The Depiction of Arabs in Children's Literature

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Byline: Ann Lazim on the need for positive images.

With Islamophobia on the increase, there has been concern about the negative stereotyping of Muslims in children's books and the relative lack of positive images. Are good titles available? Ann Lazim explores.

What picture of the conflict in the Middle East and the everyday lives of Arabs can children in this country gain from reading contemporary fiction or picture books? What books exist to help young people make sense of the situation and where can they find literature which portrays Arabs in a non-stereotypical way? Few books are available for children which feature Arab characters at all, and then rarely in a positive light. The present hostile climate towards Muslims has made this an even more crucial issue. Of course, not all Muslims are Arabs and equally, not all Arabs are Muslims, something which is often forgotten. However, I shall focus here on how Arabs are portrayed in children's books. It will be apparent that they are not all titles I am recommending but in some cases their widespread availability and the absence of more positive material means that it is important to be aware of them.

The Palestine question

Perhaps the best known and most readily available book set in the Middle East is One More River by Lynne Reid Banks, originally published in 1973 and substantially revised and reissued in 1992, prior to the publication of a sequel, Broken Bridge, in 1994. It describes the migration of a Jewish family from Canada to Israel during the period immediately before and after the Six Day War in 1967 during which the state of Israel annexed further land from the Palestinians. The story focuses on the character of Lesley who bitterly resents the move from Canada. Central to the plot are the encounters she has with an Arab boy, Mustapha, and although these may make the book appear to be giving both sides of the question with regard to this disputed land, the viewpoint is firmly that of the Israelis. Mustapha and, in the revised version, Akhmed the Arabic teacher, are the only "good" Arabs. In the sequel, Broken Bridge, set twenty-five years later, Lesley?s and Mustapha?s paths cross again when her nephew is killed by an Arab. The political situation is shown to be complex but despite this, the Israelis are accorded the moral high ground in this story.

An interesting book to read alongside these is Habibi by Arab American author Naomi Shihab Nye which has many parallels with One More River. Both feature teenage girls moving to Palestine/Israel from North America. Both girls get to know boys from the ?other? cultural/religious group. However, Liyana?s relationship with Omer in Habibi develops into a real friendship, whereas Mustapha remains a somewhat shadowy character. Another important difference is that Liyana?s father is from Palestine and has family there whom his children get to know, especially their Sitti or grandmother. Lesley?s family has no cultural roots in Israel in their immediate family history. Naomi Shihab Nye is well known as a poet in the USA and Habibi, her first novel, is semi-autobiographical. Her picture book, the moving Sitti?s Secrets in which a young girl travels from the USA to visit her grandmother in the Middle East, was available briefly in this country as a hardback only. It would be wonderful to have this book with its insights into Palestinian culture and its strong peace message available now. You can still obtain Sitti?s Secrets and Naomi Shihab Nye?s other books via the internet*. They include a beautiful book of poems and paintings selected by her with young
Safe themes only?

The question of which books make the journey from US to UK publication is an interesting one. The Day of Ahmed?'s Secret by Florence Parry Heide, Judith Heide Gilliland and Ted Lewin, set in the bustling streets of Cairo, is a fairly well known picture book in this country. However, another picture book by the same authors and illustrator, Sami and the Time of Troubles, is almost unknown, as it is only available as an import. The theme of The Day of Ahmed?'s Secret is a fairly ?safe? one, a young boy?'s acquisition of literacy while working to help support his family. Although this has its political side, it is not as potentially controversial as Sami?'s story where his family is shown hiding from bombs in his grandfather?'s basement, and he and his friends play at soldiers in the ruined buildings of Beirut.

In the award-winning translation (1) from Hebrew of Samir and Yonatan by Daniella Carmi, an Arab boy Samir finds himself in a hospital ward with four Jewish children. The outside world intrudes ? Samir fears that the brother of Tzahi may be the soldier who killed his younger brother, his parents are unable to visit him because the Palestinian territories are sealed off. The story is told from Samir?'s point of view and the personal stories of all five children raise questions for readers about the effect of the political situation on their emotional lives. Samir and Yonatan?'s story makes it possible to imagine oneself in another person?'s place. This is at the heart of encouraging understanding through literature.

In Gulf by Robert Westall, this sense of identification happens in a much more literal sense when Figgis, the narrator?'s brother, behaves as though he were an Iraqi boy soldier in the Gulf War. This story is a powerful indictment of war in general and this war in particular. In the closing chapters we gain some insight into how this conflict felt from the Iraqi soldiers? point of view, leaving us in no doubt that we are all human beings.

Also with an Iraqi setting, focusing on Kurdish refugees during the 1980s, is Elizabeth Laird?'s Kiss the Dust. This author has also written a novel set in North Africa, Forbidden Ground.

