

## **Arabic children's literature: Glitzy production, disciplinary content**

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Children's literature in the Arabic language has seen an impressive boom in the last decade both in quantity and quality. Arabic children's literature awards have also increased in number and competitiveness. However, children's literature in the Arabic language continues to be criticised for not being appealing to children, due to its didactic content and its highly symbolic language. This study analysed 47 award-winning Arabic children's literature books, looking at five domains. The purpose was to look for features and trends common to award-winning books. Results revealed that Arabic children's literature continues to be seen as a tool to educate and impart morality. Results also revealed the dominance of male characters, the prevalence of realistic fiction genres, and the repeated use of poverty, child displacement, family and refugees as the topics of choice when writing for children.

### **Introduction**

The importance of reading children's literature to children lies in its positive effect on their early literacy skills, including vocabulary acquisition and building their knowledge of the concept of print (Abu Rabia, 2000; Aram, Korat & Hassunah-Arafat, 2013; Cetin & Bay, 2015; Ezell, Justice & Parsons, 2000; Durrell, Nicholson, Olson, Gavel & Linehan, 2008). Kindergarteners whose mothers read Arabic children's literature to them at home showed higher achievement in early literacy by the end of grade one (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Aram et al, 2013). As few studies have been published on Arabic children's literature, many aspects of this world remain unclear and unknown (Bizri, 2015). This paper looks at the main features in award winning Arabic children's literature, thereby seeking to contribute to research gaps in this field.

Arabic children's literature (i.e. children's literature in the Arabic language) has long been criticised for not being sufficiently appealing to children. However, the last decade has seen promising developments in that domain with a spike in the number of books produced, new publishing houses that are focused on producing children's literature established, Western children's best-sellers translated, and an upgrade in the overall production of Arabic children's literature. Despite all that, criticism that Arabic children's literature is lagging can still be heard from many stakeholders (Kreidieh, 2015; Mdallel, 2003). Reasons for this might include the use of overly complicated and sometimes symbolic language, especially for children under the age of five (Taha, 2017), the use of descriptive texts, and the over-emphasis on morality, whereby every text is seen as an opportunity to directly teach readers something (Al-Daragi, 2016; Mdallel, 2003).

## Publishing children's literature in Arabic

Many factors influence children's book publishing, starting with production and moving into sales. Publishers in the Arabic speaking world are aware that the real customers of children's literature are in most cases adults, namely, parents, caregivers and teachers, who buy books for children and most probably read them with the children (Aram et al, 2013; Kaniklidou & House, 2018; Tan, 2017). Many factors play a role in making their purchase choices, including the topic or theme of the book, genre, illustrations, readability level, price, and book awards won.

### Themes in Arabic children's literature

Literature is a manifestation of the culture that produces it, and as Mdallel (2003) put it, children's literature is a social product. Arabic is no different in that matter and as such, Arabic children's literature remains for the large part didactic in nature and focused on a dichotomous world where it is good against evil, ethical against unethical, moral against immoral, with very clear boundaries that define the two and with the expectation that children will always do the right thing (Al-Daragi, 2016; Mdallel, 2003; Youssef, 1985). Arabic children's literature is still seen by many as a means to an end rather than an end by itself. Silly books, imaginative books, and books that use language features that are common between Modern Standard Arabic and the various dialects, accordingly, are not widely accepted. Youssef (1985) had the harshest criticism of books such as *Where the wild things are?* the classic written by Maurice Sendak. These books according to him are pointless. Another example is *Harry Potter*, the famous series written by J. K. Rowling (Thompson, 2008). Despite their popularity and the enchantment of many people of all ages with them, Harry Potter books are not allowed in most public schools around the Arab World because these books are seen to be advocating magic and sorcery (private conversations with Ministry of Education officials) which are considered taboos in Islam.

In addition to moral themes, other children's literature themes of great regard in the Arab world are ones that promote nationalism and Islamic values (Mdallel, 2003). Many Arab scholars believe that the main goal of children's literature and all leisurely reading is to instill Islamic values in children (Inani, 1999; Mdallel, 2003; Youssef, 1985). Those same scholars believe that the role of all literature is to transmit to children tales of the good, the pious and the nationalistic (Inani, 1999; Mdallel, 2003; Youssef, 1985).

Some authors and publishers, however, have started in recent years experimenting with titles that are imaginative and just fun to read, including adventure books and realistic fiction stories (Mdallel, 2003).

