanon – a country generally perceived as more Western or European than those of Egypt and Palestine.

### *Presence of Religious Message*

Remarkably, none of the books contain a religious message, and only two books mention God in passing. However, this result may not accurately reflect Arabic children's books in general, but may be due to the fact that the selected books were found at the Main Library of Gothenburg that may adhere to a secular policy, and also the fact that I purposely avoided overtly religious material.

### *Society's Attitude towards Childhood*

Five out of the seven books have a distinct didactic message – a clear indication of what the Middle Eastern society considers the very purpose of writing for children. Once again, it is "My Grandmother's Chest... Stories" and "Snow... Snow", that succeed in presenting a story, just for the thrill of the telling, without admonishment or moralization.

In stark contrast, "Fly, Fly Butterfly", "'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day", and "I Didn't Mean to...", and perhaps also "Come with me", seem to be written expressly in order to moralize.

The Palestinian story, "'Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day", is a perfect example of what Henning and Abboushi described as the traditional and moralizing overtones of Palestinian and Jordanian books in particular. The voice we find in this book is one of the society lecturing, and thus, socializing the child. As a result, the child's voice is suppressed, just as intended.

The Egyptian story, "Fly, Fly Butterfly", does not use a patriarchal threatening tone, such as the Palestinian story, but instead uses a more manipulative tool, that of shame, to wheedle children out of their preoccupation with their favorite pastimes, and press them toward the impossible ideal of Abboushi's "super-child". Here, we once again see that the ultimate goal is to mold a child into the model of a miniature adult. Henning was right, not much has changed in the tone of the Arab children's book of today.

It is only the three Lebanese books, "My Grandmother's Chest... Stories", "Snow... Snow", and "I Didn't Mean to..." that present a more realistic sample of the voice of children and childhood. Even if the last book is severe in its censure of its protagonist it still allows children to relish certain aspects of childhood.

### *Impact on, and implications for, a Child's Sense of Discovery*

"The Artist and the Colors" stands out in its passionate encouragement of exploration and discovery, making it unique among the collection of selected books.

"Fly, Fly Butterfly" attempts to stimulate a desire for exploration yet manages to alienate the very age group it targets its efforts on. Thus, it is credited for intention, but fails in achievement.

"My Grandmother's Chest... Stories" and "Snow... Snow" stimulate creativity both through text and illustration. These books encourage children to value their heritage and identity, and in the process the readers may discover more about themselves and the nuances of culture that their country or people group have to offer.

In spite of its glossy appeal and comical presentation, "*I Didn't Mean to...*", sadly manages to ultimately quench the spirit of an active and inventive little girl. Not to be outdone, "*Alā' Celebrates Tree Planting Day*", with its poor printing quality, pretentious text, and unprofessional illustration, holds the dubious distinction of not only quenching children's sense of discovery, but also women's aspirations to be more or do more than to merely serve as a shadow figure in the background of a man's brilliance.

### *Final Reflections*

If one tunes out the clamorous and chiding voices of overzealous adults that are trying to socialize children through the medium of Arabic children's books, one will detect a faint whisper rising above the racket. This whisper, that seeps through the seven books, belongs to Wafā' Tawfiq al-Qusūs. Here is an author that has tuned into the interests of children and has managed to create stories that give them what they want to hear without selling out on culture or tradition. In fact, out of all the six authors, she is the only one that has proven that tradition and tolerance can coexist in perfect harmony. She has succeeded in teaching values without the finger wagging. One hopes that many will follow in her footsteps and simply take a child by the hand and go out and play. After all, isn't that what every child longs for?

In addition to freedom to play, there is something else that the Arab child, as well as all children everywhere, longs to do. I believe that the reason "*I Didn't Mean to...*" is the only book in the selection to have been printed twice, is that it offers the reader both surprise and comedy, which invariably lead to laughter. Every child wants to laugh, and for someone to laugh with them. Middle Eastern adults indulge in extensive viewing of television series that deal with life, comedy, and adventure. It affords them an escape from the daily pressures of life, and relief from the demands that religion, politics, and social circumstances may place on them. Most of all, it allows them to laugh in spite of poverty, unemployment, war, and other crushing conditions.

Likewise, children need an arena that can deal with the issues of their lives while providing entertainment and perhaps even a temporary escape into a magical world. Notwithstanding the emotional benefits they would reap from the availability of books on such subjects, they would also reap tremendous educational benefits that would serve them throughout their lives. In the face of alarming reports of illiteracy in the Middle East, one would hope that these seven books are the first drops that announce the downpour of a torrent of children's literature to come. If those prospective authors could discern the voice of Middle Eastern children, one would imagine that these are the words they would hear: "*Leave the lectures and unleash the laughter!*"

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