



# — THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY BOOM IN ARABIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

On Contemporary Arabic Literary Production:  
a series of essays by Marcia Lynx Qualey  
exploring trends and themes in contemporary  
Arabic-language literary creation.

The Twentieth-century Boom in Arabic Children's Literature  
A series of articles by Marcia Lynx-Qualey (ArabLit) commissioned in the framework of the LEILA Research Project



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# About the author

**Marcia Lynx Qualey** is the founding editor of ArabLit, an online publication that has evolved over the years from a literary blog into a high-quality review, database, media platform and arts magazine featuring guest writers, rich media content, event calendars and comprehensive cross-referencing with other art forms and venues. She launched the ArabLit Quarterly as a print and e-magazine in 2018. In recognition of her 'strong personal dedication to creating cross-cultural understanding in the diverse world of Arabic literature', Qualey was awarded the Literary Translation Initiative Award at the 2017 London Book Fair. Based in Morocco, she holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Minnesota and is a freelance cultural journalist for a number of newspapers, journals and literary magazines. She co-hosts the Bulaq: The Arab World in Books podcast with Ursula Lindsey. Her published translations include *Ghady & Rawan* by Fatima Sharafeddine and Samar Mahfouz Barraaj (co-translated with Sawad Hussain), published in 2019, and *Wondrous Journeys in Amazing Lands* by Sonia Nimr, published in 2020.

## The Twentieth-century Boom in Arabic Children's Literature

*In this century, contemporary Arabic children's literature has seen a boom, fostered in part by government initiatives and regional prizes, such as the Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's Literature, but also by on-the-ground initiatives from publishers, librarians, book activists, scholars, authors, and—importantly—young readers. Although development in this sector has been uneven and hampered by censorship efforts, there are an increasing number of beautiful books and publishing houses taking kid lit seriously.*

Arabic children's literature has seen an exciting and tumultuous last 20 years, full of rapid growth, innovative projects, new prizes, and significant obstacles to economic sustainability. Scholar and translator Mathilde Chevre puts the renaissance in Arabic children's literature as beginning around 2000, although that hasn't meant a singular, upward trajectory. In the last 21 years, some children have had access to wonderful innovations in illustration and writing for all ages. Yet there has also been insufficient institutional support, pushback against new trends in adolescent literature, and inadequate distribution. Children's bookshops have opened, but there have been closures, too; there are many new publishing houses and children's book festivals, but also disagreements about what sorts of language and topics are appropriate for children.

Particularly in the last 10 years, countries across the region have faced political and economic challenges, most recently from shutdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Lebanese and Palestinian publishers, who have been a vibrant part of the children's-literature renaissance, have faced fierce economic and political challenges. Nonetheless, the gains made in the last two decades are significant.

In the early twentieth century, children who read in Arabic for pleasure often chose magazines, comics, and genre fiction. Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) told *The Paris Review* in a 1992 interview that he grew up on detective stories. To this day, there is still a blurry line between literature written for different age groups, and no clear terminology for distinguishing whether a novel is the younger adolescent “middle grade” or the older teen “young adult.”

However, there has been movement in this area, too. In 2010, the Arab Thought Foundation partnered with researchers and—through its Arabi21 project—developed a text readability system for levelling Arabic children's books and suggesting possible age banding. As of early 2020, close to 6500 children's books from more than 100 Arab and international publishers had

been levelled using that system.<sup>1</sup> Such projects are ongoing, with individual publishers working to make their books helpful as possible to educators, booksellers, and parents.

Another major shift is the movement away from books with a clear pedagogical or moral message. Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arabic books written explicitly for children were often pedantic. Thus, in the last decades of the twentieth century, comics and magazines played a particularly important role in developing a love of reading. YA author and children's-book translator Ahmed al-Mahdi said, of his own love of reading, "I remember that, when I was a kid, I was excited for Thursdays because that was the day my father would buy us three children's magazines that were issued every Thursday: *Bulbul* (it was published by Akhbar Al-Yawm and now it's called *Fares*), *Aladdin* (it was published by Al-Ahram), and *Mickey*, a Walt Disney comic that was published by Al-Helal and later by Nahdet Masr). There were other magazines, but those three were the ones I read the most."

