

Far From the Eyes, Far From the Heart: My Life as a Syrian-American Muslim
Hanaa J. Masalmeh

The last time I went to Syria, I was only twelve and had just begun the harrowing gauntlet of puberty. An angry line of pimples had sprung up on my face, bright red like the bomb sirens next to my grandparents' house in the Golan heights. As my schoolmates waded through a sea of hormones and into the awkward buddings of young love, I grappled with another kind of love: the love for my home country. Or rather, home countries.

In Arabic, there is a saying: "That which is far from the eyes is far from the heart." Growing up in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon, surrounded by pine trees and Priuses, I was often afraid that I would drift away from my Syrian identity. At the same time, I was embarrassed by my Syrian heritage. I would watch Disney Channel and wish for a grandmother who would wear pastel cardigans and bake chocolate chip cookies. Instead, I got a grandmother who made couscous while telling stories of the Six Days' War.

In many ways, books were my way of bringing Syria closer, of celebrating my unconventional identity while also making it normal. My mother hosted international nights at my school; she would give me a book of Arabic stories and I would read to my classmates. All the while, I would swoop in on promising materials like a magpie, collecting storybooks, religious textbooks, and even my grandfather's own writings on the Palestinian diaspora.

To say "I found solace in these books" calls to mind leisurely reading while sipping hot chocolate. I enjoy reading, to be sure, but I read with an obsession, looking for any trace of someone like me. As a child, I often wished I could trade in the tangled Arabic script for an identity as effortless as blonde hair blowing in the wind. But with each book I collected, I became more confident, and I felt the boggy marshes of my identity become solid ground beneath my feet.

Every book I have collected has a unique place in this personal evolution. Some of these books are special because they are written by Syrian authors. Others are special because they were some of the first books I read in Arabic. Of the English-language books in this collection, there are many scintillating works on the Muslim experience; there are also some that are disappointingly Orientalist. In the spirit of my hungry quest for identity, I have kept both.

Altogether, this book collection is a story in several parts, one of drama, embarrassment, disappointment, and several pangs of young love, real or fictional. It is the story of diaspora, of finding footing among hyphens, of unearthing a history so often neglected. Most of all, it is a story not of deciding between two identities, but of choosing both.

American in Syria, Syrian in America

My family and I went back to Syria several times. On these trips, a strange alchemy took place. The hills and valleys of Fayrouz's songs would solidify into reality; the same magic dissolved the hyphens in my parents' Arab-American identity, leaving them with the blissfully simple "Syrian". For my parents, Syria was "The Motherland". For me, it was the divorced parent we visited in the summers.

Summers in Portland smelled like teen spirit; summers in Syria smelled like jasmine flowers and homesickness. I was uninspired by what many had called "The Bride of the Middle East"; many days, I would stew in the humid heat, incensed at missing the latest *Harry Potter* movie premiere. My parents gamely dragged me outside, determined that I should see Syria as they saw it. On long hikes through the rugged Syrian terrain, my father would break out into Al-Rumi and Imra-ul-Qays.

While I listened to these giants of the Arab world, my American friends listened to Taylor Swift croon about her lost loves. "*I'm waiting for the day/when you wake up and find/that what you're looking for/has been here the whole time*" Swift sang. I knew, however, that Syria would not find me; I would have to wake up and find Syria. And so, to the tune of Fayrouz singing about the Kohl-rimmed eyes of her lover, I began to search for my country.

This search is always incestuous; we Syrians refer to our country alternately as our "Mother" and our "lover". The ambivalence of this language speaks to our connection, but also our confusion. A mother comforts unconditionally; a lover tortures with passion and desire. Mothers are our saviors, but lovers often need to be saved. It is no coincidence that Nizar Qabbani, famed for his erotic poems, also produced some of the most significant political and patriotic literature in the Arabic world.

My book collecting began on these trips, when my mother would pack an entire suitcase of Arabic textbooks for us to take back to the United States. Placed in our bookshelves in Portland, the books looked bizarre. Arabic is read right to left, so the spines of the books would always be upside down. If I tried turning them right side up, the books would be backwards. These textbooks were obvious immigrants into the realms of *Goodnight Moon* and *Where the Wild Things Are*.

In a way, these textbooks were the perfect embodiment of the fractured Syria that printed them. In my history textbook, the Assad-sponsored publishing company had written that Israel lost both the Wars of 1967 and 1973 to Syria. Even more peculiar, the Syrian soldiers depicted in the textbook were not fighting under a Syrian flag, but were united under the Pan-Arab flag. This brashness was astounding—all Syrians, young or old, knew that Israel had actually won. The juxtaposition between these mundane fixtures of my childhood and the Orwellian is still strange to fathom, but this tension was prescient of the conflicts that would soon tear Syria apart.

My mother's concerns, meanwhile, were more immediate. As she always put it, she was "swimming against the current" in trying to teach my sister and me Arabic when there was no Arabic school in

sight. In an effort to interest us in Arabic, my mother translated our favorite children's books into Arabic. *Martha Speaks* became *Martha Tatakallum*; even Mother Goose underwent a transubstantiation into *Al-Iwaza*. After my mother's translation project was complete, she signed up to be a storytime reader at the local library. Seeing my classmates captivated at the sound of Arabic was heartening, and my mother knew this.

Soon, storytimes became a family tradition; my mother would take me and my sister to the local library, and we would read to the other children. Some of these books became my favorites, like *Ramadan*, written by Suhaib Hamid Ghazi and illustrated by Omar Bayyan. The book was about a young boy, Hakeem, who fasts Ramadan. I especially adored an illustration of a fasting Hakeem drooling while several of his most delicious foods swirled around him. For a book about fasting, *Ramadan* includes an almost sinful number of deliciously detailed food drawings, including one of buttery, golden pancakes, dripping in creamy syrup and crowned with a luxuriant square of butter.

Around this time, my parents sent my sister and me to Syria for a year. They said they wanted us to learn Arabic, but since both my sister and I spoke Arabic perfectly, I suspect their real reason was their fear that their children would not be Syrian enough. Although I struggled to adapt to the Syrian school system, this period was one of the most fertile for my book collection. During trips to Damascus, I would drag my family to Souk Al-Hamidiye, searching through the stalls to find books to my liking. I had one particular goal in mind: to get Arabic books that looked like the American ones.

Arabic picture books, I had discovered, were usually flimsy and sad, their illustrations resembling Dada-ist hallucinations more than they did anything a child would want to look at. On top of that, the stories were overly moralizing; usually, an animal would be punished for its treachery by being eaten. Finding a good book often meant finding an Arabic translation of a European or American book. Like a wary shopper knocking on watermelons, I would look for the reassuring *plunk!* of a hardcover book. After picking out the books I wanted, my parents would engage in treacherous sport of haggling with the bookseller. I learned well; to this day, I have never overpaid for a book.

During this same trip, my parents took us to the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra, where we wandered among the Roman ruins. Despite being one of the world's most well-preserved ancient cities, the site was sorely neglected by the Syrian government. As my father, my uncle and I hiked through the desert, we lost our way amid the unmarked paths. Delirious with thirst, we found a broken water pipe to drink from, and then continued until we found a small Bedouin dwelling. A middle-aged woman, dressed in the traditional clothing my grandmother wore, invited us in. She gave us water and lunch, and offered us traditional Bedouin tea, heavily sweetened and garnished with mint.

As I grew older and began to read the Classical Arabic poetry of Omar Khayyam and Imru' Al Qays, I would think back to that day. The lost traveller in the desert is one of the major motifs of Arab literature. The desert represents death, loneliness, and danger. The tent represents home, generosity, and life. In this harsh world, hospitality was not simply a question of honor, but a

question of life and death. In my own drifting travels through my identity, it was books that offered me this priceless refuge.

A True Roman

Pictures of me around this time show a happy young girl, with shoulder-length black hair pulled into a neat bow. In almost every photo, I register a doe-eyed look of surprise, green eyes bright. I usually wore pink flowered dresses with hiking sandals; it was years before I would start wearing the hijab.

I didn't look different from anyone else in my fourth grade class, but my name marked me out. Sometimes, my classmates would call me "terrorist". Several students went so far as to write a comic book: *Syria Attacks III*.

As I tried to explain my distress to the teacher—"If there is a third installment, there must have been two before!"—I realized that this was the first time I had been bullied. Before, my discomfort at my religion and identity was internal, but now, I felt it around me, like a trap closing in. If I fought back, I became the angry Muslim. If I stayed quiet, it was a tacit admission my bullies were right. This paradox would haunt me two years later, when I ran for class president. "You're too angry", said one of the boys who had teased me. "I need to vote for someone who can stay calm."

My teacher had no words for me, other than "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." My trip to Palmyra, and ensuing obsession with the Classics, had taught me that the Romans were as much my ancestors as they were anyone else's. However, life would soon distract me from this worry by bringing me another.

In sixth grade (the same year I ran for class president), puberty hit me like an eighteen-wheeler, and I emerged with a nose that would put Madame X's to shame. Taunted by Elizabeth Taylor's perfect snub nose and bullied by Bergman's beautiful upturn, I felt that my own nose, so stubborn, so *present*, was an anomaly, a defect.

And then, I found my nose. Not on a legend of the silver screen or on the cover of Cosmo, but on a bust of Augustus Caesar. I had always seen my nose as overbearing, disproportionate. In stone, though, it took on a new kind of grandeur. While the rest of Augustus' features are soft, almost boyish, the strong bridge of his nose gives his countenance an imperial gravitas. Instead of a gentle slope, Augustus possesses a distinctive, almost broken look to his nose. Noses like mine were normally fixtures of the "before" section of plastic surgery catalogs, but here was my nose on a Roman Emperor—the Roman Emperor.

I now realize that it was never about my nose; it was about seeing myself reflected in society's mirror. Not as a joke—"Your nose used to look like *that!*" I remember Ross exclaiming to Rachel on *Friends*—but as another way to be beautiful. Perhaps if my classmates had been aware of the beauty in being unique, things would have been different. And yet, even that bitter experience

found a home in my book collection, as I began to seek out the stories of young, Muslim women like me.

Does My Head Look Big In This?

I was in seventh grade, in the midst of my Meg Cabot phase. I adored *Avalon High* and blazed through *Princess Diaries*, and then got my hands on *Princess Lessons*. Throughout Meg Cabot's books, the Middle East barely existed as a place; after all, the series was about *amour jeune*, not ambassadorship. Imagine my surprise when Mia, the main character, mentions Jordan—only to discuss honor killings.

I used to read *Princess Diaries* imagine myself as Mia's best friend—but now that I knew what my favorite characters thought of me, I began to wonder how many of my fictional heroes would be thrilled to meet a Muslim in real life.

