

Sharjah Children's Reading Festival 2016 IBBY UK Report

Summary

The International Board on Books for Young People UK (IBBY UK) were delighted to attend Sharjah Children's Reading Festival (SCRF), which ran from April 20-30 at the Expo Centre Sharjah, as a Guest of Honour of the UAE Board on Books for Young People (UAEBBY).

This report provides an overview of the visit and summarises the work undertaken by UAEBBY and other organisations to promote reading within the UAE and across the region.

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(Left to Right) Sophie Hallam, Meera Al Naqbi, Eman Mohammed, Joshua Dunning, Julia Eccleshare, Dianne Hofmeyr, Alexis Deacon and Ali.

Introduction

The International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY) was founded in 1951 by Jella Lepman, who believed that books could build bridges of understanding and peace between people. IBBY now has seventy-two national sections worldwide who meet biennially to work towards encouraging excellence in children's books, to support literacy and reading projects across the world, and to develop international understanding through children's books.

It is for this reason we were delighted to work with UAEBBY and to further understand their projects to promote reading within the UAE; to support children in the CANA region affected by war and devastation through the IBBY Sharjah Fund; and learn how we can further work together supporting refugees from the CANA region in Europe and further promote reading internationally through shared projects.¹

Attending SCRF 2016 on behalf of IBBY UK were Sophie Hallam, IBBY UK Executive Committee; Julia Eccleshare, Children's Books Editor for *The Guardian*; Dianne Hofmeyr, children's author and Alexis Deacon, children's book illustrator. The UK representatives were present at the event from April 20-23, with their involvement seeing them participate in a panel discussion, hosting creative workshops for children and meeting their UAE counterparts involved in the promotion of reading among young people as well as authors and publishers. Alexis Deacon and Dianne Hofmeyr's work was displayed on the UAEBBY stand alongside some of the the UK's recent award winners and nominees.

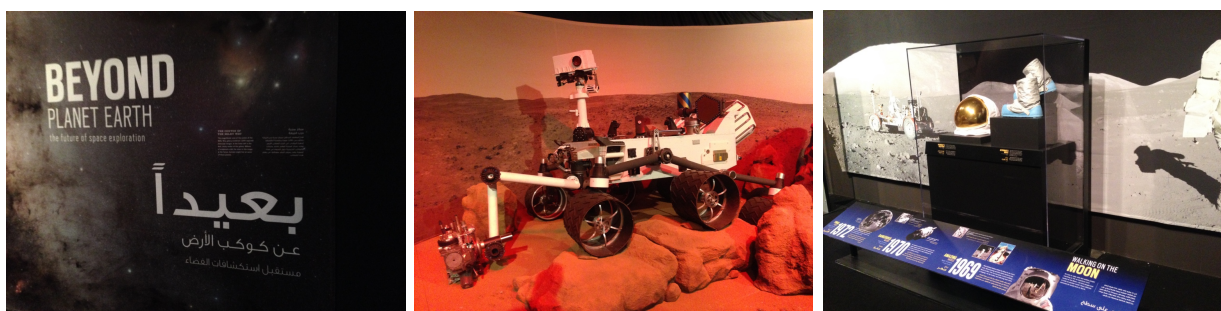


¹ We would like to recognise the work of author Jonathan Emmett and book blogger Zoe Toft in their [Think Twice](#) campaign. We fully believe that is important to be cognizant of the issues the campaign raised. As part of an international organisation, we also believe that it is crucial for IBBY members to meet and work together in order to further the aims of the IBBY.

Sharjah Children's Reading Festival

The aim of SCRF is to promote a love of reading, showcase Arab literature to the world and give illustrators, authors and artists alike the chance to feature their work.

A range of cross-curricula activities allows children to explore and interact with various subjects and disciplines. This year's festival also included an exhibition *Beyond Planet Earth: The Future of Space Exploration*.



- [A full range of activities can be seen here](#)

A whole host of special awards ceremonies are held during the Festival, including the Sharjah Children's Books Awards and the Sharjah Award for [Specially-Abled Children's Books](#), as well as prize giving held during the [Sharjah Exhibition for Children's Books Illustrations](#), held in parallel with SCRF every year.

SCRF also provides an opportunity for fellow authors and publishing houses/publishers to network and interact.