However, in the last twenty years, children's books have become more like magazines and comics, in that they have turned away from having a straightforward moral, political, or pedagogical purpose. Instead, books have focused more on humor, pleasure, and increasingly on high-quality illustrations.

At the end of this paper, we'll include specialists' suggestions of 25 Arabic books for young readers to fall in love with, as well as a list of prominent kid-lit publishers. But first, a quick history of movements in contemporary Arabic children's literature, which are tied to popular local series for young readers in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as a key children's-publishing initiative tied to Palestinian liberation.

### **Born in Beirut: Contemporary Arabic picture books**

When it comes to Arabic literature for young readers, 1974 was an important year. This was the year the Lebanese Board on Books for Young People was founded, and it was also the year that the pioneering children's publishing house Dar El Fata El Arabi was launched in Beirut.

This multi-national effort brought together artists and writers from around the region. Egyptian artist Mohieddin Ellabbad (1940-2010) was one of the publishing house's cofounders and its first art director. He told Hassan Khan, in a 2010 interview with *Bidoun*, that, "I had arrived in May 1974, and I wanted sixty-seven books by December. It was crazy. Somehow we actually, miraculously, met our target."

Nawal Traboulsi, who also worked as an illustrator at the publishing house, said in the same interview that part of what was pioneering about Dar El Fata El Arabi was that the publishing house had "authors and illustrators from every Arab country[.]" She added, "Writing and

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<sup>1</sup> Kreidieh, Shereen, et al. "Arabic Children's Literature: Glitzy Production, Disciplinary Content." *Issues in Educational Research*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2020, pp. 323–344.

publishing quality books for children was not common or trendy in those days — to even think about children was revolutionary!”

Books by the publishing house can still be found in libraries, bookstalls, and in schools across the region. The books addressed children’s concerns and pioneered new design styles. “We got rid of Mickey Mouse and Tom & Jerry type drawings,” Ellabbad said. “The idea was to present a new ‘rough’ aesthetic that was at the same time visually powerful and artistically complete.”

Ellabbad left soon after civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975. “But I did keep working with Dar El Fata through a project that I initiated in Cairo, the Arab Workshop for Children’s Books.”

Dar El Fata El Arabi closed in 1993. By that time, the torch had been passed to other publishing projects, including the Palestinian Tamer Institute, which was founded in 1989. The Tamer Institute won an Astrid Lindgren Award in 2009, and they continue to innovate in children’s literature, manage publishing and library projects, and conduct training workshops for emerging writers.

### **Trends and authors: Funny, child-centered (and occasionally affordable) picture books**

In the early 2000s, a new group of authors began to work on children’s books in earnest, focused less on pleasing committees of adults and more on pleasing children. Among this new group were Egyptian author-illustrators Walid Taher, with his popular *Fizzo* series, and Rania Hussein Amin with her *Farhana* books; several authors and illustrators in Lebanon, including Fatima Sharafeddine, Samah Idris, Rania Zagher, and Nadine Touma; and, in Jordan, Taghreed Najjar.

There was a general shift toward treating ordinary moments in life with humor, sympathy, and a lightness of spirit. Food stories abounded. For instance, Samah Idris’s “Qissa w Koosa” series, paired with fun collaged art by Yasmine Nashabe Taan, which marries photos and illustrations. *Qissa w Koosa* (A Story and a Zucchini) is a simple, humorous tale that begins with a boy who will get a bowl of ice cream if he finishes the *koosa billaban* he dreads. Somehow, the zucchini just seems to keep multiplying on his plate.

Idris salts his work with colloquial Lebanese Arabic, as well as English- and French-import terms. Yet he told the Lebanese newspaper [\*The Daily Star\*](#) that what he was writing in was a modern form of classical Arabic. He said:

I wanted to treat Arabic as a living language, not as a mummy that has been living in an incubator for ages. That is why I used Turkish words like bouza (ice cream) and Persian ones, as well as English and French, because that is how we speak and that is how we show that Arabic is a living language capable of integrating new words and expressions.