Stereotyped depictions

The Secret City by Carolyn Swift is one of those adventure stories where two plucky Western children on holiday in an Asian or African country solve a mystery or foil a crime with the aid of a local companion who knows the terrain. Kevin and Nuala travel from Ireland with their archaeologist mother who is working on a dig at the ancient city of Petra in Jordan. They befriend a Bedouin boy Ali and defy danger when the ?evil Hassan? (cover description), described several times as ?hawk-nosed?, catches them trying to prevent his plan to sell some valuable Nabatean pottery to a representative of the German embassy (who is also portrayed in a stereotyped manner). This is a pity, as the descriptions of Petra are enticing and the brief depiction of Ali?'s family?'s life style make this one of the few children?'s books available with a Middle Eastern setting which features everyday life in an Arab country to some extent. This is as important as books which reflect the conflicts in the region.

Moving to a North African setting, we encounter Benny and Omar in Eoin Colfer?'s first novel. Benny?'s family move from Ireland to Tunisia because of his father?'s work and he befriends local boy Omar. Although the focus is on Benny, Omar is no mere sidekick. The way the two boys communicate by means of slogans and catchphrases gleaned from satellite TV is very funny. The whole book displays a skilful mix of the boys?' cultural backgrounds with modern mediaspeak.

A tradition to draw on?

One difficulty in representing a multiplicity of voices from the Middle East and North Africa in children?'s literature is the lack of books available in English written by people who originated there. As Julinda Abu-Nasr says: ?there is almost no tradition of a special literature for children in the Arab World? (2). Although her article reveals this is changing, there isn?'t a wealth of children?'s literature in Arabic waiting to be translated.
Children need to know about life in the Middle East and North Africa and what life is like for people who have migrated from there to Europe and North America. In France, there is now a new generation of writers whose families came from North Africa and Lebanon. Despite the racism experienced by many Arabs in France, there is an emerging migrant literature. Unlike in Britain where the only published Arab authors, such as Ahdaf Soueif (writing in English) and Hanan Al Shaykh (translated from Arabic), seem to write for adults, there are some children’s authors writing in French whose origins are in the Arab world, such as Azouz Begag, whose family came from Algeria, and Brigitte Smadja and Nacer Khemir, who were born in Tunisia (3). The Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris has a library with a children’s section and a bookshop where children’s books in Arabic can be found as well as relevant books in French. At the most recent Salon du Livre de Jeunesse (4) in Montreuil, Paris, in December 2001, there was a special focus on books from and about the Arab world. An annotated booklist and a booklet giving details of publishers and contacts were produced (5).

In Germany, Syrian Rafik Schami has been living and writing for some years. His novel A Handful of Stars was published in English but is now out of print, although some of his picture books are published by North-South. Schami is one of the migrant authors featured in an article in the latest issue of the IBBY journal Bookbird along with Palestinian Ghazi Abdel-Qadir (6).

Searching out books which feature Arabs and Muslims positively is difficult but not impossible as I hope I’ve demonstrated here. However, cultural stereotypes still abound and I fear it will take some time to dispel those prevailing images of Arab men who are either terrorists or romantic Sheikhs (who turn out to be Europeans in disguise) and women who are either heavily veiled or scantily clad belly dancers.

Books discussed

One More River, Lynne Reid Banks, Puffin, 0 14 037021 8, £5.99 pbk

Broken Bridge, Lynne Reid Banks, Puffin, 0 14 036607 5, £5.99 pbk

Habibi, Naomi Shihab Nye, Simon & Schuster USA, 0 689 80149 1 or 0 689 82523 4

Sitti’s Secrets, Naomi Shihab Nye, ill. Nancy Carpenter, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 00301 6, out of print, Simon & Schuster USA, 0 02 768460 1

The Space Between Our Footsteps. Poems and Paintings from the Middle East, selected by Naomi Shihab Nye, Simon & Schuster USA, 0 689 81233 7

The Day of Ahmed’s Secret, Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, ill. Ted Lewin, Puffin, 0 14 056353 9, £5.99 pbk

Sami and the Time of Troubles, Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, ill. Ted Lewin, Clarion, 0 395 72085 0, out of print

Samir and Yonatan, Daniella Carmi, translated by Yael Lotan, Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Press USA, 0 439 13504 4

Gulf, Robert Westall, Heinemann New Windmill, 0 435 12414 5, £6.25 hbk, Egmont, 0 7947 1472 7, £3.99 pbk

Kiss the Dust, Elizabeth Laird, Egmont, 0 7497 4932 6, £4.99 pbk

Forbidden Ground, Elizabeth Laird, Hamish Hamilton/Puffin, out of print

The Secret City, Carolyn Swift, O’Brien Press, 0 86278 382 8, £3.99 (E5.07)

Benny and Omar, Eoin Colfer, O’Brien Press, 0 86278 567 7, £4.99 (E6.95)
*Some of the US publications mentioned can be ordered from the Amazon website

www.amazon.com [3]

Books relating to Islam can be obtained from The Willesden Bookshop, Willesden Green Library Centre, 95 High Road, London NW10 4QU or ordered from their website www.willesdenbookshop.co.uk [4] They can also supply books in print in the USA.

(Samir and Yonatan) won the Mildred Batchelder award in the USA for a children's book in translation.


(3) Find out more about these authors from the French website

www.ricochet-jeunes.org/ [5]

(4) The Salon du Livre de Jeunesse in Montreuil is an enormous annual book fair where all the French publishers display and sell their books. There are discussions, exhibitions, author signings and each year a focus on children's literature from another country or region.


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