### Illustrations in Arabic children's literature

There is an organic, inseparable relationship between illustrations and print in children's literature (Cetin & Bay, 2015). Not only do illustrations in children's literature offer support to print, but they can become at times a propeller of discussion and the hook that helps children engage in reading and the use of language. The use of colour, lines, design,

style, and technique all clarify and translate the idea the author is trying to convey (Cetin & Bay, 2015; Short, 2011), using artistic media including drawings, collage, print making, photography, painting, and computer media (Short, 2011).

Although Arabic children's literature illustrations have seen some development in the past decade, quality of illustrations, however, is not yet as high as ones seen in other parts of the world (Dunges, 2011). Characters illustrated in many Arabic children's literature are not seen as relevant to the Arab culture and tend to lack imagination (Nawar, 2001). Characters are usually made whiter and lighter in skin tone than most kids are in the Arab world. Girls in most Arabic children's literature cannot be illustrated wearing shorts, miniskirts or sleeveless tops, due to religious sensitivities. However, some work, especially in the United Arab Emirates, has been done regarding illustrations. One example is an initiative by UAEBBY (the UAE Board on Books for Young people) to develop the quality of illustrators and build national capacity, where young and promising illustrators are sponsored to take part in international book fairs, such as the Bologna Children's Book Fair. Marwa Al Aqroubi, President of the UAEBBY Executive Board has been quoted as saying:

[w]e were keen to send a group of Arab illustrators to take part in this important initiative as part of UAEBBY's strategy to give them the opportunity of gaining international experience and enable them to keep abreast of new methods and techniques for the production of high quality children's book illustrations (Etisalat, 2018).

### **Readability levels of Arabic children's literature**

Up until 2010, no Arabic language text readability levelling system has been developed to help publishers, educators and librarians, level children's literature in Arabic and make it available to users. In 2010, Arab Thought Foundation and its Arabi21 project, partnered with the researcher (Taha, 2017) who developed a text readability system for Arabic language that they used. To date close to 6500 children's books from more than 100 Arab and international publishers have been levelled using that system. However, the number of levelled children's literature in Arabic remains minimal given the thousands of titles produced every year. Having a clear readability level on the cover of the books that children read can help parents, educators and librarians choose the right book for their children (Taha, 2017).

### **Award winning books**

Children's literature awards acknowledge quality work. Awards can help develop the quality of publishing further, since many publishers will seek the acknowledgment, especially if the reward is monetary. Some awards look at the overall product/book while other awards look at the text, illustrations, and or production. The past ten years witnessed major development and changes in the Arabic children's literature publishing industry (Dunges, 2011). The development was driven by the mushrooming of new children's book publishing houses, existing publishing houses opening new children's

literature publishing departments, finding new Arab talents (authors and illustrators), establishing NGOs that promote reading, and creating monetary awards that generously rewarded winners.

Children's literature awards in the Arab world are mainly centred in and funded by the Arabian Gulf states. Those awards tend to give publishers, authors, and/or illustrators a sum of money, or buy a certain number of the winning titles. The monetary rewards make the awards appealing to publishers who can then use the money to further develop their businesses. For example, up to one million Dirham (about US \$270,000) in total are granted by Etisalat Children's Literature Award for winners in the Award's categories (Etisalat, 2018). Awards launched in the Arab world in the past decade include the Arab Children's Book Publishers' Forum Award, the Sharjah Children's Book Fair, Sheikh Zayed award, Etisalat award, and the Kitabi award. Publishers competing for the awards work on improving the quality of the production of their children's literature and work on new creative ways to showcase the content which in turn leads to the development of the publishing industry. In addition, the presence of the award's seal on the cover of the winning book may in some instances help boost the sales, add prestige, and increase the publicity and visibility for the publisher, the author, the illustrator and the book.

However, based on the researcher's experience as a children's literature award-winning publisher, a seal on the winning book does not always have a positive influence on sales. Kreidieh (2015) researched book fair customers' preferences in Arab world. In her study, customers were asked about the main criteria they look at before purchasing a children's book. The main criterion for purchasing children's literature was to be the topic/theme (76.5% of the customers). The second was the book title (22.5% of the interviewed customers) (Kreidieh, 2015, p.250). This finding emphasises the fact that guardians (teachers, parents, grandparents) use books as tools to help teach, explain, and educate their children about important issues (Kreidieh, 2015). According to Short (2011, p.45) the purpose of children's literature awards is to elevate and maintain 'the literary and artistic standards of children and for honoring the authors whose work is judged by experts in the field to have the greatest merit'. Children's literature awards may help set the standards and elevate its quality.