Food is a popular theme in many of these fun new picture books. Rania Zagher began publishing her popular and award-winning picture books in 2001. In 2007, she founded Al Khayat Al

Saghir Publishing House, and her 2010 picture book *Man Labas Karn El Booza?* (Who Ate My Ice Cream?) has been translated into 19 languages. Others focused on funny situations, such as Taghreed Najjar's 2004 picture book *Fi Safina Defda'a* (There's a Frog in Our Classroom), or easily relatable situations, like Walid Taher's *Sabbi al-Jadeed* (My New Friend), in which the moon seems to follow a boy around.

Many of these picture books are a luxury on the local market, and neighborhood libraries are uncommon in many Arabic-speaking countries. A few publishers, such as Dar Yankbow in Casablanca, have started innovative pricing structures, such as Dar Yankbow's 10-dirham (around one euro) high-quality, award-winning picture books.

### **Changing Focus: Books for Adolescents and 'Young Adults'**

Even before Dar El Fata El Arabi launched in 1974, Mahmoud Salem had started publishing his pioneering detective series for young readers. His *Five Adventurers* (Al-Mughamiroon Al-Khams) appeared from 1968-1972 in Egypt and his *Shayateen al-13* (The 13 Devils) series launched in 1978 in Lebanon.

These two series were followed by the popular Egyptian "pocket novels" series, which featured books most notably by Nabil Farouk (such as *Ragil al-Mostaheel* 1984-2008) and Ahmed Khaled Tawfik (such as *Ma Wara' al-Tabi'a* 1993-2014). The latter, translated to English as *Paranormal*, has lately been the basis for a popular Netflix series. Although these novels were beloved by teens, they weren't only for teen readers. Ahmed Khaled Tawfik's characters continue to be beloved by young adult readers.

These books and others, such as Emily Nasrallah's *Youmiyyat Hirr* (A Cat's Diary, 1988) formed the foundations for the contemporary movement toward Arabic young-adult literature, which started in the early 2000s with the release of two novels by Lebanese writer Samah Idris: *al-Malja* (The Shelter, 2005) and *al-Nas'ab* (The Imposter, 2006). In 2010, prolific children's book author Fatima Shafeddine published her first Young Adult novel, *Faten*, which follows a young girl named Faten who is pressured by her father to work as the maid of a wealthy family in Beirut. That book garnered wide attention, winning a "Best Book" prize at the 2010 Beirut Arabic Book Fair. After that, Sharafeddine continued to publish what are largely realistic, issues-focused novels for teens. She co-authored *Ghadi w Rawan* (Ghady and Rawan, 2013) with fellow Lebanese writer Samar Mahfouz Barraaj, and it looked at the difficulties of living abroad, racism, and drugs; her *Cappuccino* (2017) looks at domestic violence, and *Mila's Pear* (2019) at eating disorders.

Other pioneering YA writers have been Lebanese Basma al-Khatib, Palestinians Ahlam Bsharat and Sonia Nimr, Syrian Maria Dadouch, Jordanian-Palestinian Taghreed Najjar, Jordanian Haya Saleh, Algerian author Djamila Morani, and Egyptian Rania Amin. Although much of Arabic YA is literary realism that addresses social issues facing teens, other popular genres have included historical fantasy (Sonia Nimr, Djamila Morani), urban fantasy (Huda al-Shawa, Walid Daqqa), science fiction (Maria Dadouch, Noura Noman), and the detective novel (Taghreed Najjar).

Although the field of Arabic YA has faced serious issues of censorship in schools, distribution and discoverability problems, many of which have been documented by the researcher Susanne Abou Ghaida, exciting new books have continued to appear each year.

### **New illustrators, trends in illustration**

One of the most important changes in Arabic children's literature in the last 20 years has been the emergence of talented artists who focus a large part of their career on creating illustrations for children.

Trends include illustrators who cross between graphic novels and illustrations, such as Lena Merhej and Soheila Khaled. Others have borrowed traditional illustration techniques, like Sahar Abdallah, and Syrian author-illustrator Alaa Murtadha, who used a classic medieval-manuscript style of illustration in his award-winning picture book *Damascus*. Maya Fidawi is a particularly beloved illustrator; her detailed drawings of Moroccan interiors and Beirut balconies are joined by her expressive sheep, cats, and children. Egyptian illustrator Walid Taher uses warmly expressive, experimental forms in his illustrations for young readers.