In one of my favorite series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis writes of Tashkent, a fictional kingdom based off of Ancient Persia. The people of Tashkent are lascivious, immoral, and profligate. Meanwhile, Narnians are honest and upright, unsullied by the luxuries of Tashkent. I realized that even in fictional worlds, I was not always welcome. There is no word for this heartbreak, but there should be.

I quickly moved on, looking for a familiar face. And then I found Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?* It was a classic teenage coming-of-age story—but the main character was Muslim. I finished the book in hours, and then read it again. Just like that day in the desert, I didn't realize how thirsty I was until I found water. I tried to find more of these stories, but there were none.

And so I began to write them.

In high school, I began performing stand-up comedy. "Yes, I do shower with my scarf on. I use Hijab&Shoulders to keep it smooth and shiny." My quips were hardly the stuff of comedic legend, but my classmates were incredibly supportive. I told them about my Palestinian grandparents, about my summer trips to Syria, about the comical struggle to find a hijab that matched my outfit.

Of course, underneath this humor was love—and one of the ironies of love is that it often comes too late. My passion for Syria ignited just the country went up in flames; by the time I began my freshman year at college, my relatives were scattered across the globe, and I was left with the impossible wish of savoring Syria's beauty one last time. In my college essay, I imagined, with equal parts pain and longing, what such a day would be like:

I leave the mosque and walk through Old Damascus' cobblestone streets. The horses neigh as they pass, and old men quarrel over games of chess. The jasmine flowers weave through the city's stone walls: a wreath on the head of my beloved. The call to prayer sounds through the air, and ten thousand souls fall quiet to listen.

In my dream, I travel quickly. It is only a few steps to my aunt's house. She greets me with coffee: every cup an ocean of memories. I sip slowly, letting the rich taste languish on my tongue. The stars above me are brighter than silver. I wonder, have they been polished, or are they bullets from the war caught in the great net of the sky? But then I remember... in this dream, there is no war, there was no war...

The mint whispers around me. The grapes sway, the figs are like tears, the olives pound the grass. The world is alive. Every memory encapsulates a thousand others, like a pomegranate housing its seeds. In my dream, the wind carries white doves, who sing to me in Arabic.

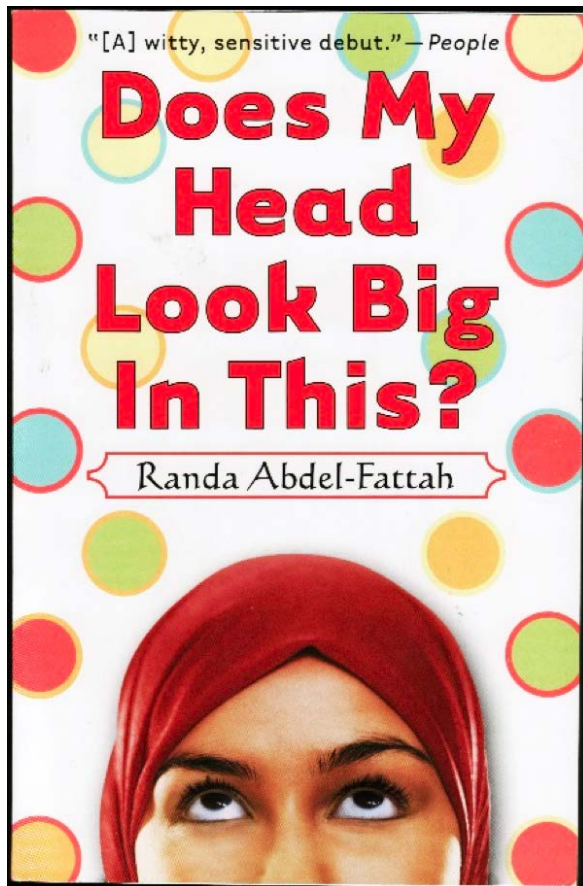
In the morning dew, the olive leaves drip diamonds onto the grass, while the mint throws emeralds into the sky. My grandmother awakens to bake bread, and I wonder how many mornings are left before the war begins.

What do I do with my love for a country that, in many ways, no longer exists? Holding on to my books, I feel as if I am hoarding the mementos of a lost love. My loopy Arabic handwriting from my first-grade workbook, the confident calligraphy of an Arabic art project; these are the love letters I never knew I was writing. My books, too, are mementoes, alternately painful and beautiful. And yet, my love is not one of grief, but of action.

My latest addition to my collection is a short volume of poetry by Gibran Khalil Gibran, the famed Syrian-American poet. While living in the once-thriving Syrian quarter of Boston—a few miles from my college dorm—Gibran wrote: “Are you a politician asking what your country can do for you, or a patriot asking what you can do for your country?” John F. Kennedy referenced Gibran’s line in his inaugural address—“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

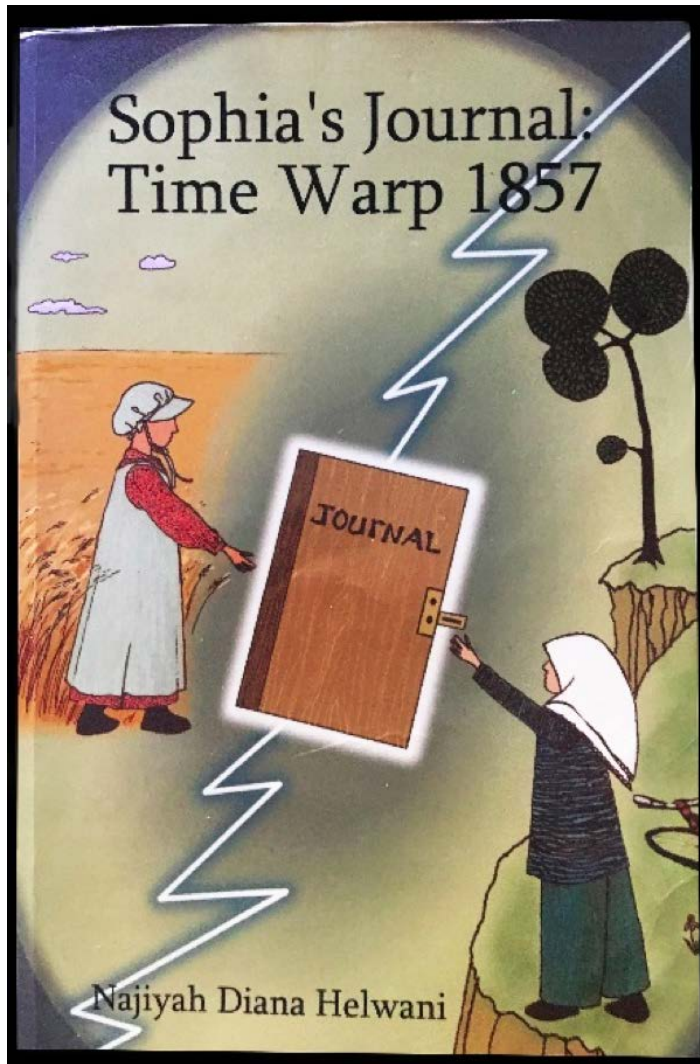
Few would guess that a Syrian-American wrote this line, and yet it has come to epitomize American patriotism. Gibran’s exile from his homeland became the fertile soil from which his accomplishments grew. His poems, watered by his tears, became the branches under which I would find solace for my lost homeland. The Syria I know exists only in the memories of the people who love it, but my America is still here. Instead of choosing between them, I have finally learned to love both.

Annotated Bibliography; Thematic Arrangement



Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* 1st ed., Orchard Books, 2007.

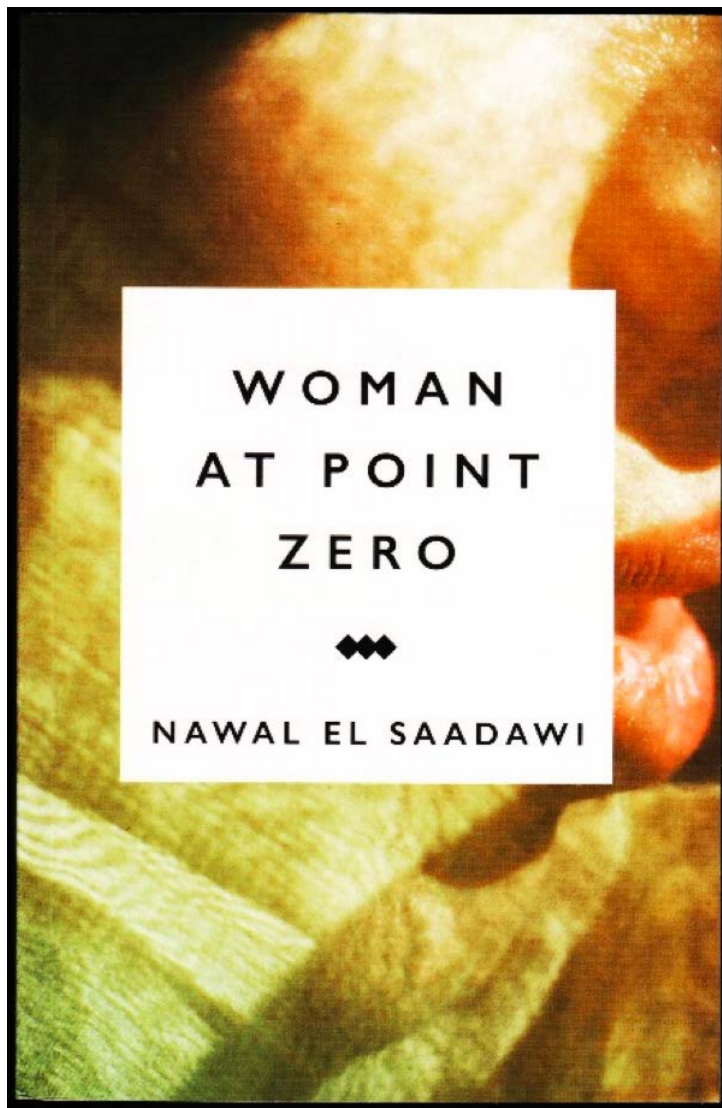
Abdel Fattah's book was the first book I ever read with a Muslim protagonist like me. Amal doesn't live in an "exotic" Middle Eastern country; she lives in an ordinary suburb. She shops at the mall, has sleepovers with friends, and, most importantly, develops crushes on boys. While a non-Muslim teenage story might end with a passionate kiss on prom night, Amal turns down her crush's advances because she would rather stay true to her religious beliefs; Islam does not allow premarital physical intimacy. And yet, Amal never comes off as pathetic or self-deprived. This is because Randa Abdel-Fattah—a Muslim woman herself—writes about Amal's experience from the inside, adding equal doses of drama and humor. While I have read many of Abdel Fattah's books, including *Ten Things I Hate About Me* and *Where the Streets Had a Name*, *Does My Head Look Big In This?* remains my all-time favorite, an outsize influence on both my book collecting and stand-up comedy.