Does this apply though to Arabic award-winning books? To answer this question, it might be helpful to look at the definitions of children's literature in order to be able to set a background for our analysis.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Fadiman, 2001):

Children's literature, the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials.

According to *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (Mallan, 2017):

Children's literature is a dynamic entity in its own right that offers its readers many avenues for pleasure, reflection, and emotional engagement.

According to the Library of Congress *Collections Policy Statements* (2008): Children's literature is defined as material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults. It includes all non-fiction, literary and artistic genres and physical formats.

What is common between all three definitions of children's literature is the factor of entertainment. In addition, all three specified the fact that children's literature comes in different genres. This led the researchers to ask: what are the criteria used to judge the Arabic award-winning children's literature, and would enjoyment or entertainment be one of them?

#### *Etisalat Award*

The Etisalat Award for Arabic children's literature is managed by the UAE Board on Books for Young People and sponsored by Etisalat Telecom. The award recognises the best authors, illustrators and publishers of Arabic children's literature (Etisalat, 2018). The award has different categories of best text, best illustrators and best production, targeting authors, illustrators, and publishers. The Etisalat award offers large monetary rewards dividing 1.2 million Emirati Dirhams amongst six winning titles.

#### *Khalifa Award for Education*

The Khalifa Award for Education is an international education award based in the United Arab Emirates. The Award seeks to highlight innovation in the education sector in the UAE and throughout the Arab world, and recognises excellent contributions to education in the various fields including Arabic children's literature (Khalifa Award, 2018). Khalifa Award offers a monetary reward of 100,000 Emirati Dirhams for children's literature, divided amongst two winners.

#### *Sheikh Zayed Book Award*

The Sheikh Zayed Book Award is presented annually to eight outstanding writers, intellectuals, and publishers. It includes an award to the most distinguished work in children's literature. The award offers 7 million Emirati Dirhams, divided amongst eight winners (Zayed Award, 2018).

#### *IBBY Honor List*

The IBBY Honor List is a biennial award honouring outstanding, recently published books in IBBY member countries. The titles are selected by national committees which can nominate one book for each of the three categories featured in the award (IBBY, 2018). Unlike the aforementioned awards, the books on IBBY Honor List are not awarded money, but rather recognition and exposure by including a sticker on the winning book cover and displaying the winning titles in the International Youth library in Munich, the Swiss Institute for Child and Youth Media in Zurich, Bibiana Research Collection in Bratislava, and the Northwestern University Library at Evanston in Illinois.

#### *Kitabi Award*

The Kitabi Award is a biennial award established by The Arab Thought Foundation as "... the only Arab award that depends on children's vote, they choose the stories they liked

and vote for the winner" (Zayed University, 2018). The award committee chooses a list of books divided into six categories: fiction and non-fiction in age groups of 4-7, 7-9 and 10-12. Students in partner schools around the Arab world are then sent the short-listed books and they have to read them and vote for the titles they liked most. The Award recognises the publisher, author and illustrator of each winning category. The Kitabi Award buys 500 copies of all the winning titles in lieu of a monetary award and places a sticker on the cover of each winning title giving exposure to these titles (for example from 2013, refer Arab Children Book Publisher's Forum, 2013).

### **Criteria in Arabic children's literature awards**

Criteria for each of the Arabic children's literature awards were *Google* searched and, in addition, emails were sent to each award coordinator. All five awards secretariats were contacted, and they made most of their selection criteria available to the researchers, noting, however, that there were additional 'confidential' criteria that they couldn't share with the researchers. All five awards had common criteria and distinct ones.

### **Common selection criteria**

#### *Content*

- Show richness and creativity in the use of classical Arabic.
- Focus on Arabic language as an original intellectual activity.
- Importance of topic chosen.
- Vocabulary and sentences commensurate with age range.
- Focus on values and humanitarian issues.
- Address ideas aimed at promoting lessons, cultural and social values in children and youth.
- The writing style/method should be consistent with the level of the child and their psychological and linguistic development.
- The affiliation of characters to real and daily life and clarity of place and time.

#### *Illustrations*

- Illustrations used should stimulate readers to read the picture.
- Illustrations used should enrich the visual text and taste of the child.
- Illustrations used should have a method that stimulates reader's imagination.
- Illustrations used should correspond to the target age group.
- Illustrations should be interesting to the child's age, develop his imagination, behaviour, movements, and develop their aesthetic and artistic taste.

#### *Production*

- Cover to have an artistic design that captures the reader's attention.
- A solid production that takes into consideration the child.
- The cover is exciting to the child's attention and curiosity.
- The attractiveness of the book's cover, its shape, its design, its colours, the beauty of its interior design, binding, size, paper and printing.