Another more recent trend is to have collaborations between Arab authors and illustrators in other countries. The award-winning *Koozy*, a moving book about grief and loss, was written by Palestinian author Anastasia Qarawani, illustrated by Slovenian artist Maja Kastelic, and published in Jordan by Dar al-Salwa. The delightful recent picture book *My Pants are Too Short*, also published by al-Salwa, was written by Syrian author Maria Daadouch and illustrated by Argentinian artist Celeste Aires.

### **Prizes, 'Hadi Badi,' and discoverability**

Literary prizes have been one important engine in encouraging and supporting growth in different parts of Arabic children's literature. In particular, the Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's Literature boosts the profiles of several winning books each year, in categories of best text, best illustration, best book, best production, and best Young Adult. There are also a number of other important prizes, including the Mahmoud Kahil Award, the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, and the Sharjah Book Fair's Illustration Award.

However, what about the rest of the year? Potential buyers and readers of Arabic children's literature in Arab-majority countries, and diasporas around the world, have few resources to help them find the best of Arabic literature for young readers. While [excellent literature for young readers](#) is being produced in many countries across the region, there has *not* been a robust sector for highlighting or criticizing these books. Much of what turns up in stationery stores, schools, and even bookshops, is lackluster, pedantic, and poorly illustrated; people looking for the best books often don't know where to turn.



Fortunately, there are groups working to make connections between great books and eager readers. One of the most active is the Egyptian group “Hadi Badi,” which started as a website run by Egyptian child psychiatrists Hend Badawy and Raneem Hassan, and author-translators Miranda Beshara and Soheir Abaza. The group has the [stated aim of bridging “the awareness gap”](#) that prevents people from finding great Arabic literature for young readers.

They launched their website, [www.hadibadi.org](http://www.hadibadi.org) and social media channels in January 2019. They publish book reviews, age-banded and topic-driven book recommendations, and news and interviews from the world of Arabic children’s literature. The initiative has a dual focus. The first is the needs of parents, educators, and children—who want to learn more about quality Arabic books. The second is the needs of authors, illustrators, and publishers—who want to better and more meaningfully engage their audiences. Both with the overarching aim of reading promotion in Arabic for children and young adults inside and outside Arab-majority countries.

During one of the 2020 lockdown periods, Hadi Badi launched a “Save with Stories” campaign, along with Save the Children. As part of the campaign, twenty-five celebrities recorded themselves reading high-quality Arabic children’s books, garnering more than [7.5 million views](#). And, in the fall of 2021, Hadi Badi will help launch a curated Arabic “bookshelf” in schools in Egypt and in diverse communities in the UK with grant support from the British Council Literature Program.

## What now? 25 Books to Fall in Love With

### *Picture books*

**A Very Naughty Cat - جدا شقي قط** – A beloved picture book by Abeer al-Taher, illustrated by Maya Fidawi, that tells the story of a lonely old man and a naughty cat, and the friendship that develops between them. Dar al-Yasmine, 2014 (4-8 years).

**Akh, akh أخ أخ** – A funny story of a forgetful girl who leaves the house and, “akh!” There’s another thing she forgot. Written by Manar Hazza and illustrated by Soheila Khaled. Dar Alia for Publishing and Distribution, 2019 (4-8 years).

**Captain Shereen شيرين كابتن** - A small book with a strong female protagonist, Shereen, who confidently believes in her and her friends' abilities to win a football match. Written by Hadil Ghoneim and illustrated by Hany Saleh, Dar Al Shorouk, 2020 (4-8 years).

**Hamada, the Happiness Maker السعادة صانع حمادة** - A little boy gets creative in finding ways to cope and to help his peers cope with all the surrounding tragic news of wars and disasters. Written by Samah Abo Bakr Ezzat and illustrated by Sahar Abdallah, Al Borj Media, 2017 (4-8 years).