Helwani, Najiyah Diana. *Sophia's Journal: Time Warp 1857*. D McNichol, LLC DBA Muslim Writers Publishing, 2008.

I purchased this book at an Islamic book fair in downtown Portland, Oregon, in the same Islamic school where I would later attend a Hillary Clinton rally. This book represents a growing cottage industry of fiction that caters to young Muslims; the inside of the book is "Hedaya Certified", meaning that this book adheres to Muslim ethics and morals.

Sophia's Time Warp is about a young Muslim girl, Sophia who falls into a river while biking and finds herself transported to a prairie homestead in the year 1857. Sophia slowly adjusts to life with her host family, musing that bonnets make excellent hijabs. Sophia soon falls in love with her Christian neighbor, Matthew, only to turn down his proposal when she realizes he is pro-slavery. Sophia eventually finds her way back home, having learned how to stay true to her faith no matter where she is.



Sa'dāwī, Nawāl., and ḤAtātah, Sharīf. *Woman at Point Zero*. Zed Books, 1983.

The storyline of *Woman at Point Zero* is tragically simple: a young Egyptian woman, Firdaws, passes through harrowing poverty and prostitution, all while subjected to the cruel whims of men. One day, Firdaws commits a murder in self-defense and is executed for her so-called crime.

Fascinatingly, *Woman At Point Zero* is based on a real inmate in a Cairo prison who told Sadawi her life story before being executed. I found Sadawi's novel utterly beautiful: at every turn, I hoped that the confident, feisty Firdaws would escape the trap of patriarchy, and yet I knew there was no hope.

Despite Sadawi's eloquence, she is rarely mentioned in discussions of feminist literature. Sadawi's themes are not European, nor are they at home in the male-dominated Arab postcolonial canon. Given the all-too-common erasure of Muslim and Arab female authors, discovering Sadawi was

simultaneously rewarding and frustrating. I adored Sadawi; I did not adore being the only one who had heard of her.



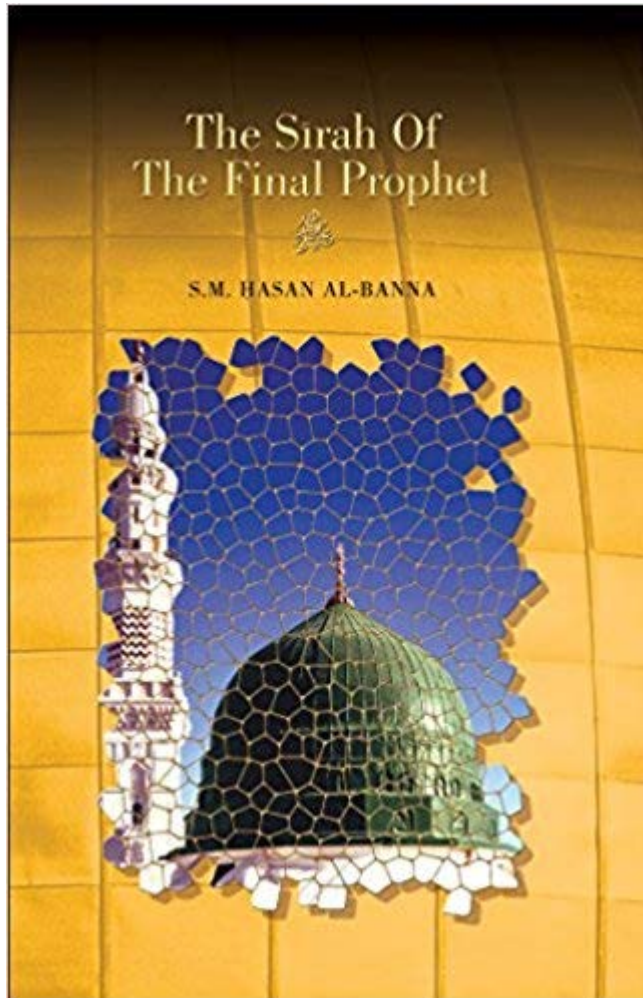
Al Nabili, Khalil Saalih. *When the Moon Sets*. Independent Press, 2005.

Al Nabili, Khalil Saalih. *Tears in an Arctic Wasteland*. Independent Press, 2007.

These are two of several of my grandfather's books in my collection. Although my grandparents spent most of their lives in Syria, they were both born in Palestine, and fled in 1948. My grandmother came from a line of wealthy landowners in Haifa, but once her family arrived in Southern Syria, they worked as stonecutters and watermelon farmers. My grandfather's writings deal with his lost homeland of Palestine, and of the difficulty of living, as he put it, "in a new place where no one knows your name." My grandfather taught in Dubai for several years, sending money back to his family.

Around this period, my mother, Eman, was born. My mother described happy times camping out in the family watermelon farm where mosquitos, attracted by the sweet scent, would swarm around them. My mother, her siblings, and my grandparents would listen to stories of Palestine.

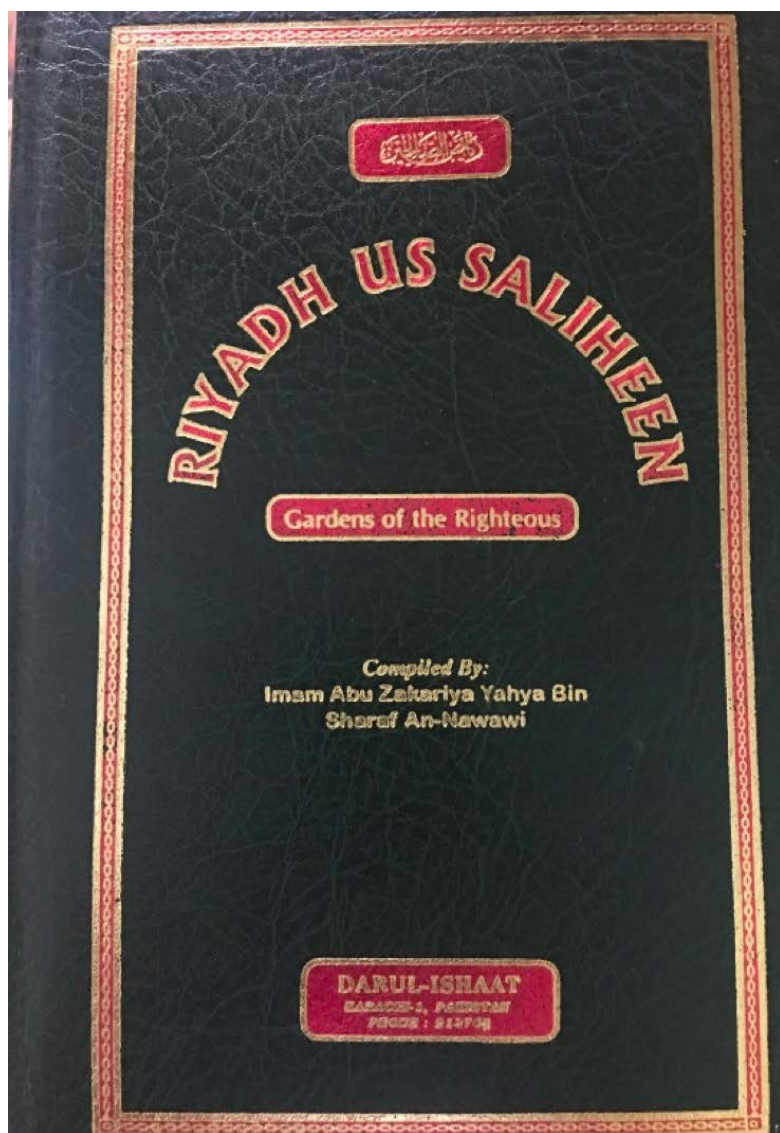
As my grandfather wove these histories into memoirs and short stories, he never imagined that Syria would become yet another lost homeland. My grandfather's books have come to symbolize this loss for me; he had not even finished his final book about Palestine when the Arab Spring began. Now, I write about Syria, and I hope that this is the last time that anyone in my family will have to reckon with the loss of a homeland.



Al-Banna, S.M. Hasan. *The Sirah of the Final Prophet*. Awakening Publications, 2000.

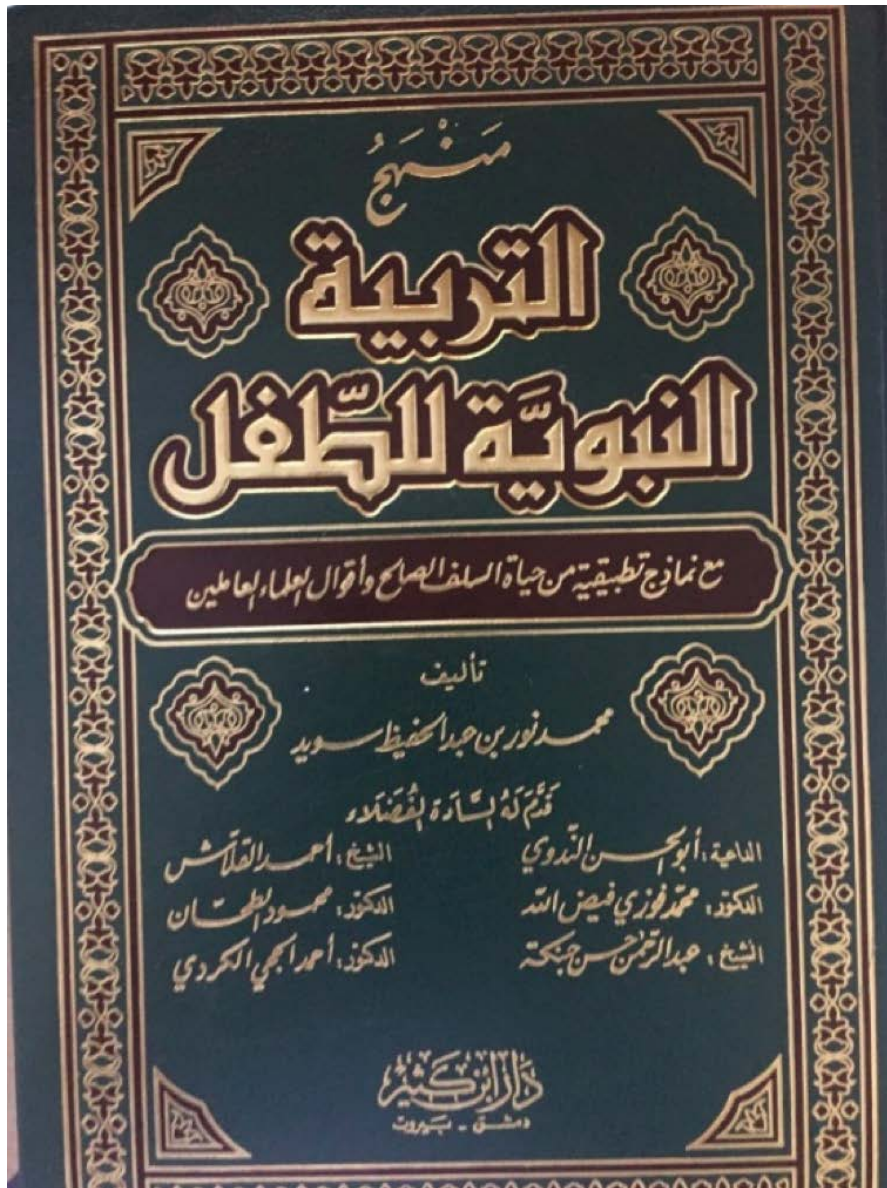
Like many of my books, this was one that was purchased at an Islamic book fair. I was eager to finally read the story of the Prophet's life in English, instead of struggling through thick academic volumes in Arabic. Mostly, though, I purchased this book out of guilt that I didn't know enough about my Muslim heritage. While Harry Elkins Widener famously said he only collected books which inspired "passion", this book is a clear case to the opposite! Indeed, many of the Islamic volumes I collected belong more in the sleep remedy section of the local pharmacy than they do on a bookshelf.