IBBY UK at SCRF

Dianne Hofmeyr and Alexis Deacon were invited to form the IBBY UK delegation, and part of their role at the festival was to hold creative workshops for children at schools and within the festival as well as take part on a panel discussion *How Reading can be a Bridge between Cultures*.



Originally from South Africa, Dianne's stories brought a taste of the African continent to the UAE. From the engaging fable of *The Magic Bojabi Tree* to the real-life story of *Zeraffra Giraffra*, her books are imbued with tales of the past which delight and fascinate children today. Dianne's workshop at the SCRF focussed on reading of *The Magic Bojabi Tree* as well as creative giraffe-making workshops. A whole array of animals made the journey to the UAE! Dianne's story is of physically crossing borders and through her stories allowing reading to be a bridge across cultures.



Alexis Deacon's work crosses borders in other ways. His works are often dreamlike and transcendent but yet cover very real and raw emotions. In *Beegu*, a little alien finds himself – well, alienated - on earth. He searches for his mother, and makes some friends along the way, but he is always moved on, and pushed out. *I am Henry Finch* deals with existential questions of being, encouraging children to think and philosophise. *Jim's Lion* – part narrative fiction, part wordless graphic novel – is an agonizing and gut-wrenching portrayal of serious illness and the power one has in overcoming it. Alexis' books will always stir up an emotion and it's not always a comfortable one. But it is *this* that enables children to cross borders into understanding something new or different, or indeed to recognise these feelings within themselves. Alexis' workshops focussed on his work as an illustrator – creating other worldly beings for the children to enjoy.



CONTEXT

The UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven states that forms one of the Middle East's most important economic centres. Before oil was discovered in the 1950s the UAE's economy was dependent on fishing and a declining pearl industry. But since oil exports began in 1962, the country's society and economy have been transformed. The seven shaikhdoms that were to form the UAE had been known as Trucial States and been part of Great Britain's informal empire in the Persian Gulf. The country became a federation of seven emirates in 1971 and since then diversified to become a regional trading and tourism hub. In 2013, the UAE's total population was 9.2 million, of which 1.4 million are Emirati citizens and 7.8 million are expatriates. It is a highly developed country and is one of the wealthiest countries in the Middle East.

LITERACY & READING CULTURE

Extract from *Educational Publishing – safeguarding the future of the Arabic language* by Sheikha Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi in *Spotlight on Arab Publishing*.

Across the Emirates, parents, teachers, and officials are expressing concern at the dwindling level of mother tongue proficiency among young native Arabic speakers. If this worrying trend is to be addressed, decisive action is needed from all of the stakeholders in our education sector, including the publishing industry.

A report recently commissioned by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, has shown that 42% of students in the Arab world read only once a week or less and that 64% of those do so in standard Arabic.

Sheikha Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi is the founder of Kalimat, the first publishing house dedicated to the production of quality Arabic children's books. Sheikha Bodour is the former President of the Emirates Publishers Association (EPA) which is responsible for representing UAE publishers locally and internationally, developing the country's publishing industry, and participating in domestic and overseas exhibitions and conferences. In 2012, her efforts gained the EPA full membership of the International Publishers Association (IPA). She is also Patron of the UAE Board on Books for Young People (UAEBBY) and the Director of Knowledge without Borders, an initiative launched by the Ruler of Sharjah with the aim of establishing a library in every house in the Emirate.

The following programmes are a result of the above concerns.

UAEBBY Projects

In line with its mission to develop the children's books industry in the United Arab Emirates, the UAEBBY organises regular workshops and events for writers, illustrators and publishers of children's books in collaboration with relevant institutions. The UAEBBY also supports those who work to promote reading among children (e.g. librarians) through providing training opportunities, information and guidance. These are a few of UAEBBY's local projects:

Etisalat Award for Children's Books

The Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's literature was launched in 2009 by the Arab Children's Book Publisher's Forum on the initiative of Her Excellency Sheikha Bodour bint Sultan Al Qasimi, President of UAEBBY. In 2010, the organisation of the award was handed over to UAEBBY.

The Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's Literature aims to provide an incentive for publishers, authors and illustrators to publish Arabic children's books that are of the highest quality in both form and content. It is one of the richest awards of its kind in the world and is considered one of the most important literary awards for children's literature in the Arab region.

