

Springtime for Arabic Children's Books

The children's book segment is a very dynamic—perhaps even the most dynamic—segment of the contemporary Arab publishing industry. Publishers are now able to operate internationally through licensing and publishing partnerships, and whereas many are focused on purchasing foreign rights, others are eager to raise the standards of Arabic productions in terms of the quality of their content and illustrations. Mathilde Chevre, an expert in Arabic children's books, provides insight here into the most exciting Arabic children's books today. Following her article is a list of publishers who are taking the initiative to produce high-quality Arabic children's books and a sampling of some of these titles.



Mathilde Chevre

Mathilde Chevre – Contemporary books for Arab youth are like the heroes and heroines who come to life on their pages: inquisitive, impertinent and innovative, they reflect and question the societies that created them. Take Sima, for example, who asks her parents about the obsolete moral lessons and arduous language in the Arabic books that she must read, and the mismatch between these books and her daily realities as a wealthy Lebanese girl. Or Farhana, who liberates herself from the constrictive attire and “ornamental” role expected of Egyptian girls. Or a group of fictional children in Beirut who ponder the sea's colour and are drawn into an adventure of epic proportions. In another book, a young boy from Cairo envies his mother's tenderness with a chicken.

Books for children in Arabic have seen the dawning of a new spring that began some fifteen years ago in Lebanon and Egypt and has since spread across the Arab World from the Gulf to North Africa.

The revival is structural first and foremost. The past ten years have seen the emergence of dozens of youth-oriented publishing houses in the Arab World. These have sometimes been simply new imprints of pre-existing operations launched by a family member or spouse. In

other cases, a new publishing house was born from a shared feeling among a circle of intellectuals that there was a crucial lack of innovation in children's books. Individually or in small groups, people started to write, draw and publish a new kind of books.

Of course the big players remain in the market. Major Lebanese and Egyptian publishers who have been in business for decades and produce titles for the very lucrative educational market expanded their own activities and now offer impressive catalogues of encyclopaedias, atlases and picture books, many produced in collaboration with Western publishers. In Beirut this is true of Dâr al-Ilm lil Malayîn, the Librairie du Liban and the Librairie Antoine, which is affiliated with Hachette, and in Cairo it is true of Nahdat Misr.

But it seems to me that the real revival lies somewhere else, within publishing houses that are driven by an authentic will to promote and regenerate Arab creativity for Arab children. The spirit of the revival is contained within the books themselves, which go to great lengths linguistically to use a language that does not discourage the child from reading. Visually speaking, the illustrations are anchored in an Arab aesthetic tradition that is echoed in the child's real world.

The appearance of Arabic culture in Western children's books remains limited to characters from The Arabian Nights. The high-quality new products of Arab creativity discussed here, which reflect the contemporary realities of a lively culture, are seldom translated.

The true crux of the revival lies perhaps in the agency these books give to the figure of the child. Now the narrator of his or her own story, the child becomes a non-idealised hero. He or she may make mistakes, but this is how life is. Or the hero may want to change his mother, or to feel and to dream; he may be different or disabled; he may be claiming his right to love or even to be a poet! The child, previously considered a weak or even evil-minded creature that books—and adults—have to educate and discipline becomes a person, and a reader at that!

Publishers to watch:

Dar Asala, Lebanon (established in 1999)
Dar al-Adab lil-Sighar, Lebanon (2003)
Samir Editeur, Lebanon (2000)
Dar al-Shorouq Kids, Egypt (1989)

Dar al-Hadaeq, Lebanon (1989)
Tala Establishment, Lebanon (2003)
Turning Point, Lebanon (2000)
Tamyras, Lebanon (2003)
Dar Onboz, Lebanon (2005)
Yuki Press, Lebanon (2004)
Dar al-Khayyat al-Saghir, Lebanon (2008)
Dar Bardi, Egypt (1992)
Dar Balsam, Egypt (2005)
Bright Fingers, Syria (2005)
Dar Salwa, Jordan (revived around 2000)
Yanbow al Kitab, Morocco (2004)
Kalimat, UAE (2008)

Titles mentioned in the article:

“I Didn't Do It on Purpose” (Lam akun aqsud, Dar Asala, Beirut, 2004)
“A New Mother” (Um jadida, Dar al-Adab lil-Sighar, Beirut, 2005)
“My Brother Is Different” (Akhi yakhtalif, Tala, Beirut, 2004)
“She and They and They” (Hiya, huma, hunna, Dar al-Khayyat al-Saghir, Beirut, 2010)
“The Red Butterfly” (al-Farasha al-Hamra, Dar al-Hadaeq, Beirut, 2003)
“In My City there Is War” (Fi madinati harb, Dar Asala, Beirut, 2005)
“The Black Stain” (Al-nuqta al-suda, Dar al-Shorouq, Cairo, 2010)
“If I Were a Bird” (Lau kunt tairan, Kalimat, UAE, 2010)
“My Story” (Qisati, Dar al-Adab lil-Sighar, Beirut, 2010)
“Farhana and the Evening Dress” (Farhana wa malabis al-sahra, Dar Elias, Cairo, 2000)
“What Is the Sea's Color?” (Shu lun al-bahr, Dar Onboz, Beirut, 2007)
“The Chick Is Not a Dog!” (Al-katkut laysa kalban!, Dar al-Shorouq, Cairo, 2003)