However, hidden within these pedantic tomes were gems of Islamic eloquence: in one of his most beautiful sayings, Ali bin Abi Talib stated: "Do for this life as if you live forever, do for the afterlife as if you die tomorrow." In another linguistic feat, Ali wrote an entire sermon without using the letter *a*. Where, I wondered, was this eloquence when it came to modern Islamic texts?



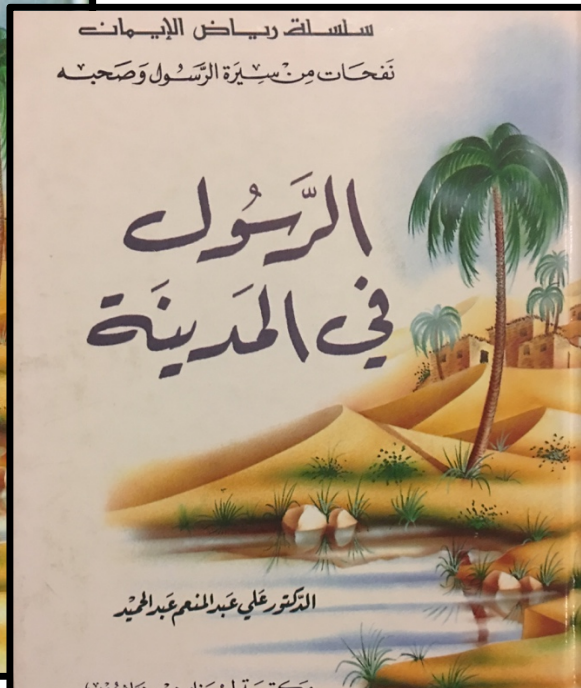
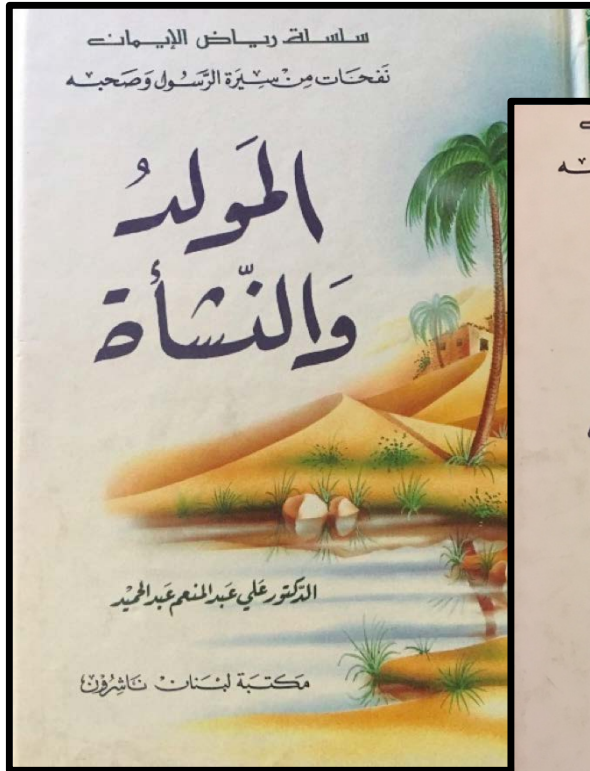
An-Nawawi. *Riyadh Us Saliheen: Gardens of the Righteous*. Darul-Ishaat, n.d.

This is an English translation printed in Pakistan that took me years to track down; one of the few translations of classical Islamic texts that preserves the lucidity of the original Arabic. The hadiths in this book are compiled by An-Nawawi, a famous Syrian scholar; this is one reason it made it into my collection. In compiling these hadiths, An-Nawawi focused on issues of everyday life and etiquette; reading this book was like reading a Muslim *Miss Manners*. The Prophet (PBUH) advises Muslims to ask before they sit between two people, lest they interrupt a conversation. Another hadith emphasizes the importance of personal hygiene, because a Muslim should strive to embody physical as well as spiritual goodness.



Suwaid, Mohammad Noor Bin Abd Al-Hafith. *Prophet Guidance on Childrearing*. Daar Ibn Kathir, n.d.

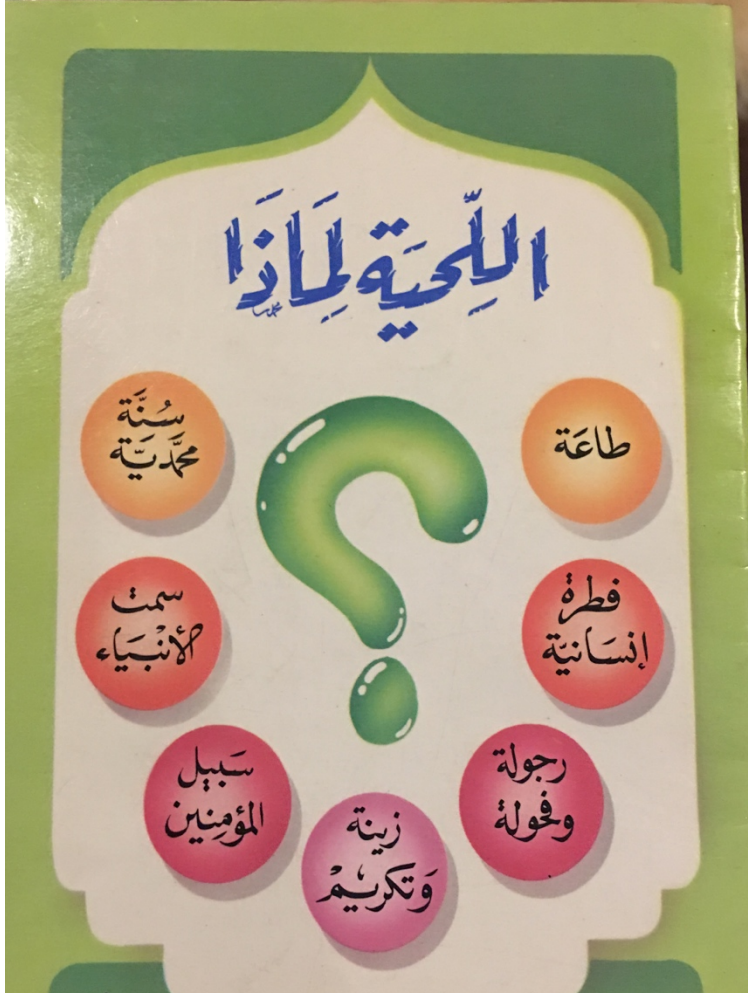
My parents frequently purchased Islamic parenting books; they happily fell into my hands. I had already read *What to Expect When You're Expecting* when I was five, and I was fascinated by the Islamic perspectives on similar issues. Namely, one hadith commanded parents to teach their children how to swim, and my parents took this to heart. By age of four, I could swim easily; this saved my life on several occasions, including when I got stuck in the muddy bottom of a lake. When I read this book, I realized that Islam was not only concerned with issues of faith, but also dealt with the challenges and dangers of everyday life.



Abd Al-Hameed, Ali Abd Al Min'im. *The Birth and Childhood of the Prophet*. Lebanon Library, n.d.

This book is one part of a three-part series on the life of the Prophet (PBUH). Like many of the items in my collection, I purchased these books during my year in Syria. I felt some sort of obligation to learn more about my religion, but I was also attracted to the clean minimalism of the book covers. Islam forbids images of the Prophet Mohammad, PBUH, so artists must find creative workarounds. Here, the classic images of desert oasis and the date palm—a tree often mentioned in the Quran—call to mind the early days of Islam in the deserts of Arabia.

I would often take these books to school for Silent Reading Time, and I would enjoy my classmates' amazed expression when they found out that "I could actually read that weird writing." My strange mixture of pride and embarrassment at my heritage would only deepen when my class-mates began teasing me because I was Muslim. I began to wonder: did a religion founded 1,400 years ago have a place in my modern American life?



No author. *Prayer, Prayer!* King Fahd Saudi National Library, 1998.

No author. *Why Grow A Beard?* King Fahd Saudi National Library, 1998.

