



The World through Picture Books: Lebanon

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Abstract:

This paper aims to provide a glimpse of children's authors, illustrators and editors in Lebanon.

These authors are drawn from the list of books compiled in cooperation with public libraries following a poll conducted in order to ascertain the titles most frequently consulted by public library users.

10 titles by various authors will be presented, as well as an analysis of the contemporary publishing landscape in Lebanon.

The publication of children's literature in Beirut is still flourishing, and over the course of the past decade multiple titles have garnered prizes in children's book fairs in Europe, Asia and Arab countries.

The role of the public library, especially of the children's section, is very important in the promotion of books, authors and illustrators. Public libraries put much effort towards this end, however, libraries are not always able to succeed in this role due to lack of collections, financing of services or human resources.

7 Publishing Houses
8 Illustrators
9 Authors
10 Books
In Public Libraries
In
LEBANON

The Project and Method:

One of our section's favorite projects is the creation of a list of picture books from around the whole world which will later serve to aid librarians in promoting the most popular books in their original languages in the libraries participating in the Sister Libraries project and ultimately around the world.

Since the announcement made at the Congress in Göteborg, we have proceeded in launching a project during the annual meeting of Lebanese librarians. A letter explaining the project was sent to all the librarians in the public reading network in Lebanon by the intermediary of the Department of Public Reading of the Ministry of Culture.

The libraries received a form to fill out in which we asked them merely to list the titles of the books most read or most borrowed by their readers, a list specifying authors and editors.

Unfortunately, only thirty-some libraries out of the hundred surveyed responded, and some mentioned school books which we did not retain. Our study is thus limited to a small sample.

We selected the titles that were shared or recurred most frequently among all the participating libraries, but we must note that the majority of the public libraries do not possess circulation software so the results come from manually-reported statistics. The fact that the collections of libraries are not very rich and are not often updated explains the dominance of titles published during the last ten years—books given by the Ministry of Culture to all libraries and reading centers.

Children's Literature in Lebanon

Beirut's prominent role in the diffusion of books throughout the Middle East is well known. Today, Beirut is the leading city on the path to reviving the children's book, the book which will play an essential role in constituting modern Lebanon.

Before the year 2000, children's publishing was reserved for editors and publishing houses which initially specialized in the publication of school textbooks, the children's book being assigned one role alone: Education. Moralizing or educational books constituted the majority of production during the 50's and 60's.

The specialized publishing house Dar Al Fata Al Arabi, the first of its kind, stood out in the publishing landscape of the time. Since its founding in 1970, it imposed criteria to ensure quality, and put forward authors and painters committed to improving the children's book in both content and form, but above all to revolutionizing the role and the message of the children's book.



Books by Dar Al Fata Al Arabi

Several children's publishers have emerged in Beirut since the year 2000. Their work has provided a wealth of children's literature written in Arabic. The revival of the children's book has gained much attention, even though its production does not exceed 15% of overall literary production according to the most recent statistics.

We have selected several reasons for this revival:

- At the dawn of the 21st century, Lebanon entered into a period of stability and peace, the State and its public and private institutions strove for development and a return to normal life in the country.
- Lebanon witnessed the birth of the Ministry of Culture and the impact of local associations with the main results:
 - The creation of municipal and public libraries in Beirut and in various regions, as well as the adoption of a politics of encouragement and reading and, above all, the support of the publication of books destined for children.
 - The creation of National Reading Week.
 - The creation of the travelling festival of children's literature.
 - The birth of critical revues (Hamzet Wasl and subsequently 'at saghira).
- The presence of a developed editorial sector and a market for books in Lebanon despite the years of war.
- The opening of a specialized bookstore and of specialized sections in several bookstores.
- Their presence in international book fairs such as Bologna and Montreuil.

There are many signs of the revival, highlighted as follows:

- The birth of new themes such as: ecology, psychology, cultural heritage, children's rights, etc...
- The evolution of children's roles in books—their personalities grow stronger, they are no longer mere characters in the story but are instead heroes, they are sometimes narrator, and female heroines also begin to appear.
- Authors break the boundaries forbidding the use of the Lebanese Arabic dialect, this language becomes one of their tools of expression.
- The esthetic quality of the book improves and we see the appearance of beautiful books, the image becomes an element which constitutes the book, rather than a mere decorative element. There is a diversification of formats.

This development comes, on one hand, in order to respond to the emerging needs of new readers, and on the other hand, in order to compete with the Western (English, French, German) books present in the market. Production does not cease to improve in quality, and more and more books are published. The leaders of this revival in children's publishing are the authors, illustrators and editors, and in the definitive list that we have compiled can be found the major names in children's literature today in LEBANON:

The Books Selected

We here provide a brief glimpse of the works mentioned in the list.