This study will attempt to analyse the main trends and features of printed and bound books in award-winning Arabic children's literature, by looking into the themes, illustration, production, and overall quality of those books. The reason for choosing to analyse printed and bound books was because children's literature awards in the Arab world only allow printed and bound books to be considered for the awards. The rationale could be to publically emphasise the importance of having parents and teachers read aloud to children, and possibly because the e-publishing industry has not yet flourished enough in the Arabic language.

It will be important in future studies to include alternatives to traditional printed books that reflect different and modern formats, including literature that is published electronically, reading from a screen rather than a printed book, listening to reading aloud on TV, and other formats whereby children's literature can be disseminated.

Our main question in this study is:

What are the trends and features distinguishing printed books aimed at ages four to ten years that have won at least one of the Arabic children's literature awards in the past three years?

## **Methodology**

In exploring recent trends and features that are evident in conventionally printed and bound books that have won Arabic children's literature awards over the past three years, a content analysis method was used as the research method. Through following a set of procedures, content analysis provided the study with valid inferences from texts that supported the initial investigation of these features (Weber, 1990). The content analysis also helped by generating numerical results to give weights to the features analysed. It also assisted with the development of an assessment tool for assessing Arabic children's literature through similarities, comparisons, and common trends.

The researchers' combined experiences and knowledge in the context of children's literature, as well as their ontological perspectives as researchers, guide this personal appreciation of the quality of children's literature.

## **Researchers' background**

The research team for the content analysis examination is important to consider. It comprised two members with extensive experience in children's literature:

1. Hanada Taha Thomure has worked in the field of Arabic language education for 27 years. She has published many books on the teaching of Arabic language and authored several children's books. She authored the first Arabic text levelling system that is currently used by more than a 100 children's literature publishers in the Arab world. Her research is focused mostly on Arabic language teaching and learning. She served as

a judge on the Etisalat book award. She holds a PhD in Education; MA in Educational Psychology and Counselling, a BA in Social and Behavioural Sciences, and a diploma in elementary education.

2. Shereen Kreidieh has a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, a Teaching Diploma in Early Childhood Education, a Masters in Children's Literature, and a PhD in publishing. The title of her PhD thesis is *Publishing and marketing of Lebanese children's literature in the Arab world* (Kreidieh, 2015). She established and manages Asala Publishers that has produced high quality children's literature in Arabic since 1998. She is a member of several organisations in Lebanon and abroad (LBBY, IRSCL, International Young Publishers and Cultural Leader (British Council). Currently, she is the president of Lebanese Board of Books for Young Children (Lebanese chapter of IBBY). She was a member of Hans Christian Anderson Award Jury for 2018. She teaches children's literature and social work courses in Haigazian University in Beirut.

### **Book selection**

The following inclusion criteria were used, based on Gomm et al. (2017):

1. Books are all winners of at least one Arabic children's literature award.
2. One title out of the 47 selected was a translation from English language.
3. Books are all picture books targeting ages four to ten, and not exceeding 50 pages in length.
4. Books are all written in Modern Standard Arabic.
5. Books are all currently in print and available for purchase.

The aim of this study was to investigate the trends and features of award-winning Arabic children's literature in the past three years. The purposeful sample for this study was 47 award winning Arabic children's books, aimed at ages four to ten, and published over the past three years (Appendix A).

### **Study feature extraction and data analysis**

Beyond the actual criteria set by each award for evaluating children's literature, two expert coders were assigned the task of extracting study features. These coders took into consideration international guidelines based on related literature such as California State Department of Education (1998), Martinez, Stier and Falcon (2016), and Ulug and Bayraktar (2014), to develop a new and consolidated set of guidelines that would work for Arabic language children's literature. Hence, a framework including five main features (see Table 1 below) were extracted to be coded and analysed for the purpose of determining current features and trends in award winning Arabic children's literature aimed at ages four to ten:

1. Information about the book itself (author, illustrator) to see if there are authors who have won more than one award;
2. Content information including genre, age group it targets, language and theme;



3. Illustrations and whether they support the text (Short, 2011);
4. Overall production including but not limited to the cover, binding, size and overall design;
5. Character descriptions including the female/male as the main character and the animals' role if they are available. Although some studies considered 'character' as a sub-feature under 'content' (Ulug & Bayraktar, 2014), it was decided by the researcher to list it as an independent feature in this study because of its specificity within the Arabic context. The influence of poverty, political oppression, and wars in some Arab countries as well as the illiteracy rates among females have shaped the production of children's literature over the years (Dunges, 2011), and accordingly, this study lists characters as their own feature to be analysed.