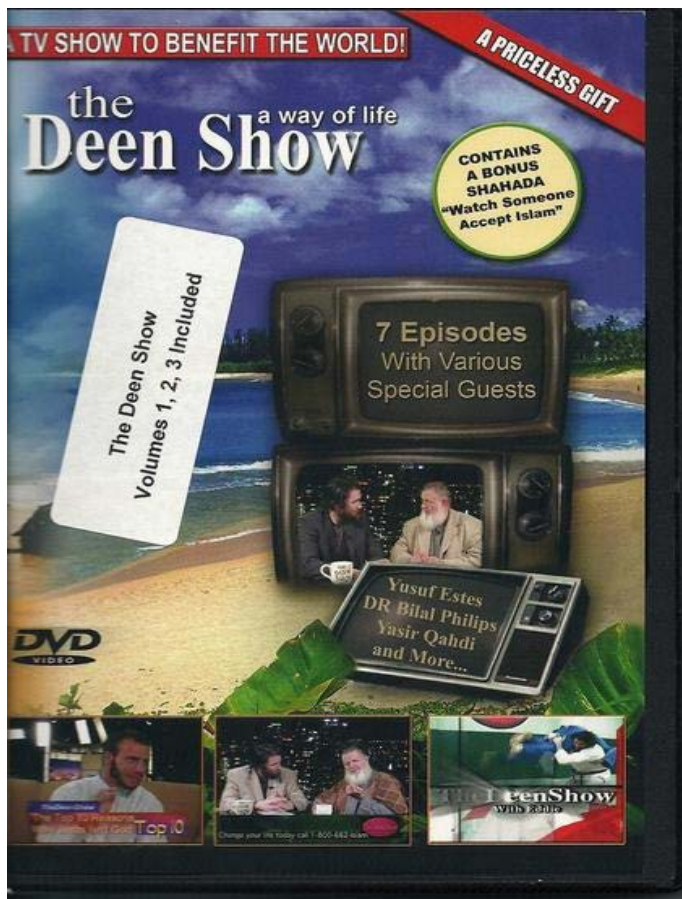
These are two of many religious manuals in my collection. Both are published and distributed by the Saudi government. These pamphlets are particularly interesting because Syria is technically a secular country; hijabs were not allowed in school until the early 2000s. My mother told me many stories about female hijab police who would burn confiscated headscarves. One day, my aunt—whose name is “Islam”—wore a silk hijab to school, only to watch it go up in flames.

These booklets are a deeply ambivalent gesture by the highly conservative Saudi Wahhabi government; most Syrians don't pray regularly, and certainly most Syrian men do not have beards. Nonetheless, the Saudi government claims that “dawah,” or inviting people to the path of Islam, is a

holy duty. These mixed influences point to a deep ambivalence about religion, another theme in my collection.

Abi Fidaa, Ismaail. *The Stories of the Prophets*. Daar Al-Feehaa', 2001.

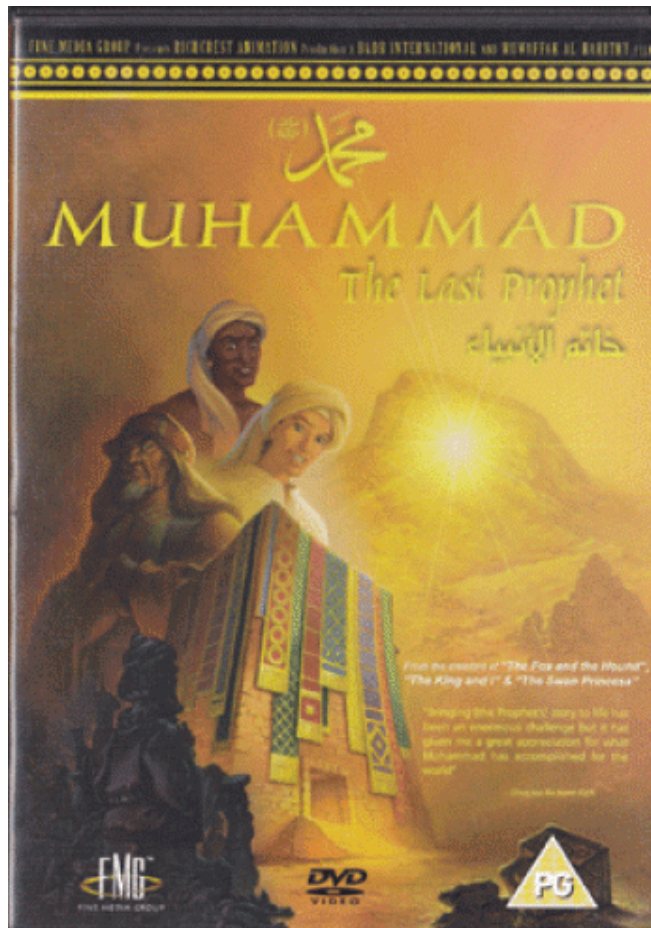
My father purchased this book intending it to serve as a new collection of bedtime stories. However, father and I quickly realized that it was a pedantic collection of every single saying of every single Prophet—there was even an entire section on how tall Adam was! Once again, my boredom overwhelmed my curiosity, although I would eventually finish the book during a Ramadan lull.



The Deen Show. The Deen Show, nd. DVD.

After my team won first place (for the third year in a row!) in an Islamic Trivia Competition, I received this DVD as a gift from one of my fellow teammates. *The Deen Show* is a talk show hosted by a convert to Islam, Eddie. Typical episodes have titles like “From Rapper to Sheikh”, “Bullying: Advice from Islam to Muslim Teachers and Parents”, and “Christian Security Guard Guarding Mosque Learns About Islam”. This specific DVD—now sold out on *The Deen Show’s* website—features special guests such as Yusuf Estes and Yasir Qadhi, both well-known Islamic scholars and leaders.

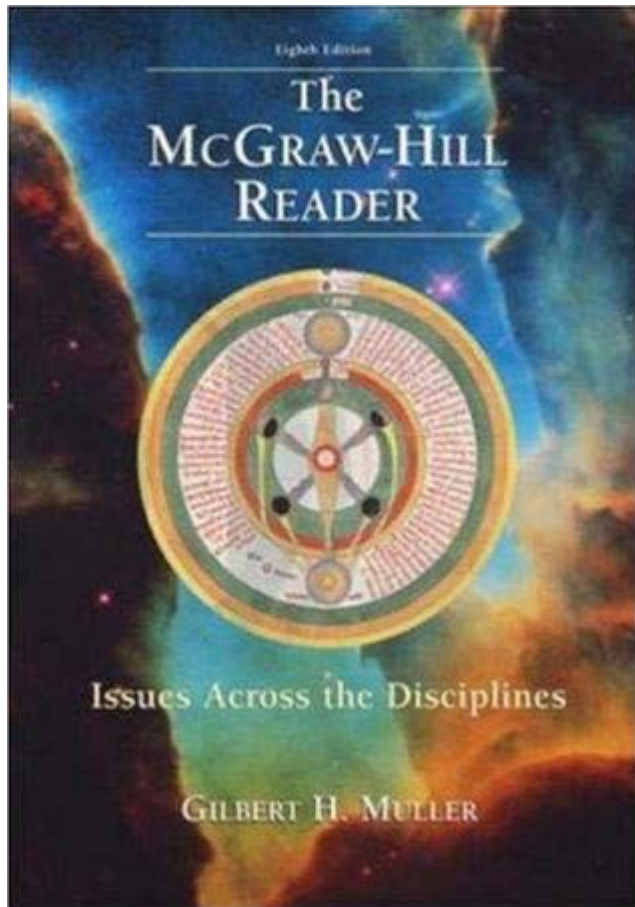
The Deen Show recently switched from DVD format to a YouTube channel; ads that play before the videos include Muslim matrimonial websites, halal meat and chicken, and even Islamic travel services. Clearly, the centers of Islamic knowledge are shifting from the dry Islamic textbooks I used to collect and into a more modern, youth-oriented medium, one concerned with the challenges of being Muslim in America.



Mohammad: The Last Prophet. Richard Rich. Badr International, 2002. Film.

At yet another masjid book fair, my father bought me this DVD of *The Last Prophet*, an animated film about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Our edition had an elaborate black and gold cover, which folded out to the shape of the Kaabah. Although Islam forbids images of the Prophet (PBUH) this film used the clever device of showing events through the Prophet's eyes (PBUH).

My pursuit of high-quality Muslim entertainment is a continuing theme in my collection, and *The Last Message* was clearly one such film: I loved that it combined the animation quality of a Disney movie with an undeniably Muslim story.

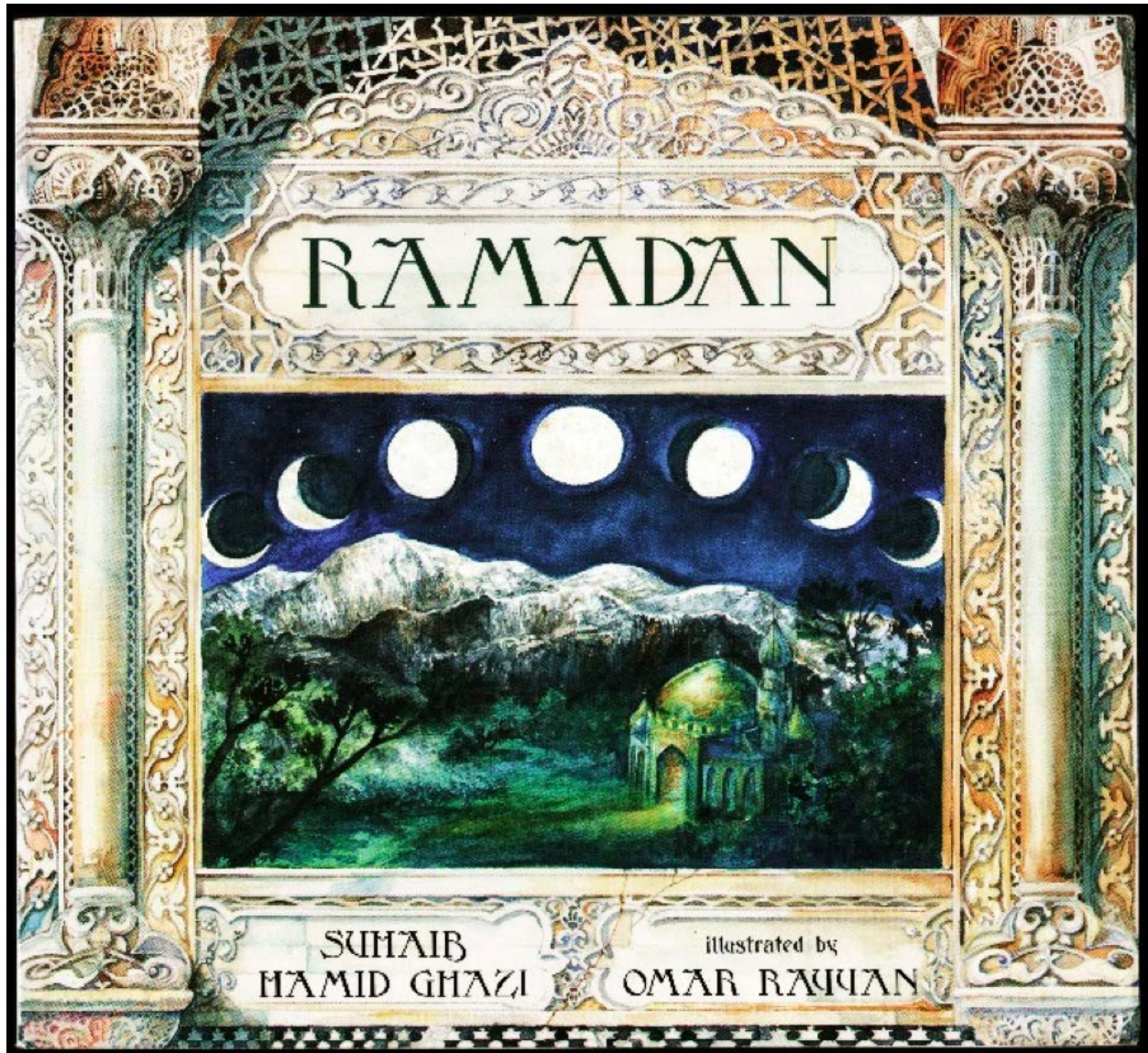


Muller, Gilbert H. *Issues Across the Disciplines*. McGraw Hill. 2002.