**Unnecessary Advice for the Young Reader الصغیر للقاء غیر نصائح** - A collection of unnecessary yet important advice for the young reader written in a witty style by Anas Aburahma and beautifully illustrated by Lubna Taha, Palestine Writing Workshop, 2016, (6-9 years).

**Damascus - Tale of a City دمشق، مدينة قصة** – This beautiful book, illustrated in a classic medieval-manuscript style, was written and illustrated by Alaa Murtada and tells the story of Damascus through the eyes of a young boy. Winner of a best illustration award from the Etisalat Prize for Arabic Children’s Literature. Dar al-Balsam, 2019 (6-9 years).

**Teta and Babcia – Kitchen Tales from Egypt, Poland, and Syria وبابتشا تیتا رحلات** This illustrated family story, about food and love across generations and nations, tells history through food. By Miranda Beshara, Dar al-Balsam, 2019 (6-9 years).

**I Feel Like. . . وكأن أشعر** - An empathetic book about a little girl who uses imagination to express her feelings. Written by Soheir Abaza and illustrated by Walid Taher, Dar Al Balsam, 2020, (4-8 years).

**Shahrazazi’s Nights: A Tale Within a Tale Within a Tale شهرزیز لیالی داخل حکایة** – Written by Hadil Ghoneim and illustrated by Sahar Abdallah, this book takes us to tales of the *Nights* for young readers. Winner of the Best Children’s Book of the Year Award from the Etisalat Prize. Dar al-Balsam, 2020 (6-9 years).

**The Monster and Me أنا والوحش** - A beautifully illustrated picture book about the beast that settles in after a loved one’s death and how to conquer it. Written by Aisha Abdullah Al Harithi and illustrated by Baraa Awoor, Dar Ajshar, 2020 (4-8 years).

**Think of Others, poems by Mahmoud Darwish for children بغيرك فکر** – Illustrated by Sahar Abdallah and winner of the 2020 Etisalat Award for Arabic Children’s Literature in the Best Illustrations category. There are also **المهملة الشجرة قالت هكذا** and **أمی خبز** as well (4-8 years).

**The Invisible الخفی** - A story about the invisible nature of death for different creatures told with a poignant text and expressive illustrations. Written by Amal Farah and illustrated by Ossama Abou El Ola, Dar Shagara, 2017, (4-8 years).

**Hope أمل** - Life events are sometimes hard, but there is always hope as we navigate a surreal world in this beautifully illustrated book about resilience by Lebanese-Mexican author Amal Nasser and illustrated by Syrian artist Haya Halaw, Dar Rummana, 2020, (6-9 years).

**Mansour’s Memory منصور ذاكرة** - Mansour has a unique ability to recall, but the memory police are after him, trying to confiscate his memories of the past. A powerful story about Palestine by Mohamed Khaled and craftly illustrated by Diala Zada, Hikayati Publishers Limited, 2021 (4-8 years).

**What Happens When We Miss Each Other? نشتاوق؟ عندما نعل ماذا** - When a little girl relocates to another country with her family, she misses her friend. Written by Bothayna Al Issa and illustrated by Amama Mobarak, Dar Arwa Al Arabia, 2017, (6-9 years).

**A Forest in My Head غابة رأسي في** - A magical journey about what happens inside a person's head when they're reading. Written by Al Hassan Benmouna and illustrated by Sara Tayeb, Dar Arwa Al Arabia, 2017, (6-9 years).

**Creatures of the Ceiling الغرفة سقف كائنات** - Every night at bedtime, Karim's vivid imagination takes him on a journey with the shapes formed by the peeling paint of the ceiling of his modest room. Then one evening he can't see his imaginary friends! Written by Nabiha Mheidy and illustrated by Hassan Zahreddine, Dar Al Hadaek, 2011, (6-9 years).

**شوشوبا (Shoushoya)**, Shoushoya, written by Bassam Altaai and illustrated by Charlotte Shama, is a dragon. A bedtime story where a giant dragon friend shrinks down to a cuddly stuffed toy. Dar al-Salwa, 2019 (4-8 years).