The value of the award is AED 1 million, distributed across 5 different categories. The winners are announced every year during the Sharjah International Book Fair

Warsha Programme

Warsha's aim is to support and inspire a new generation of writers, illustrators, and publishers who are passionate about creating Arabic books for children and young adults from 0 to 18 years. The goal is to motivate the creation of short stories, picture books, and novels that offer children doorways to fantastic and imaginary worlds and that ultimately instil a love of Arabic books into the hearts of children for generations to come. The programme offers workshops in Illustration, Writing, and Publishing with the aim of building the capacities of young individuals in the creation of books that are both rooted in local Arabic culture and that meet international standards. The workshops are presented in the UAE and abroad by internationally acclaimed trainers and specialists in the fields of Children's and Young Adult literature.

Read, Dream, Create Campaign

Read, Dream, Create was launched in 2013 to encourage interaction between young people and books, and to develop their capabilities in the field of reading, writing, creativity, and innovation through children's stories. The initiative is known for utilising social media volunteers as well as corporate public platforms to reach out to children and young adults through literature.

Consisting of a vast range of reading related activities as well as an interactive website that engages community involvement in creating a culture of books, the campaign aims to show the fun and inventive side of reading whilst motivating the young to earnestly apply their imaginations, to be original, and to gain insight on ways to get their own stories told. Read, Dream, Create implements school visits by volunteers throughout the UAE, professional training workshops for librarians, and an annual creative writing contest for children and pre-teens the first of its kind in the Arab world.

Books Made in the UAE

The project *Books – Made in UAE*, in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut supports the development of a sustainable local children's book industry by training young and aspiring authors and illustrators in the creative process of producing children's books in Emirati Arabic language.

Kan Yama Kan Campaign

Launched in 2015, the "Kan Yama Kan" initiative (which translates as "Once upon a time") provides stationery and mobile libraries for children living in areas with limited or no access to books due to social or natural crisis or unrest and wars.

The libraries, which will be set up in a number of countries and regions around the world, will provide entertainment for children, as well as moral support. The initiative is based on the "Big Heart Library", launched by Sheikha Bodour bint Sultan Al Qasimi, UAEBBY Patron, in the Emirati-Jordanian camp for Syrian refugees in June 2014. The library, containing 3,000 books, is named after the "Big Heart Campaign", which was launched by H.H. Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, Wife of His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah, and the UNHCR Eminent Advocate for Refugee Children, to support refugee children throughout the world.

Sharjah IBBY Fund

The UAEBBY and the International Board on Books for Young People Foundation have established the IBBY Sharjah Fund for the region of Central Asia and Africa. This fund is largely dedicated for the development and support of long-term projects that are dedicated to reading and that target children in post-crisis situations as well as children living in precarious conditions in the region. It was launched on April 23, 2012 during the Sharjah Children's Reading Festival.

Knowledge without Borders

Home Library

Knowledge without Borders is a Sharjah Government initiative, with the aim strengthening knowledge through reading. One project hopes to encourage parents and children to spend more time reading and, with this aim in mind, intends to provide a library of Arabic books for around 42,000 Emirati families in Sharjah. Each library includes 50 titles from different genres, appealing to various ages and interests. Topics include religion, science and health, as well as fictional novels and children's story books.



This project aims to emphasize the importance of reading in childhood development, increase general knowledge within the local community and assist in preserving Islamic and Arabic identity and language. Part of the campaign also includes the collaboration from local celebrities who visit private and public schools to hold reading sessions. The first celebrity reading was held by local racing legend Mohammad Bin Sulayem, who visited the American International School in Sharjah. Bin Sulayem sat down with 30 eight-year-olds and read the story, *Me and My Left Hand*, to them in Arabic, as well as pointing out the importance of and fun that can had from reading as opposed to watching television and playing online games.

Total budget: 150 million Dirham (just under 28 million in Sterling)

1001 Titles

Knowledge Without Borders, KWB, has announced the launch of "1001 Titles", a project which seeks to release 1001 Emirati books over the next two years in line with 2016 being declared the Year of Reading in the UAE. The AED 5 million initiative will be implemented in 2016 and 2017 with the aim of increasing Emirati publications and distribute them in various markets including public libraries, schools and university libraries with Emirati publications.

