

Tamer Institute for Community Education

Renad Qubbaj, Director General of the Tamer Institute, talks about her experience. Published by the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award official website.

A children's book that changed my life

Many prominent Palestinian writers have produced works that have young adults as heroes. In 1978, Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian journalist, novelist, and painter, joined Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghassan_Kanafani) in authoring the book *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa & Other Stories*. The book includes many short stories on Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation in language that is encouraging for young adults and adults to read.

Among the many short stories within this book for young adults is *A paper from Ramleh*, from 1956. The story pictures the motion of Abu Othman within the crowd of Palestinians expelled from Ramleh towards Jerusalem in 1948. Kanafani has also authored and illustrated the book *The Little Lamp*, which speaks about a legacy left by a king to his daughter to urge her into using wisdom in life trips.

Challenges in my work

The main and more serious challenge is related to the obstacles enforced by the Israeli military occupation regulations that hinder the movement of our personnel and books from district to district within the country, and from home to other countries. The fact that Tamer's workers in Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank are unable to meet in person and discuss projects through video conference is a great challenge to us.

Another challenge in Tamer's work relates to the fact that children literature is a relatively new branch of arts in our region, and that Tamer is one of two bodies in Palestine that specialise in this field. This lays heavy responsibilities on Tamer, which finds itself involved in all aspects of children literature including publishing and improving the quality of local children's and young adults' books, sponsoring hundreds of children books discussions in the libraries, training and sponsoring young amateur writers and illustrators, and launching campaigns all over the country to promote reading as a tool to empower the individuals and society at large.

Library experience

The network of children's libraries is now facilitating the work and experience of the 78 member libraries, and is continuously supporting the competencies of librarians. The trainings that the institute have conducted so far, based on the assessment of needs, has filled much of the gaps that were required before conducting activities with children. Now the institute is confident that each district has more than three resource persons who are qualified to discuss books with children. The institute is also confident that all of the librarians who work at the libraries involved have acquired the skills necessary to classify books and manage their children's libraries. Those book discussion activities organised inside each library is considered a democratic forum where participants among children and youths are encouraged to express their ideas and ambitions freely and then plan and receive some guidance to make them true.

In the Nablus village in Beit Fourik last year, the librarian was able to advocate for new premises that facilitated better participation of youth and children in the activities organised. This year, the librarian was able to form a reading club among those youths, which is in the process of practicing an election forum of the library that is based on one of the books produced by the institute, Election Day in Sabanna. The club aims to make the library a democratic space.

My definition of quality

Tamer identifies itself as an institute for community education. For us, quality means trying to meet the goals we have set and participating in the cultural development and cultural change of the society.

In this sense, Tamer's approach to quality means tackling all or most aspects and sectors that can influence the cultural exchange. These include:

1. Promoting reading as a fun, entertaining and educating tool in society.
2. Enhancing the abilities of the Palestinian children and young adults' libraries.
3. Empowering writers and illustrators of children's books, and teachers, by providing them with the resources to do so.
4. Publishing and translating quality children and young adults' books, attractive books, and books that support the process of cultural exchange within society.
5. Building bridges with bodies like the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education for a wider and better access and influence in society.

What has the award meant for you?

The award has come as a distinction and a merit to the Palestinian children literature and to the Tamer Institute, which has been struggling for the past 20 years to bring this art to light.

The award means recognition and a sort of acknowledgement to the institute and all the people involved in children literature in Palestine. They all feel honoured and empowered by the award.

The Palestinian media and the public have received the news about the award with overwhelming feelings and encouraged some of the formal bodies that were reluctant to support children literature to think again.

Having said that, the award has also placed more responsibilities on Tamer's shoulders as it has been recognized by most formal and private bodies as the place for Palestinian children literature. Consequently, there are more challenges and commitments to meet.

The Alma Award has celebrated and supported the impact of Tamer's vision in the Palestinian community. Since 2009, work has accelerated vehemently to accumulate the effort on the core values of community building and support of the existing potential within it. While the main goal has not diverged, workers, volunteers and partners have developed a profound belief in the ability of reading and expression to achieve change against the multiple oppressions, mainly those caused by the Israeli occupation. The constant growth of belief and abilities are the backbone of the Institute's sustainability.

What are you working on at present?

For this year, Tamer's publishing unit have just finished publishing six children books and four studies on children literature; four other books are in print and should be launched soon.

The institute facilitates for book discussions to be held twice a month in each of the 77 community libraries that we cooperate with; 54 in the West Bank and 23 in Gaza.

Tamer has just finished surveying some of the infrastructural needs of the 77 community libraries and started to respond to some of their basic needs that would help make the libraries a warmer and more appealing place for the young visitors.

The institute also facilitates book discussions, which are held twice a month in each of the 40 public schools, selected from eight different districts. Several workshops and training sessions are planned for the teachers/librarians in those schools to enhance their abilities in book discussions, storytelling and creative writing.

Tamer's resource centre for children's literature has recently purchased copies of an old collection of Palestinian children and young adults books (around 120 titles) that were published in the Diaspora since the 1970s. Each community library in Palestine received three copies of each title in the collection.

Approximately 100 different other titles (Arabic and translated children books) have also been bought and distributed to all 77 community libraries and 40 school libraries that are engaged in our book discussion program for this year.