At age eleven, with the air of someone who had discovered salacious contraband, I pored over my mother's McGraw Hill Reader *Issues Across the Disciplines*. Inside, I found Edward T. Hall's anthropological essay "The Arab World". Today, the title seems preposterous—no serious scholar would ever write an essay titled "The European World" or "The Hispanic World", but nonetheless, I found a glimmer of dignity in the essay, a satisfaction at seeing myself represented seriously. Although it was almost a decade before I would major in anthropology—a decision I attribute in no small part to this essay—I was already showing the first signs of discontent with a media system that denied Muslims our humanity and diversity.

As a young Syrian-American Muslim, I have always been keenly aware of the paucity of meaningful reporting on Middle Eastern issues. I grew up in a post 9/11 era, watching debates about hijab bans on CNN. Only specific types of Arabs or Muslims (in many ways, Western media renders these terms interchangeable) ever appeared on television. There were the dusty, impoverished, tent-dwelling families, who stared at the camera with an exhausted passivity that frightened me. Then, there were the terrorists and war criminals, who would always appear during a lull in the news cycle.

My frustration with these one-dimensional narratives is a key theme throughout my collection. I am drawn to Muslim-centric books not in an effort to defy stereotypes, but rather render them irrelevant in the face of the beautiful diversity of my religion.



Ghazi, Suhaib Hamid. *Ramadan*. Illustrated by Omar Bayyan. New York: Holiday House, 1996.

Another deliciously illustrated book in my collection, *Ramadan* quickly became a family tradition. In this book, we follow Hakeem through the trials of fasting, from a delicious Suhoor of pancakes, syrup, and freshly squeezed orange juice, to a dizzying array of sandwiches and french fries that

Hakeem's classmates devour as he watches, hungry and tired from fasting, and finally, a beautiful family Iftaar of aromatic chicken and rice whose fragrance practically floats off the page.

Sharing Ramadan—and sharing *Ramadan*—were some of the most defining experiences of my childhood. Every year, several of my Muslim and non-Muslim friends fast with me, gathering together for a delicious home-cooked Iftaar. Keeping the tradition of Ramadan alive, especially during scorching summers and dreaded 18-hour-days means more than simply abstaining from food and drink. It means connecting with a beautiful tradition, one that is as American as it is Muslim.



Mackey, Ken trans. Nadia Diab. *City Mouse and Country Mouse*. Library of Lebanon. N.D.

Mackey, Ken trans. Nadia Diab. *The Little Tailor*. Library of Lebanon. N.D.

One of my absolute favorite childhood stories is this translation of *City Mouse and Country Mouse*. It seems that many of my favorite books, in English or in Arabic, have one thing in common: illustrations of delicious food! I purchased this book in Damascus' historic Souk Al-Hamidiye, along with *The Young Tailor*.

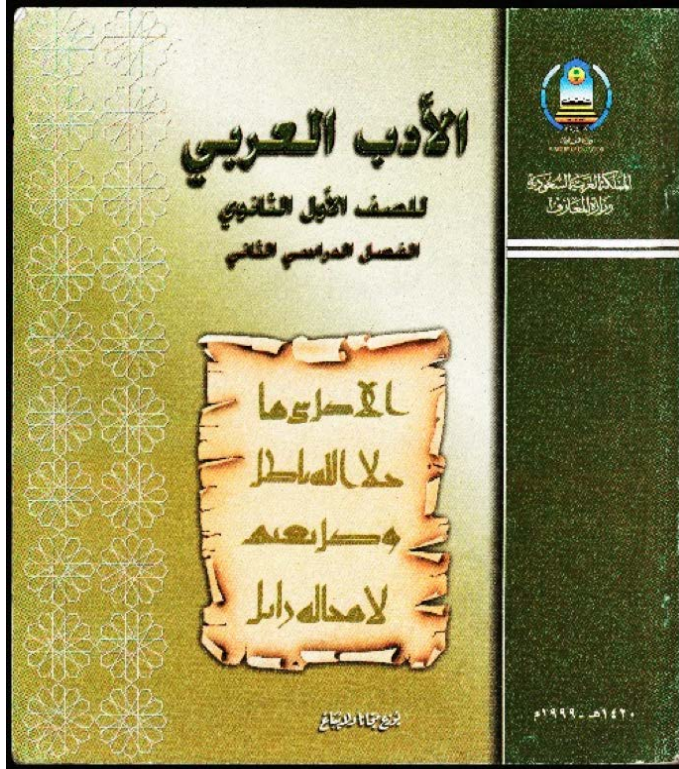
In the story, a tailor brags that he can kill seven in one blow—it turns out, he means seven flies, not seven men. This became a family joke when my sister tripped over a tea tray and broke seven cups. "Seven in one!" I yelled, and to this day, it's still her nickname.

Maḥallī, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad, et al. Tafsīr Al-JalāLayn : Bi-hāMish Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm. al-Ṭab'ah 1. ed., Mu'Assassat Al-RisāLah, 1995.

The classic Arabic exegesis of the Quran. Every Muslim household has at least one of these books. My family's copy is saffron-colored and still has the price on its back cover—250 Syrian Pounds, which in 2004 was the equivalent of 5 U.S. Dollars. This copy is ornamental; when we moved next to the only Arabic school in Oregon, my parents gave me a smaller copy to take with me to class. That copy, a copper-colored edition that was nearly falling apart, was the same one my oldest aunt used in Syria. Inside, the word “Allah” (Arabic for God) was lightly circled in pencil. My mother told me that this is because, in Syria, teachers often punish students by handing them a copy of the Quran and then telling them to count the number of times the word “Allah” appears. This was only of many stories my mother told me to make me grateful for my American school education.

Al Qarni, Ayed Bin Abdullah. *Do Not Despair*. 1998.

Yet another classic of Islamic literature, *Do Not Despair* describes Islamic ways of dealing with grief and sadness. The title is an allusion to a Quranic verse in which the Prophet (PBUH) comforts his companion by telling him “Do not despair; indeed God is with us.” While my friends reached for *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, I reached for this book. I enjoyed how pertinent this book was to the challenges of being a Muslim-American; I especially loved the Prophetic hadith about exercise as a medicine, and about volunteering as a way to take my mind off my own misfortunes. Most of all, I enjoyed how this book offered Muslim wisdom in a way that was compatible with life in America. It was a valuable lesson that Islam was not a hindrance, but rather a source of deep wisdom I could use to navigate my life.



وإن دماء الجاهلية^(١١) موضوعة... وإن ماتر^(١٢) الجاهلية موضوعة غير السدانة والسقاية^(١٣) والعمد قود^(١٤)، وشبه العمد ما قتل بالعدا والحجر، وفيه بشة بعير، فمن زاد فهو من أهل الجاهلية.

أيها الناس: إن الشيطان قد ينس أن يعبد في أرضكم هذه، ولكنه قد رضى أن يطاع فيما سوى ذلك مما تحفرون من أعمالكم.

أيها الناس: إن لسناتكم عليكم حقا، وتكم عليهن حق، لكم عليهن ألا يوطئن فرشكم غيركم، ولا يدخلن أحدا تذكروهنه بيوتكم إلا بأذنكم، ولا يأتين بفاحشة مبينة. فإن فعلن فإن الله قد أذن لكم أن تعضلوهن^(١٥)، وتهجروهن في المضاجع، وتضربوهن ضربا غير مبرح^(١٦)، فإن انتهين وأظعنكم فعليكم زهفن وكسوتهن بالمعروف، فأتقوا الله في النساء، واستوصوا بهن خيرا. ألا هل بلغت؟ اللهم اشهد.

أيها الناس: إنما المؤمنون إخوة، فلا يحل لامرئ من مال أخيه إلا عن طيب نفس منه. ألا هل بلغت؟ اللهم اشهد.

(١١) دماء الجاهلية: دماء النفس الذين قتلوا في الجاهلية.
(١٢) ماتر: ما كاتره يوارثونه من عادات وفعالهم.
(١٣) السدانة (السقاية): حراسة البيت ودفنهم، وإسقا الحجج.
(١٤) العمد قود: أي القتل العمد يجب فيه العصاص.
(١٥) تعضلوهن: تضيقوا عليهن.
(١٦) غير مبرح: غير شديد.

(٢) من خطبة الوداع

لرسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم

مناسبة الخطبة:

حج النبي ﷺ حجته الوحيدة في السنة العاشرة للهجرة، واستصحب معه جميع أهله وأصحابه، وانضم إليهم خلق كثير حتى احتشد في الموسم أكثر من ستة آلاف، وفي يوم الحج الأكبر وقف النبي ﷺ يخاطب الناس وفي كلامه نهضة الموعظ، الموقن بقراب الأجل، ولهذا كان يسأل الناس عقب كل مقطع قائلا: ألا هل بلغت؟ ثم يقول اللهم اشهد. ولأن النبي ﷺ توفي بعدها بثلاثة أشهر، فقد سُميت خطبة الوداع.

النص:

«أما بعد: أيها الناس، اسمعوا مني أئيب لكم، فإني لا أدري لعلي لا ألقاكم بعد عامي هذا، في موقفي هذا.

أيها الناس: إن دماءكم وأموالكم حرام عليكم إلى أن تلقوا ربكم، كحرمة يومكم هذا، في شهركم هذا، في بلدكم هذا، ألا هل بلغت؟ اللهم اشهد.

فمن كانت عنده أمانة فليؤدها إلى من ائتمنه عليها.