Mathilde Chevre is writing her doctoral thesis, “Children's Books in Arab Countries since the '70s : A Project and Reflection of the Societies”, at IREMAM (Aix-en-Provence, France), and was awarded a scholarship from the French institute IFPO in Damascus, Syria. She is also a publisher, author and illustrator of children's books in France and Egypt.



Trendsetters, Children's Books and Reading Promotion

Amina Hachimi Alaoui,
Owner, Yanbow al Kitab,
Morocco

What kinds of promotional activities are you running with your products? Community events, deals with education authorities, interaction with teachers, etc.

We have a publishing house called Yanbow al Kitab and an art book shop where we organise cultural activities like reading promotion.

We are waging a grassroots campaign that offers underprivileged children access to books. "One child = One book" is an initiative to distribute books to orphanages, associations and public schools throughout Morocco. Some of the funds we generate from exhibitions are used for "One child = One book".

We also organise workshops called "Tell me about..." that bring together live elements of Moroccan heritage.

What is the aim of these promotional activities?

We are aiming to promote Moroccan heritage through reading by bringing books to the most remote places in our country.

Furthermore, we have made it a point to produce high-quality books that stimulate our children's curiosity. Being aware of tight family budgets in our country, we have been developing partnerships with the private sector, and their financial contributions help us.

What is the most positive impact that you are seeing (for your company and for reading)?

Up to this point, we have distributed 85,000 books to children and public schools through our different initiatives. We have cooperated with various organisations to produce material for literacy campaigns, we published books that supported a charity for children, we went on tour



Amina Hachimi

with a theatrical play through different schools in Morocco—and so many other things! The libraries that we supply with our books have started using them for reading activities.

This summer we are planning to produce an audio book about Casablanca to make people aware of the issue of sound pollution in the city.

Carol Sakoian,
Scholastic International

What kinds of promotional activities are you running with your products? Community events, deals with education authorities, interaction with teachers, etc.

Promoting My Arabic Library: What is unique about MAL is that it is a classroom set with teacher guides. We have also made huge efforts to ensure the quality of the Arabic (some publishers don't spend enough time and effort on editing). We focus on the school and trade market and display at international fairs, national fairs, Islamic School Associations and NGO events.

Who are your partners for these activities?

We partner with local booksellers who serve the school and trade market, and we partner with multilateral organisations such as UNESCO (which displays the MAL set at conferences) and a wide range of other companies and organisations who are interested in encouraging and supporting reading in the



Carol Sakoian

Arab World. We also provide discounts to nonprofits.

What is the aim of these promotional activities?

We promote reading for our business and because it is part of Scholastic's mission. Even before our "Read every day. Lead a better life." campaign we were telling children in the MAL programs that they had the "right to read".

What is the most positive impact that you are seeing (for your company and for reading)?

We see that when children are given high-quality books and materials, they can be drawn to reading for enjoyment. In schools where children are given time and books, independent reading does increase.

to subsidise the prices of the books we publish.

Tamer Said, Kalimat,
UAE

What kinds of promotional activities are you running with your products? Community events, deals with education authorities, interaction with teachers, etc.

Kalimat was established in 2007 as the first publishing house in the UAE dedicated to publishing high-quality children's books in Arabic. In the short span of time from 2007 to 2011, the Kalimat publications list has grown from 5 to 75 titles.



Tamer Said

Through the frequent events organised by Kalimat, it has played an important role in initiatives to improve reading habits and promote its publications. The events and promotional activities that Kalimat organises include book launches and readings at book fairs and bookstores, competitions, workshops with children and parents.

Who are your partners for these activities?

We partner with bookshops, libraries, the Ministry of Education, schools and other cultural authorities, shopping malls and private companies.

What is the aim of these promotional activities?

The aim of our promotional activities is to reach out to our consumers and to tighten our relationship with them. We want to create awareness for our products and to promote our books. We are also promoting the idea of reading as a habit among children.

What is the most positive impact that you are seeing (for your company and for reading)?

We are glad to see that awareness of Kalimat and of our products has risen. We also see more traffic on our website and are very happy that our sales have increased. With our different activities, we have established a strong relationship with our consumers that helps us to better understand their needs.