Table 1: Framework for evaluating Arabic children's literature

Features	Sub features
Information about the book	What is the quality of language used? Where was the book printed? What is the genre of the book?
Content	To which age group are the books targeted? How suitable is the content to the age group targeted? Is the theme of the book important to age group? Are the characters well-developed and showing diversity? Is the setting well developed and portray diversity? Has the text been levelled? A level is clearly printed on its cover? Are the sentences short and easy?
Illustrations	Do the illustrations lend meaning to the text? Are the illustrations an important part of the text? Are the illustrations attractive to children? Do the illustrations extend the text and encourage exploration of book? Does the style of illustrations align with the book's theme?
Overall production	Do the front and back covers include needed information (title, author, illustrator, publisher, level, teaser sentence or summary)? Do the design of the cover and endpapers reflect the spirit of the book? Is the size of the book appropriate to the age and purpose of the book? Is the quality of the paper and overall printing good? Does the spine include information about the book (title, author)? Is the binding of the book durable and high quality? Is the book hard bound?
Character description	Does the book have an ISBN? Is the main character male, female, both, an animal? Is there portrayal of extended family? Do animals play an important role? Is the main character poor or a refugee?

To establish coding reliability for full-text review, two researchers independently reviewed 10 books chosen at random. Each rater completed the rating individually and discussed the codes, resulting in an acceptable level of inter-rater agreement of 94.6% (Cohen's  $k = .89$ ). Once assured that there were no major concerns in the use of the codebook, and in order to develop the analysis system, all 47 books were double-coded by two members, and each coder completed the data extraction independently. Data were analysed following the five main features and 29 sub-features (Table 1). Features and sub-features were coded and arranged in columns based on their frequencies. Percentage scores determined the weight of each sub-feature.

## Findings

Findings will be presented in tables following the five common features in the 47 award winning books analysed. Percentages are presented for each sub-theme to give an emphasis on the weight and importance of each.

Table 2 summarises general information collected about the books, including quality of language, country of origin, genre, and age groups targeted. All 47 books were written in Modern Standard Arabic. Lebanon has the highest percentage of award-winning books (45%), compared to 23% from the United Arab Emirates, and 11% from Egypt.

Table 2: Information about the award-winning books (N=47)

Quality of language	Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)	100%
Country of printing	Lebanon	45%
	United Arab Emirates	23%
	Egypt	11%
	Iraq	6%
	Jordan	5%
	Syria	4%
	Kuwait	2%
	Morocco	2%
	Qatar	2%
Genre	Realistic fiction	66%
	Modern fantasy	26%
	Poetry	4%
	Information book	2%
	Folk tale	2%
Age groups targeted	6 and up to 8 years	55%
	8 and up to 10 years	28%
	4 and up to 6 years	17%

Looking at genres, we find that 66% were realistic fiction, while 26% were modern fantasy, 4% were poetry, and 2% for each of information book and folk tale genres. This might be an expected finding that reflects the direction that most Arabic children's awards are going with, the over-emphasis in the Arab world on the here and now, an

under-emphasis on imagination at times as a literary and educational tool, and probably the difficulty of finding authors who can write using imagination (Siber, 2012). Additionally, results of this study revealed that the majority (83%) of these books targeted children over 6 years old.

Table 3: Content

Theme of the book	Family	21%
	Empathy	19%
	Healthy habits	17%
	Friendship	17%
	Dreams	13%
	Imagination	13%
	Poverty	11%
	Helping others	9%
	Divorce	9%
	Refugees	9%
	Death	9%
	Traditions	6%
	Science concepts	6%
	Special needs	6%
Diversity	2%	
The book is suitable to the age groups addressed		89%
Theme is important and significant to the age group		98%
Characters are well developed		96%
Setting is well developed		94%
Text is levelled and clearly printed on the cover		21%
Sentences are short and easy		72%

When looking at the themes of the books, 45% of the books encouraged good behaviour, such as being empathetic (19%), being a good friend (17%), and helping others (9%). The second most recurrent theme was family (21%), with books modeling family relationships between parents, siblings, and grandparents. Only 6% of the books analysed sought to teach children about scientific concepts such as learning about shadows and planets. Furthermore, only 2% of the themes promoted diversity and the importance of accepting others. This study did not find themes revolving around national identity, religious values, or myths.