وإن بنا الجاهلية موضوعة^(١)، ولكن لكم رؤوس أموالكم لا تظلمون ولا تظلمون قضي الله أن لا ربا، وإن أول ربا بدأ به ربا عمي العباس بن عبد المطلب.

(١) موضوعة: ملقى.

Al-Pasha, Abd Al-Rahman. The Stories of the Companions. Saudi Ministry of Education, 2000.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, my mother would drive my sister and me forty-five minutes each way for Arabic language and Islamic studies. I attended Arabic school with the excitement of a prisoner walking to her death sentence. I was more excited to go back to “real school”—what I

called American school—and spend time with my friends. After five years of this arrangement, my parents had enough, and moved to a house five minutes away from Arabic school. Thus, my Arabic and Islamic education became the invisible orbit around which my life revolved.

For a long time, I saw Arabic school as a burden. I would “forget” my homework and constantly doodle in class. To be fair, I was only nine; it was difficult to concentrate for three hours after a full day of school. But as I began my difficult middle school years, Arabic school became a refuge: it was the only place . I became more and more interested in Arabic and Islamic studies, eager to understand the identity that had followed me my entire life.

Much of my book collection centers around this theme. An especially significant part of my collection was this book, which compiled the stories of the Prophet’s (PBUH) companions. I was struck by the kindness and generosity of these Muslim teachers, but they lived in the Arabian peninsula 1400 years ago—how could I apply their lessons to my All-American anxieties?

فلسطين

النشيد

سلیمان العیسی

فلسطين داري و ذرْب انتصاري
 نَظُنْ بلادي هوى في فؤادي
 ولحنا أبيا على شفتينا
 وجوه غريبه بأرضي السليبية
 تبيع ثماري وتحتل داري
 وأعرف ذريسي ويرجع شعبي
 إلى بيت جدي إلى دفاع مهدي
 فلسطين داري و ذرْب انتصاري

الحاسوب

المحادثة والقراءة

شاهد خالد أخته تدخل إلى غرفتها جهازاً كائنتفاز، ثم تجلس أمامه، وتضغط على لوحة لها أزرار، فيها حروف وأرقام، فتظهر على الشاشة كلمات واضحة، وأشكال هندسية منتظمة، وصور ملونة جميلة.
 قال خالد: تمتازك جميل يا أختي، وقد لاحظت أنه يظهر ما تريد.
 ضحكت أخته وقالت: هذا ليس تفتازاً يا خالد، إنه آلة عظيمة تصيب وتكتب، وترسم، وتقدم كثيراً من المعلومات. إنه الحاسوب. اجلس بجانبني يا أخي، وحاول أن ترسم مثلي. فهذه القطعة التي تسمى (القارة) تساعدنا في رسم ما نريد. فقد خالد عمل أخته، فرسم مثلها.
 أعجب خالد بهذا الجهاز، وقرّر أن يجلس ساعة كل يوم بالقرب من أخته، ليتعلم المزيد عن الحاسوب.

جدي فلاح

النشيد

فاروق سلوم

جدي فلاح في الحقل ولديه بيوت للتحل
 وسواق يجري الماء بها كي تشرب أشجار النخل
 التحل بطوقاً على الشجر ويرفرق من فوق الزهر
 ويغذي القرية بالعمل ما أسعد جدي في العمل
 جدي فلاح في الحقل وعلى يده ربي أهلي

Syrian Ministry of Education Official Textbooks

The following are a series of images from my fourth grade Syrian textbook. Reading them as a child, I very often did not understand the political undertones. The first photo is a song of praise to Palestine. In this song, Palestine is shorthand for the struggle to regain Arab glory. The song calls Palestine “The homeland of my elders” and “the place of victory.”

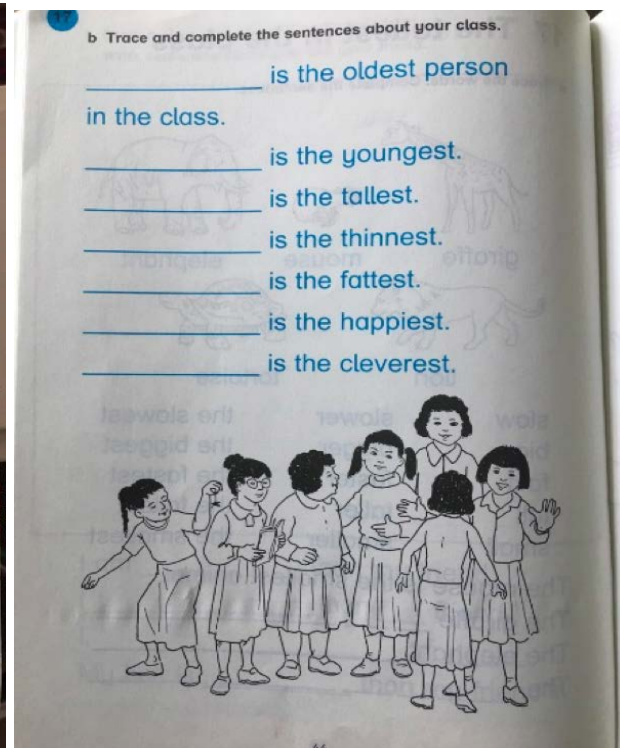
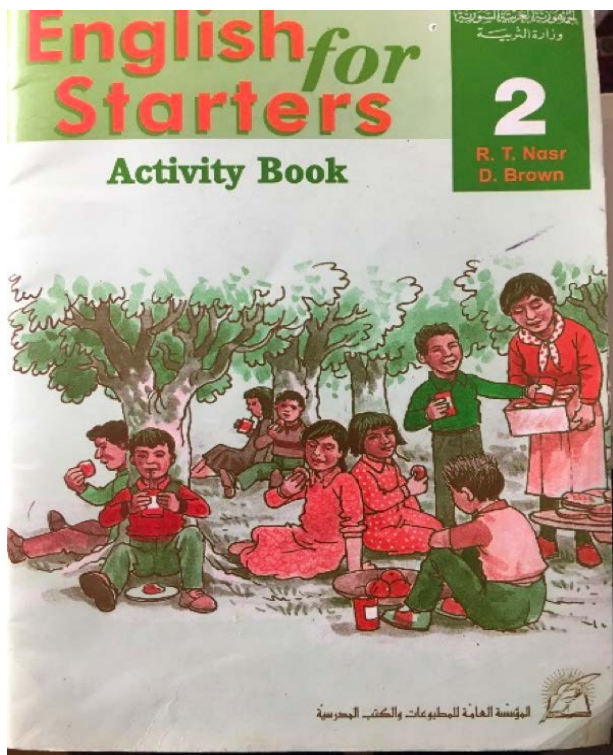
Other parts of the book present an image of a Syria that is modern and secular. Not only are the women not wearing hijabs, they are wearing miniskirts. This is because, in imitation of French secularism, Syria's Baath party banned hijabs in public schools. In other places, the textbook is strangely traditionalist; the images of farmers call to mind Syria's history as a famous wheat farming region.

Reading these books now, I see vastly differing political messages: a book published by a quasi-secular political party still opens with the first chapter of the Quran, Al-Fatiha. Every time I look at these books, I see something new; a fitting metaphor for a chimeric and chaotic Syria.



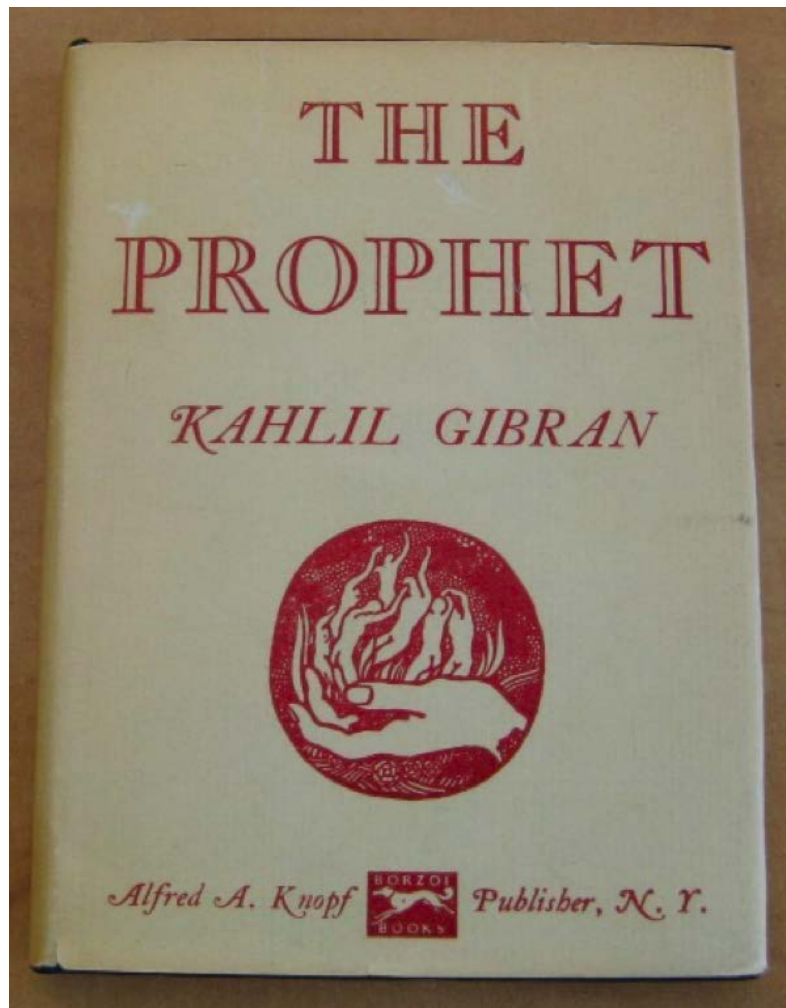
The Egypt Library: Blue Book Library for Children.

The Blue Book Library is a series of short stories for children, each printed on flimsy, almost see-through paper. These books are titled *In the Island Of Wonders*, *It Is Impossible to Please All People*, and *A Kind Trick*. The first is an excerpt from the Arabian Nights, the second is an Arabic folk story of Juha, alternatively a classic trickster and frustrated everyman. It tells the story of Juha and his journey through his village on a donkey. When Juha lets his son ride on the donkey, the people say that the father should respect his son and let him ride the donkey instead. When Juha rides the donkey, the villagers say that he is too heavy to ride such a small animal, and so he and his son walk. This continues, until Juha, fed up with the unsolicited advice of the villagers, throws himself, his son, and his donkey off the bridge, yelling "It Is Impossible to Please All People!" In *A Kind Trick*, the trickster motif is repeated, except this time, a kind, wealthy man comes up with a way to convince his poor but proud neighbor to accept money. These books were too moralizing to interest me; I wished I could find interesting, well-illustrated books in Arabic.