The Moon and the Bee Eater الفمّر والوروار, Nadine TOUMA, Ill. Lana Khayyat, Dar Onboz 2005

This is a book for the youngest of children, a hardcover book which presents a very simple story with rhythm and in rhyme, telling of the day of two friends, the moon and the bee eater, who eat and play together. Nadine Touma's text is very gentle, like her singing voice on the CD accompanying the book. Lana Khayyat's illustrations are full of light, with colors which burst through the first pages and dim down in the final pages, as the book deals with a representation of the day, from sunrise to sunset, the hour when the baby goes to sleep. A mobile to be suspended above the bed is offered by the publisher as a small gift to the reader.

The Moon and the [guepier] الفمّر والوروار the first book by Dar Onboz, was a beautiful inaugural work for this publisher in the book market in Lebanon, its fold-out form gives a large and panoramic view, likely symbolizing the spirit of the young publishing house.

DAR Onboz, founded in 2005, is led by its creative passion for books and by its love of the Arabic language. In order to spread the love of Arabic to children both young and old Dar Onboz creates illustrated books which arouse children’s interest in art, stimulate their creativity and reinforce their imagination. Its books are often accompanied by games, toys and CDs with music. Today Dar Onboz is recognized and celebrated internationally for their avant-garde editorial exploration.

Nadine Touma considers herself a “bridge between authors and illustrators, a bridge between the book and the reader, a bridge between parents and their children, a bridge between Lebanon and the world”.

Certain books by the Onboz publishing house have been recognized by the Bologna Children’s Book Fair: « *The Time Flies* رطا الوقت », « *TABATI* طابتي ».



Qisat al kûsa The Story of the Zucchini, Samâh Idrîs, Ill. Yasmine Taan, Dâr al-Adâb lil-Sighâr, 2003

Oussama’s mother, a young woman from Beirut who does not like zucchini with yogurt, tricks her son into eating some zucchini. The story scandalized traditionally-minded individuals, for the book presents a “lying” mother, which does not constitute a positive image of the mother and does not offer a good model to the child.



Qisat al kûsa The Story of the Zucchini, Samâh Idrîs, Ill. Yasmine Taan, Dâr al-Adâb lil-Sighâr, 2003

The illustrations are the work of Yasmine Taan, who uses various materials and techniques in her plates. Taan believes that illustrations should be works of art. Photomontage, drawing and painting are mixed together to create an original image, full of surprises. The illustrator creates a parallel story and thus makes for a playful and entertaining reading of this picture book to young people and contributes to the book's success.

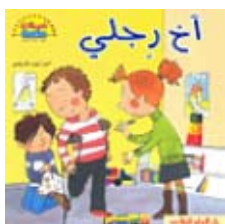
The Story of the Zucchini (قصة الكوسة) represents a bifurcation in the production of children's literature.

The author innovates in dealing with the subject and stands up to censure, using words in the Lebanese dialect. Samâh Idrîs, linguist and author and director of the children's branch of Al-Âdâb, decides, when confronted with the decline of reading in the Arabic language, to write for children and adolescents using a modern, spoken Arabic, simplified and attractive. Thanks to the use of several words "of foreign or dialectal origin" the young audience appreciates the books. The series "story of a child of Beirut" was classified as a best-seller in the Arabic Book Fair in Beirut in 2003-2004, despite the resistance of conservatives.



The Shelter, Samâh Idrîs, Dâr al-Adâb lil-Sighâr, 2004

The Shelter, a novel for adolescents, takes place in the midst of a civil war, and the hero tells of his life and the lives of the other people living in his apartment building. He also speaks of the organization of communal life, the distribution of responsibilities, dramas and teenage love. Samâh Idrîs' heroes and heroines reflect, question, and seek to understand their environment; they critique the social rules and Lebanese values, without being superheroes.



"Ow my leg" Akh rijli Amal Ayyoub Frayji, Ill. Michèle Standjofski, Dar El Ilm Lilmalayin, 2006

This is the story of Jad, nicknamed "sport boy" by his friends. Always the winner, he jumps, swims, runs, does rock-climbing, etc. One day, however, he breaks his leg, resulting in a hard time for the young boy. This story dramatizes the difficulties of children's everyday lives. The rhythm is interesting and the humor of Amal Ayyoub Frayji's text is reinforced by illustrations which integrate drawings, photographs and collage.