Table 4: Character description

Main characters	Males	45%
	Females	32%
	Animals	17%
	Males and females	4%
	Animals and humans	2%
Story includes extended family of the main character		32%
Animals have important role in the story		28%
Is the main character poor or refugee?		19%

Findings from Table 4 reveal a dominance of males as the main characters in the books analysed (45%), compared to females (32%). The Arab world has long been known as a patriarchal society and continues to be. Even in the same story where two characters play main roles, both characters are usually males, which might be a reflection of the conservative beliefs of the Arab society and an attempt to also reflect the culture and traditions when writing for children. Examples of two males playing the main character roles in those books are: *Are you a cricket? A rocket to space; Zayd and Jad are in trouble; and What happened to my brother Ramez?*

About 32% of the books described the importance of the extended family and its impact on the child. For example, in the book *Are you a cricket*, the author described the warm relationship between the main character and his grandmother and how he and his siblings sat around her while she told them fun stories. Extended family in the Arab world is highly appreciated and given utmost respect. In particular the elderly are viewed as wise and revered role models whom everyone ought to respect and obey.

Table 5 summarises the quality of illustrations used. Results revealed that illustrations in all the books analysed lent meaning to the text and were of importance to it. Illustrations were found to be aligned with the story theme making it easier for the young reader to understand the story and be engaged in reading. The majority (98%) of the illustrations were found to be attractive, extending the text and encouraging exploration and discussion. In a few cases illustrations were distracting and cramped as exemplified in Figure 1. Such illustrations do not encourage the reader to read the picture, nor do they enrich the visual text and taste of the child, and most importantly they do not stimulate the reader's imagination (Nawar, 2001; Siber, 2012).

Table 5: Illustrations

Lend meaning to the text		100%
Attractive		98%
Extend the text and encourage exploration		98%
Are an important part of the text		100%
Style is aligned with the story theme		100%
Medium of illustrations	Paintings	40%
	Drawings	21%
	Mixed media (drawings and computer generated)	15%
	Computer generated	13%
	Collage	11%
	Photographs	0%
Artistic style of illustrations	Realistic	45%
	Cartoon	32%
	Folk art	11%
	Abstract	6%
	Expressionist	4%
	Impressionist	2%



Figure 1: Illustration and text from *ورقة الحياة* written by Ameera Al Marzouqui, illustrated by Ahmed Suleiman, first published in the UAE during 2014 by Alaalm Al Arabi © 2014 (use a PDF reader's 'zoom in' function to facilitate reading)

When looking at the medium of illustrations, 45% were found to be realistic illustrations using painting 40%, while 21% were drawings and 15% were mixed media. Given that the dominant genre used in the books was realistic fiction, it makes sense that a majority of the illustrations were realistic. A good example of this is the book titled *Red line* in which the illustrations were realistic drawings, highlighting the key issue for kids' physical safety; 32% of the illustrations were cartoons used to attract younger readers. It is very interesting to note that none of the books analysed used photographs.

Table 6: Overall production

Front and back covers include needed information	98%
Design of the cover and endpapers reflect the spirit of the story	100%
Size is appropriate to the age level and purpose of the book	100%
Good quality of the paper and overall printing	100%
Spine includes information	45%
Binding durable and high quality	98%
The book is hard cover	32%
The book has ISBN number	96%
There is a summary on the back cover	72%

All 47 books analysed included the information needed on the front and back covers, were of good production quality and their size was found to be suitable for the age group targeted. However, 28% of books were missing a summary on the back cover. Many books did not include the book's information on the spine (55%), probably because most

books had soft covers due to the high cost of hard cover binding or the narrow width of the spine for soft covers.

## **Discussion**

Findings from analysing 47 award winning Arabic children's literature aimed at ages four to ten revealed certain trends and features that currently characterise Arabic children's literature. Most winning books are published in Lebanon, followed by those published in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Lebanon has a long history in publishing and has numerous publishing houses that have historically supplied books to the Arab world. The United Arab Emirates is a relatively new player in the field, with some impressive work, especially by the Emirate of Sharjah and Shaikha Budoor AlQasimi who are currently championing quality publishing of Arabic children's literature.

It is interesting to see that the results reveal a steep favouritism towards realistic fiction books. Most of the books winning these acclaimed awards were realistic fiction with very few to almost none being non-fiction, imaginative or plain silly (Saracho & Spodek, 2010; Siber, 2012; Shine & Roser, 1999). This finding reflects where the Arab culture stands in regard to anything aimed at children. Stories that teach something, or that touch on the daily lives of children seem to be valued and rewarded. Reading is still regarded in the Arab world as a chore and not an act of enjoyment and fun (Gaiman, 2013; Mallan, 2017). Due to wars, political, social and economic unrest in many nations of the Arab world, books can become a tool to educate and create awareness in younger generations. Books can also become a refuge and a safe escape for many displaced children in the Arab world.