English for Starters. Syrian Ministry of Education, n.d.

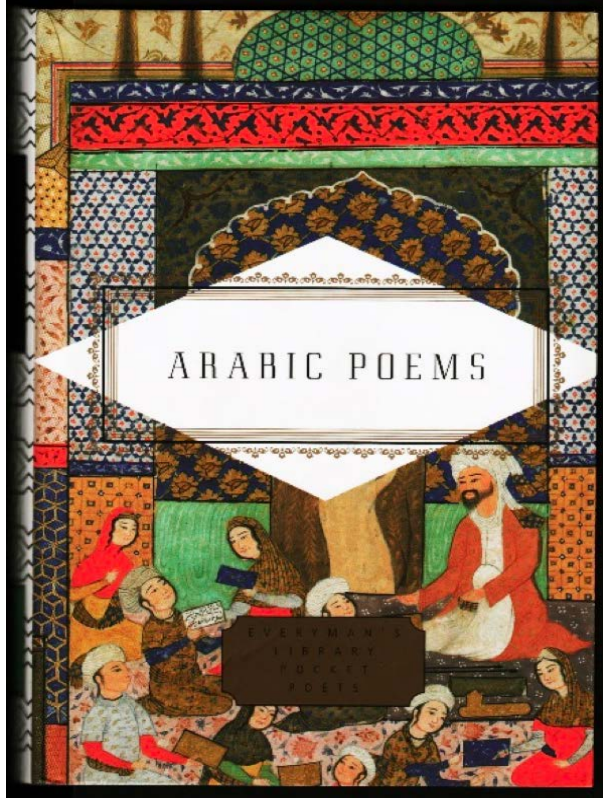
During my year in Syria, I had to take English classes at my school. Of course, I breezed through the lessons, but I certainly remember this awkward page in our workbook, which I thankfully never filled out. One day, however, our English teacher read a flashcard that said “snack.” I immediately perked up. However, she meant “snake,” as in the animal. When I tried to correct her, she immediately dismissed me. When I tried again, she did the same. That day, I learned a valuable lesson about the Syrian school system: the teacher is always right, even when she is wrong. To experience such a deep level of culture shock at such a young age—I was barely seven—is still one of the most formative experiences of my life.



Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. Knopf, 1923.

Khalil Gibran is one of the most famous Syrian poets, but few know that he was also American. His family escaped the Middle East during a period of political turmoil, making their home in the Syrian quarter of Boston. In the Arab world, Khalil Gibran is remembered as an almost sacred figure, but he led a salacious life, keeping several mistresses and stringing along his married editor. Despite his philandering, Gibran was one of the most elegant and prolific writers, balancing themes of spirituality and love with the messy realities of identity and nationhood.

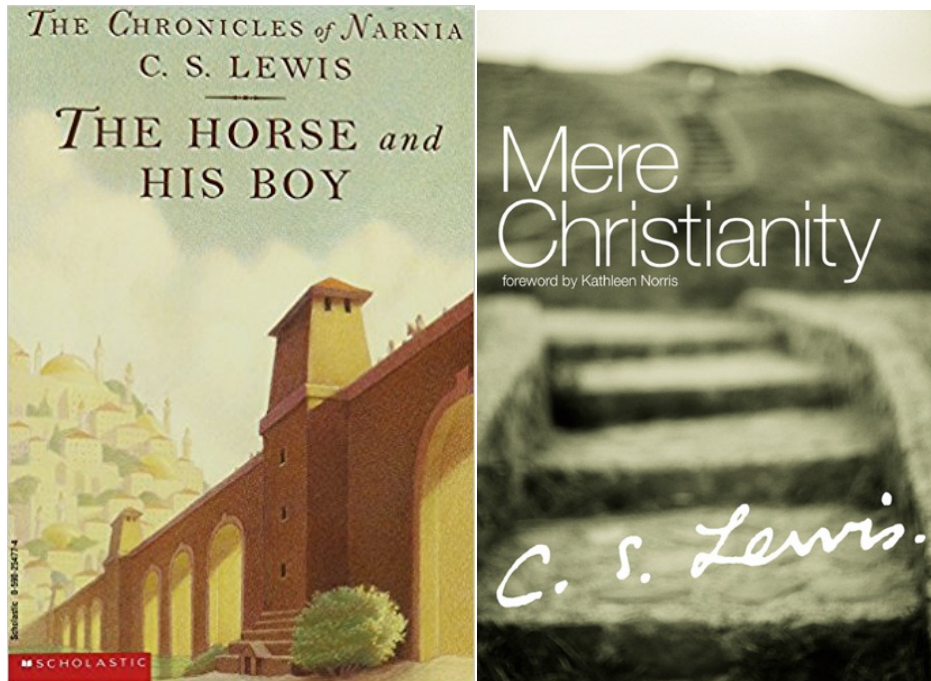
Although Gibran is more famous in the Arab world than he is in the West, many of his works were written in English. Gibran's bilingual cannon strikes a chord with my own Syrian-American identity: I often worry about forgetting my Arabic, and my diary entries in Modern Standard Arabic attest to this. Losing Arabic would be like losing a spiritual limb, leaving many shades of emotion out of my reach. How ironic that the poet who most reminds me of Syria should have written his work in English.



Hammond, Marlé, editor. *Arabic Poems*. Bilingual edition. New York: Everyman's Library Pocket Poets/Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

After hearing my father recite so many Arabic poems, I was determined to prove myself by learning about my region's rich poetic heritage. I purchased this book (on Amazon Prime, not in a Syrian bookshop!) with high hopes. However, I soon discovered that the richness of the Arabic language was, as often happens, lost in translation. One such untranslatable term is *qitmeer*, which means "the membrane of a date seed" and is used to connote something worthless or impossibly small.

This specificity comes from the fact that Ancient Arabs lived off of dates for many months of the year. Indeed, the Ancient Arabs' nomadic lifestyle gave Arabic much of its unique vocabulary; as Arabs navigated through the desert, they gave the stars Arabic names that are still used to this day.



Lewis, C. S., and Baynes, Pauline. *The Horse and His Boy*. Macmillan, 1954.

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. Illustrated gift ed., HarperOne, 2012.

My interest in religion was not limited to Islam. After reading the *The Horse and His Boy*, my favorite installment of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, I was eager to understand the source of C.S. Lewis' brilliance. When my high school crush, a devout Christian, recommended that I read *Mere Christianity*, I did so right away. Although I disagreed with Lewis' Orientalist portrayal of the East in *The Horse and His Boy*, I adored *Mere Christianity*.

I admired Lewis' engaging tone and the lucid way in which he tackled some of Christianity's most pressing questions. In fact, *Mere Christianity* was originally a call-in radio show, which explains its conversational tone. Oftentimes, I would use Lewis' metaphors to answer questions about Islam. This reminded me of one of the Prophet's (PBUH) sayings: "Knowledge is the lost property of the Muslim. He should seize it wherever he finds it." And so, I seized upon Lewis' wisdom, even if it was not meant for me.

Bryant, Megan E. *She's All That!* Scholastic Books, 2009.

Bryant, Megan E. *Oh My Gods!* Scholastic Books, 2009.

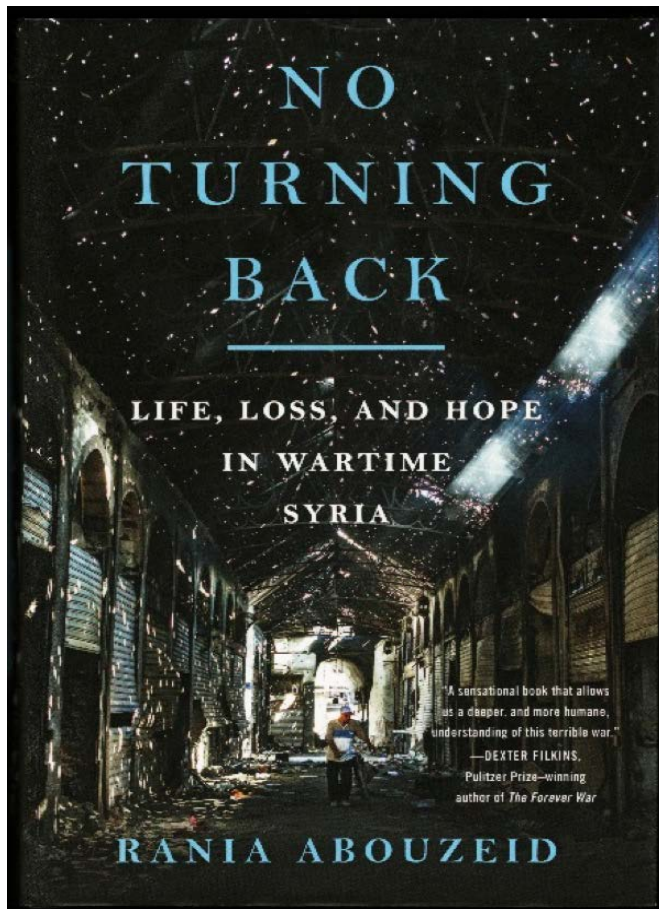
Osborne, Mary Pope. *Favorite Greek Myths*. Scholastic, 1991.

Edwards, Catharine. *Lives of the Caesars*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

When I first arrived at Harvard, I was struck by a small flower carved into the stone doorway of my dorm. I recognized it as the five-petalled Palmyra rose, named after the ancient Syrian city I had visited over a decade ago. This strange connection was explained by Robert Wood, an English architect who journeyed to Palmyra and, in 1753, published an architectural catalogue of the city'

motifs in a book titled *The Ruins of Palmyra*. Wood's book became a hallmark of Georgian architecture, a deep influence on many of Harvard's most famous buildings.

After my family's trip to Palmyra, I became obsessed with Syria's rich Greek and Roman heritage, which I explored through many books such as *She's All That, He's All That*, and Mary Pope Osborne's *Greek Mythology*. I enjoyed the colloquial tones of these books, and I especially enjoyed seeing the vibrant history of my region. As I moved on to the works of Cicero and Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, I never stopped looking for traces of Syria's history.



Abouzeid, Rania. *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018.

This book was a gift from one of my professors after I completed my thesis on Syrian integration in Germany. The author is a journalist who follows four different Syrians through the unrest of the Arab Spring. Indeed, of all the books in my collection, this is the only one that covers the current events in Syria, and had my professor not given it to me, I would never have bought it. I preferred my collection to be unmarred by the current violence and tragedy in Syria, a small reminder of the precious calm before the storm.