Rashid Al Kous, General Manager of KWB, outlines the details of the initiative: "We have launched the official website of the initiative, 1001titles.com, to enable publishing houses to send the content they want to publish. A special committee will select books according to set criteria. The selection criterion includes the necessity that the content be classic Arabic and in line with Islamic, Arab and Gulf values and traditions, and priority will be given to Emirati authors."

According to Al Kous, children's books should capture children's interest and imagination, and information in books should be accurate and up-to-date. The books should help develop children's knowledge of spiritual, humanitarian, social and national values. Other criterion includes that the books should contain illustrations and pictures.

The initiative is open for applications from March 1st and after approving the content, 1,000 copies of each title will be printed in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Media's United Printing and Publishing Company. The printed books will be promoted through participation in local, Arab and international book fairs and cultural festivals. In total therefore, one million one thousand Arabic books will become available to readers.

Meeting with Publishers:

Kalimat is the first publishing house in the UAE dedicated solely to publishing Arabic children's books targeting children. Having released over 175 publications since its launching, Kalimat focuses on producing books for children with vibrant illustrations and stories. Kalimat are the winners of the "New Horizons" category of the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award after being the only Arabic book to be shortlisted for the award in 2016.



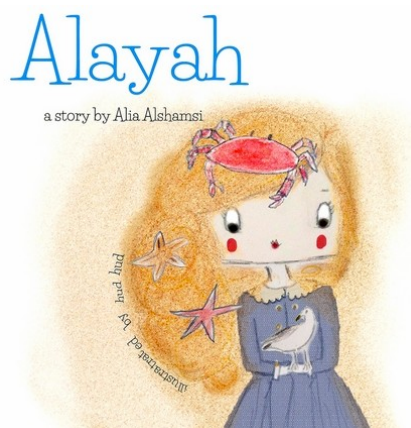
Horouf Educational Publishing, is an educational program released by Kalimat Publishing, and one of its main goals is supporting the teaching of Arabic Language at schools starting from the preschool levels. The program aims to improve the Arabic language among children through the special materials it presents.

Al Hud Hud Publishing focus on creative literary works and related topics, and direct its efforts towards young book lovers and early readers in the Arab world.

Meeting with Authors:

Alia Al Shamsi – author of *Alayah*

Alayah lives in Jumeirah and was born with sand in her hair. At first she is so annoyed by it. Years go by, and she hardly notices it any more, taken as she is with all the changes happening in Dubai. She finds herself farther and farther away from the shores she played on as a child, but the sand in her hair is always there – it connects her, it's her roots.



Noura Al-Noman – author of *Ajwan*

Al Noman studied English at UAE University and received a masters' degree in translation from the American University of Sharjah. Her first novel, *Ajwan*, was published in 2012 and won the Best YA Book Award of the Etisalat Children's Books Award in 2013. Al Noman said that she wrote the novel because she was unable to find young adult science fiction in Arabic for her daughter to read, noting that both teenage fiction and science fiction were virtually non-existent in Arabic. The novel follows the titular heroine, a 19-old girl, on an interplanetary quest to rescue her infant son from a nefarious organization who wants to turn him into a super-soldier. According to al Noman, the plot reflects contemporary political concerns in Arabic countries, in that it describes "men who have a hidden agenda to acquire power, and they use the pain and suffering of minorities or marginalized peoples to turn them into their own private armies".

Maitha Al-Khayat is a children's book author and illustrator who has been passionate about reading and writing since childhood. Her published works include *I love my Daddy's Long Beard* and the award-winning *My Own Special Way*, shortlisted for the 9th edition of the Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation.

Key issues from talking with authors/publishers:

- Talking to publishers was generally very positive. There was a feeling of excitement within the new industry and there are many initiatives to support them.
- For authors and illustrators, it's also an exciting time. There are lots of efforts to support new authors and illustrators. It is worth noting these programmes are predominantly for Emirati authors and illustrators only. There are some elements of censorship.
- The main issue the industry is facing is that children generally don't want to read in Arabic. It's not the language in which they speak day to day – usually they speak more of a dialect. Modern Standard Arabic is fairly archaic. They also read more in English. There are lots of other distractions and there is not a big reading culture amongst the older generation.

Key Outcomes:

- Supporting refugees from the CANA region in Europe through the Sharjah IBBY Fund
- Developing International Children's Laureate in the CANA region.
- Creating links between UK publishers and publishers in the UAE.

Please contact us for further information:

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