The 2015 data revealed that one in every 20 Middle Eastern kids is a refugee, and 6 out of 10 Syrians are refugees (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). Thus, exposing children to real life issues including poverty, war and refugees is seen by some as a needed tool that would teach children about the world they live in (Tan, 2017). Moreover, because publishing is a business and there are currently many NGOs spending money on buying children's literature for refugees, publishers and authors might be more tempted to focus on topics related refugee lives, possibly in order to have a share in the market. However, another line of thought might be that because of the current unrest in so many parts of the Arab world, children need books that are imaginative, that teach how to dream, that make them laugh, ponder, giggle, and work for a brighter tomorrow. The idea of reading children's literature for the sake of entertainment might be an important one to start discussing in the Arab world, as it might also be a key to making children love Modern Standard Arabic and engage with it (Dunges, 2011; Idriss, 2003; Taha, 2017).

Another trend observed in the 47 books analysed had to do with illustrations. With the world of children increasingly becoming a visual world, the significance of illustrations in Arabic children's literature reveals itself as a key element (Short, 2011). While Western published literature has started using all kinds of visuals including graphic novels for tweens and fascinatingly illustrated books for younger children, with endless possibilities of book sizes and shapes including pop-outs, flaps, folds, die-cuts (Short, 2011), the award-winning Arabic books analysed in this study mostly adhered to the classical

production of a rectangular shaped book that mostly used realistic illustrations. Books that were analysed in this study were all picture books. Illustrations play a major role in picture books given that the text is not long and most of the details of the characters and setting are portrayed via illustrations. It is observed that award-winning foreign books include many details in the illustrations that lend more meaning to the text including the lines, colors, and arrangement of character and objects, in order to set the mood and highlight the important features (Moebius, 1986; Stewig, 1972). Although acceptable and pleasant, the award-winning Arabic children's literature analysed in this study did not reflect that level of detail and engagement with the illustrations.

Male dominance was another feature noticed. Although girls were present in many of the books analysed, male characters dominated, 45% of characters versus 32% for girls. This also is an accurate reflection of the Arab culture currently, where the tides are shifting slowly but surely in favour of girls securing a balance in gender representation. Studies have found that books published with girls as main characters are read by girls only, while books published with boys as a main character are read by girls and boys (Grauerholz & Pescosolido 1989; Ullah, et al, 2014; Flood, 2011; Yabroff, 2016). It has been even said that most winners of the Caldecott medal have been books that have greater appeal to boys (Yabroff, 2016). Carnegie medal-winner children's author Melvin Burgess has spoken about the fact that girls tend to read books that have boys as main characters, while boys won't read books that have girls as main characters (Flood, 2011).

It is worth mentioning that some of the award-winning books analysed might not have been aptly suited for the targeted age groups. For instance, books such as *Where is my shadow?* (Figure 2) and *A rocket to space* (Figure 3) included challenging concepts and abstract words that would be difficult for readers of the age group 4 to 6 to grasp, needing some scaffolding by an adult.

It was also noticed that some stories were highly symbolic, which makes it difficult for children to grasp the book. For instance, in *Nour runs away from the story*, it was hard for the adults reviewing the book to understand the idea behind the story and how the main character is not the same boy who is reading the story. It turns out the reader is a girl named *Nour* who is inside the story book that the boy is reading. Additionally, it might be difficult to retain the attention of the child when reading two simultaneous stories happening at the same time within one book, while also trying to inform children about the topic of child displacement.

One book of the award-winning books was translated into Arabic from English. Translation added a level of complexity to the language as seen in the example given in Figure 4.

Another trend the analysis revealed was that some publishing houses are starting to age level their children's literature. This is welcome progress, given that 10 years ago there were no books levelled beyond what each publishing house haphazardly assigned. This study found that 21% of all award-winning books were age levelled. It will be essential to

make levelling one of the book selection criteria in awards, given its importance in promoting reading independently and reading at large.



Figure 2: Illustration and text from أين ظلي؟ written by Mohammad Kazem jawad and illustrated by Julnar Hajjo, first published in Lebanon during 2015 by Dar Al Saqi © 2015



Figure 3: Illustration and text from صاروخ إلى الفضاء written by Rana Anani and illustrated by Huda Haddadi, first published in the UAE during 2014 by Kalimat © 2014





Figure 4: Illustration and text from *الدببة لا تقرأ* written by Emma Chichester Clark and translated by Samar Mahfouz, first published in Lebanon during 2016 by Academia © 2016.