The author is among the first generation of writers specializing in children's literature. Professor of pedagogy, she taught Arabic, creating innovative programs and methods for learning the language. She can be credited with producing 27 picture books for children aged 3-9 in which she deals with the problems of children's everyday lives: at school, on the bus, at the doctor's office, in the hospital etc... "classic" topics presented in a simple language, and all of this in a universe created by the illustrations of Michèle Standjofski, illustrator and specialist in comics. Her illustrations are stylized, carried out in warm, joyful tones, in a classic style very much in harmony with the text.

The book is among the "Literary" production dedicated to "educational" materials by one of the oldest presses, Dar Al-Ilm lilmalayin, known for more than 50 years for its publication of well-known works translated from abroad; the press buys the rights of foreign books and produces them in Arabic. The press has received prizes from IBBY for its series "Nadi el Qura'a" for the quality of its translation.



العلاق العلاق *The Giant Giant*, Rania Saghir, Ill. Samar Ziadeh, Turning Point, 2005

This picture book depicts a child who observes his body and finds that his hands are large, his legs are large, his eyes are large, etc. but then states that he is tiny in his mother's arms. The picture book is geared towards the youngest of children, the sentences are short, descriptive, following the rhythm of the plot and the discovery of each limb. Samar Ziadeh's illustrations are humorous and cover the whole page. The artist uses a fold-out page to depict the "giant" in his entirety. The colors are bright and reflect the freshness of childhood.

In addition to the Giant Giant, an attractive and amusing character, Rania Saghir and Samar Ziadeh have made other experiments with a series of picture books which have been very pleasing to young readers. The book is published with Turning Point, a press dedicated to publishing high-quality books about Lebanon and the Middle East and guides, as well as children's books. The press produces innovative and original works thanks to its talented Lebanese writers, artists and designers.

In her work, Rania Saghir deals with subjects in a simple and accessible manner. Her books have been met with much success in libraries and bookstores, and she won the Annual Award for Children's Literature from the Assabil Association for her book *Sisi Malakit*. In 2010 this book appeared among the Anna Lindh Foundation's list of children's books from the Arab world.

In 2007, along with Lana Khayyat, she founded the specialized press Al Kayyat al Saghir which published "Halabees, Haltabees," a picture book about un-requited love. This was met with great success, and was quickly transformed into an Ipad application. At present,

the author has been translated into multiple languages, such as Italian, German and Korean.



الشركة العالمية للكتاب
WORLD BOOK PUBLISHING

In the Shadow of the Citadel, Nazek Saba Yared, Dar al Kitab Al Alami., 2nd ed. 2009

Fi zil al -kalaa tells the story of Nada, a teenager who lost her parents during the war and who lives with her aunt in Byblos. When she falls ill, a cousin living in the United States offers to bring Nada to America in order to assure her a better future. The young girl refuses to leave her aunt and her country. This novel, which deals with real-life problems in Lebanese society such as the consequences of the war, economic difficulties and immigration, takes place in a setting rich with ancient history. Thus, the reader also encounters various sites and visits the remains of Byblos. Cultural heritage is very close to the author's heart, and she invites young readers to discover Lebanon in her various books.

Dar al kitab al Alami is and has been one of the main presses in Lebanon for the past 70 years, specializing in school textbooks and known for producing the best of literature. The press calls upon well-known writers to produce children's literature, from whence Fi zil al – kalaa, the fruit of a collaboration with the author Nazek Saba Yared.



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Ghassan, My Mother is the Author أمي هي المؤلفة Nabihah Mihaydali, Ill. Loujaina Al Assil photos, 2010

Ghassan's mother just came up with an idea for a story. She writes it down on paper and talks with her son about the creation of books. One day in the school library, the teacher shows the students of Ghassan's class a book and Ghassan jumps for joy while showing the book to his mother.

The picture book recounts the birth of the book, from its beginnings through the creation of the picture book. The different steps of producing a picture book are presented in a two-page file which folds out at the end of the book. The characters are realistic, sympathetic, charming, and Loujaina al Assil's illustrations combining a variety of techniques and in colors which are both soft and bright contribute to the success of this picture book.

The simple dialogue between mother and son contributes to the development of the story. Nabiha Mheidly writes in a language which is classic but uses a vocabulary accessible to children. She can be credited with publishing more than 40 books with Dar al Hadaek, the press which she has run since 1987. Her works always contain a message of love, tolerance and peace.

Dar al Hadaek specializes in publishing children's books and is one of the largest presses in Lebanon. Since 1987 the press has published two magazines for children aged 5-8, and works with talented painters and writers. Among them are Hassan Abd allah and Zakaria Tamer, who also write for children and adolescents. Its mission is to develop in children a taste for art and a love of language and of reading.