#### *Chapter Books*

**غريبة عجية مغامرة (A Strange Adventure)** -- While Hind is examining the contents of a straw basket she got as a present from her Aunt, she is suddenly transported to a strange world where thread spools talk and a lobster plays a musical instrument. An exciting story that is full of fantasy and adventure, told through the lens of Palestinian tatreez embroidery. Written by Taghreed Najjar and illustrated by Charlotte Shama, Dar al-Salwa, 2018 (6-10 years).

#### *Middle Grade*

**الرعد طائر ثلاثية (Thunderbird Trilogy)** -- The Thunderbird books, written by the great Sonia Nimr, are a time-travel fantasy led by a young teen girl, Noor, who was orphaned after her parents died in a plane crash. Noor must set out across space and time — and even travel past the wall to the world of the djinn and other creatures — in this hugely exciting fantasy adventure series that takes place between Ramallah and Jerusalem in different historical periods. Published by the Tamer Institute.

#### *Young Adult*

**الكل ست (Sitt al-Kol, or Against the Tide)** – Shortlisted for the Etisalat Children Literature Award 2013, this book, by Taghreed Najjar, follows 15-year-old Yusra, who must accept her new life as it is, or defy society's expectations to do something no woman in Gaza has ever done before: become the first and only fisherwoman in Gaza. Published by Dar al-Salwa in 2013.

**النعمان شقائق (Wild Poppies)** – Jordanian novelist Haya Saleh’s edge-of-your-seat, realist YA novel follows two Syrian brothers who are separated during the war and who must find their way back to family. Winner of the 2020 Etisalat Award for Arabic Children’s Literature in the YA category.

**لحم بيت تين (The Dragon of Bethlehem)** -- Huda El Shuwa’s 2017 YA novel Dragon of Bethlehem is built around a 16-year-old who lives in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp just south of Bethlehem. This wonderful, fantastical tale follows the bullied young Khidr who meets a dragon that changes his life. Published by the Tamer Institute.

**كابتشينو – (Cappuccino)** – Fatima Sharafeddine’s Etisalat Prize-winning YA novel follows two Lebanese teens, Lina and Anas, as they confront domestic abuse. Published by Dar al-Saqi in 2016.

**الصقر عين لغز (Mystery of the Falcon’s Eye)** -- Shortlisted for the Etisalat Award for Children’s Literature Award in 2014, this YA mystery, by Taghreed Najjar, follows Ziad and his family. When the discovery of an old family heirloom reveals a cryptic glimpse into his family’s past, 17-year-old refugee Ziad must embark on a dangerous journey across the impenetrable border that divides him from the buried secrets of a past Palestine, a journey which may hold the key to his future. Published by Dar al-Salwa in 2014.

#### **A few notable publishers:**

Kalimat (UAE): <http://kalimatgroup.ae>

Shorouk Kids (Egypt): <https://www.facebook.com/darelshorouk.kids/>

Dar Asala (Lebanon): <https://asalapublishers.com/>

Dar Yankbow al-Kitab (Morocco): <https://www.facebook.com/yanbowalkitab/>

Tamer Institute (Palestine): <https://www.tamerinst.org/en/>

Al-Khayat al-Saghir (Lebanon): <http://www.khayyatsaghir.net>

Yuki Press (Lebanon): <http://www.yukipress.com>

Dar al-Hadaek (Lebanon): <https://www.facebook.com/DarAlHadaek/>

Al Salwa Books (Jordan): <https://alsalwabooks.com/en/>

Balsam Books (Egypt): <https://www.facebook.com/AlBalsamPublishing/>

Nahdet Masr (Egypt): <https://www.nahdetmisr.com>

Saqi (Lebanon): <https://www.daralsaqi.com>

Jabal Amman Publishers (Jordan): <https://www.japublishers.com/children/>

Kadi and Ramadi (Saudi Arabia): <http://www.kadiandramadi.com>

Dar Arwa (Saudi Arabia): <https://arwaalarabeia.com>

Bright Fingers (Syria): <http://bright-fingers.com>

Dar Al-Yasmine (Jordan): <https://www.facebook.com/daralyasminepublishing/>

**Prizes to follow:**

@EtisalatAward – Etisalat Award for Arabic Children’s Literature, awarded in the fall.

@KahilAward – The Mahmoud Kahil Award, awarded in the spring