## Limitations

The meagre availability of studies available on Arabic children's literature was a limitation that the researchers could not get around. It limited how much information and data they were able to draw on from the Arab world. It will be important for future research to delve deeper into Arabic language children's literature, especially in terms of time spent reading to children, children's opinions in books read to them, children's choices versus parents, librarians and teachers' choices of books. It will also be important to have future research look at alternatives to traditional printed books that children and young adults are reading currently.

## Conclusions

This study analysed 47 award-winning children's literature books published in Arabic to find current trends and features in that domain. Arabic children's literature has seen great leaps from a decade ago in terms of production, popularity, quality and awareness.

It was found that Arabic children's literature continues to be seen as a tool to educate and teach values, rather than a tool of entertainment and motivation to make reading a daily habit and an escape (Mdallel, 2003; Temple & Louie, 1996).

Realistic fiction dominates the genre terrain and includes topics that touch on child displacement, poverty, divorce, wars, refugees and similar topics reflecting the current unrest in many Arab countries. As noble and realistic as this might be, it could be short

changing the industry as a whole and depriving Arab children of the opportunity to choose themes they would like to read and experiment with, including genres that are light-hearted, imaginative and possibly scientific (Stewig, 1972).

Most Arab children are immersed in the harsh world of adults around them and they can probably benefit from an escape that well-written and produced children's literature can offer (Mallan, 2017; Mdallel, 2003; Tan, 2017). Arabic children's literature awards might need to reconsider some of their selection criteria to include books that are entertaining, age appropriate, rich in illustrations, balanced with regards to genres, imaginative and creative.

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## Appendix A: The selected award-winning Arabic children's books

English translation of title	Title in Arabic
1 Words made of rocks	كلام من صخر
2 My friend	صديقي
3 Where is my shadow	اين ظلي
4 My grandmother, Nafeesa	جدتي نفيسة
5 Dad, what does 'poor' mean?	بابا شو يعني فقير؟
6 He and the other	هو والآخر
7 Moon guards Carmel's house	قمر يحرس بيت كرمل
8 Rocket to space	صاروخ إلى الفضاء
9 Are you Zeez?	هل أنت زيز؟
10 Red line	خط أحمر
11 Creatures of the ceiling of the room	كائنات سقف الغرفة
12 Loaf of bread on the road	على الطريق رغيف خبز
13 The puppets' girl	طفلة العرائس
14 When you get angry	عندما تغضب
15 Nour escapes the story	نور تهرب من القصة
16 Zaid and Jad in trouble	زيد وجاد في ورطة
17 I wish I say no	يا ليتني أقول لا
18 Elephant the painter	الفيل الرسام
19 Turn the lights off	اطفي الأنوار
20 White carpet underneath us	بساط أبيض تحتنا
21 My mom is a gorilla, and my dad is an elephant	امي غوريلا وابي فيل
22 A cat in our house	في بيتنا قط
23 I want to be a turtle	اريد ان اكون سلحفاة
24 The song of returning home	انشودة العودة
25 Thirty poems for children	ثلاثون قصيدة للأطفال
26 Sun	شمس
27 Without a hat	بلا قبعة
28 Life leaf	ورقة الحياة
29 Laila and the donkey	ليلي والحمار
30 The judge's mule	بغلة القاضي
31 Bears do not read	الدببة لا تقرا
32 Excuse me, pass me through, please	احم احمرني من فضلك
33 I love my world	أحب عالمي
34 I have two houses instead of one	لي بدل البيت بيتان

35	A fish I dreamed of	سمكة حلمت بها
36	The open window	النافذة المفتوحة
37	When my friend got sick	عندما مرضت صديقتي
38	The seventh day's sheep	خروف اليوم السابع
39	Tamir has got a special world	لتامر عالم خاص
40	Trees fight	شجار الأشجار
41	What happened to my brother, Ramiz?	ماذا حصل لأخي رامز
42	Dana's journey	رحلة دانه
43	Dreams' seller	بائع الاحلام
44	Memories tree	شجرة الذكريات
45	Mah and me	انا وماه
46	The crocodile and the giraffe are friends	التمساح والزرافة صديقان
47	The sun's bottles	زجاجات الشمس

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**Please cite as:** Taha Thomure, H., Kreidieh, S. & Baroudi, S. (2020). Arabic children's literature: Glitzy production, disciplinary content. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(1), 323-344. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier30/taha-thomure.pdf>