The press has won multiple awards in Arab book fairs such as the Sharjah Book Fair, the Beirut International Exhibition, the Anna Lindh award for the best book for people with special needs ("عمر وبلال" *Amir and Bilal*) in 2010, and the Assabil award for the book "لائحة مشتريات ياسر" *Yasser's Shopping List*."



نورا وقصتها, *Nora and Her Story*, Fatim Charaf al-Din, ill. Hiba Farran, Assala, 2007

Nora is a kind ant who lives and works with her family and friends, busy gathering food from morning to night. When her reserves start to run low and she feels neglected, she decides to set out to live by herself. Later, she will come to save her family from a great danger and understand her place among her own kind. This is a beautiful fable about solidarity and each individual's place in society.

Hiba Farran's illustrations are remarkable, produced in a style filled with fantasy, abounding with details like those in miniature artworks, very decorative and with warm colors which play with scale in order to depict the world through the eyes of an ant. The text is like a canvas full of Kufic style calligraphy.

Fatim Charaf al-Din uses classic Arabic with a vocabulary very close to the spoken vocabulary of children. She also juggles in rhymes to give a musical touch to the book.

One of the rare specialized Arabic writers, Fatim Charaf al-Din writes and translates children's picture books and her desire is to produce high-quality works in Arabic. She can be credited with more than 60 books.

She has published in Lebanon since 2004 with Assala press. After the war in 2006, "*fi madinati harb*" marked her career as an author, and was the subject of controversy at the Frankfurt Book Fair. In 2008 the book "*My Country's at War*" was released with Mijad in

Belgium. Many of Fatima's books have been translated into European languages such as Dutch, Danish, Spanish, French and German. In addition to her recognition in Europe, she has had several books featured on IBBY's (the International Board on Books for Young People) Honor List, and has received the Anna Lindh award for her "*Book of Laughs and Tears* كتاب الضحك والبكاء." Today, she is among the preferred authors of Dar Kalimat in the United Arab Emirates.

The picture book is published with Assala, the most prolific of the specialized presses. Founded in 1998, its focus is on publishing Arabic works appropriate to each age group in order to help children learn to love the Arabic language. It is sensitive to social problems and questions such as accepting others and the environment.



ياسمينة والسمكة *Yasmina and the Fish, Caroline Hamadeh, Assala, 2008*

"*Yasmina and the Fish*," a book written and illustrated by Caroline Hamadeh and designed for learning the letters of the alphabet was published by Assala, along with "*lam Akoun aqsid*" written by Samar Mahfuz Baraj and illustrated by Léna Merhej in 2007.



لم اكن اقصد *I Didn't Mean To, Samar Mahfuz Braj, Léna Merhej Assala 2007 Photos*

In this picture book a young girl tells her story, or rather, tells of the foolish things she does, which follow one after the other, each bringing consequences. Each time, she learns her lesson. Or does she? A little glimmer in her eyes leads us to believe at the end of the book that she will continue her antics. The author, Samar Mahfuz Baraj, treats the sensitive situations in which parents and children often find themselves with humor and finesse. She also takes the opportunity to introduce the heroine and the reader to various professions.

The hand-written text is amusing and easy to read.

The book is exceptional in its format, in Léna's illustrations which are conceived of in plates and in comic strips, in the humor of its character, in its detail. All the elements of the book contribute to creating a dynamic which resembles that of a naughty little girl, and captivates readers young and old alike.

The large format gives more space for the depiction of the foolish mistakes a series of sequential images on the right-hand pages of the book, while the resolutions of the various problems are depicted on the left-hand side of the book. This choice assigns greater importance to the work of the little girl, and the reader is plunged into the nooks and corners of the plain but spacious house.

This picture book gathers together multiple characteristics of the revival of children's literature in Lebanon: the child has the right to make a mistake for he/she will learn and

grown from these experiences. The child is respected and given value, and the little girl is both narrator and heroine of the book.

The image of the mother is more realistic and modern. She is a mother who works and who educates her child with principles which respect the child's speech and rights, while still keeping her own authoritative parental tone.

This is a rare occurrence in children's literature in the Arab world.

The heroine pursues her chosen path and becomes increasingly malicious and audacious in the following books in the series.

Conclusion

In this difficult context, and despite the weakness of its size and of its collections, the public libraries in Lebanon are developing numerous activities for children, and aim to offer the best books produced to readers young and old. The collections in the libraries come, for the most part, from "donations"; they are trilingual, which presents the librarians with additional work. All of the libraries work in collaboration with schools in order to draw more and more students to the library, organizing events with Lebanese and foreign authors, exhibitions and themed activities.

However, we are still in a time in which we are faced with new technologies, and readers are fascinated by the magnificent evolution of technological devices. They demand products that the public library in Lebanon is incapable of offering, even when it is merely a question of digital materials.

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