



**MIDDLE EAST OUTREACH COUNCIL ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF
THE 2020 MIDDLE EAST BOOK AWARD**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington, D.C.

November 18, 2020

Contact: Susan Douglass, Ph.D., and Emma Harver, co-chairs of the 2020 Middle East Book Awards committee, BookAwards@meoc.us.

Dive into stories about separation and longing for home, finding belonging and friends in new places, overcoming collective fear by confronting it head-on, and interwoven stories from multiple cultures, connecting in ways that can be shared by all. These are the winners of the 2020 Middle East Book Award. This year's award winners were announced on November 18, 2020 during a live-streamed announcement on [Facebook](#). To engage with these stories, view the recorded announcement and [register for a webinar](#) featuring a 2020 award winner on March 11, 2021.

Established in 1999, the Middle East Book Award recognizes quality books for children and young adults that contribute meaningfully to an understanding of the Middle East and its component societies and cultures. Books are judged on the authenticity of their portrayal of a Middle Eastern subject, as well as on characterization, plot, and appeal for the intended audience.

For the purposes of this award, the Middle East is defined as Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

A committee of MEOC members, including teachers, librarians, outreach coordinators, and other educators select award winners (and, if deemed appropriate, honorable mention titles) in three categories:

- **Picture Book** (simple text accompanied by large images on most pages, intended for elementary school readers).
- **Youth Literature** (plot-driven books appropriate for readers in middle and high school).
- **Youth Non-Fiction** (reference or other non-fiction—e.g., memoir—intended for K-12 audiences or their teachers).

In order to be eligible for the 2020 Middle East Book Award, titles must have been published between January 2019 and June 2020. As always, MEOC encourages teachers, librarians and all who share stories and books with children to communicate with children's parents and caregivers about the stories shared.

This year's recognized titles are:

PICTURE BOOK AWARD

Winner: *SALMA THE SYRIAN CHEF* by Danny Ramadan, illustrated by Anna Bron (Annick Press, 2020).

Salma and her mother have recently arrived in Vancouver and all Salma wants to do is make her mama smile again. Between English classes, job interviews, and missing Papa back in Syria, Mama always seems busy or sad. A homemade Syrian meal might cheer her up! The staff and other newcomers at the Welcome Center are happy to help out. Syrian culture is beautifully represented through the meal Salma prepares and the diverse cast of characters speaks to the power of cultivating community in challenging circumstances. Accessible for readers ages 4-7/ Pre-K-2nd grade.

Winner: *THE CAT MAN OF ALEPPO* by Irene Latham and Karim Shamsi-Basha, illustrated by Yuko Shimizu (G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2020).

When war came to Syria, many fled the once-beautiful city of Aleppo and were forced to become refugees in faraway places. But Mohammad Alaa Aljaleel, an ambulance driver, stayed behind. He cared for his neighbors in need and used what little money he had to buy food for the city's abandoned cats. Now known worldwide as the Cat Man of Aleppo, Alaa's courageous and heartening story is brought to life in this book and its gorgeous illustrations.

Honorable Mention: *THE GHOUL* by Taghreed Najjar, illustrated by Hassan Manasra; translated from Arabic by Michel Moushabeck (Crocodile Books, 2019).

The villagers are afraid of the "Ghoul". For years, they have tiptoed around out of fear of disturbing this monster which is believed to eat humans until one day brave Hassan embarks on a dangerous mission to face the long-feared Ghoul. What does he discover at the top of the mountain? This is a beautifully illustrated story that can be used as a springboard to discuss how we perceive those who are different and how our fears and prejudices may be built on false assumptions.

Sub-committee Chair: Angela Williams, Associate Director, Center for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Illinois; Reviewers: Hadil Ghoneim, children's book author, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Nnenna Odim, doctoral student, Early Childhood Education, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas; Courtney Tuck, K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Coach, Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Andi Webb, Instructional Coach, Forest Hills Global Elementary, Wilmington, North Carolina.

YOUTH LITERATURE AWARD

Winner: *NO BALLET SHOES IN SYRIA* by Catherine Bruton (Nosy Crow Ltd, 2019).

Aya has fled Aleppo with her mother and baby brother, arriving in the United Kingdom with only the few items they could carry. Her days are spent at a refugee center, wondering what might have happened to her father. Stumbling upon a ballet class, she is able to join, but wonders if she will ever fit in. The teacher was once a refugee, too, during the Holocaust as part of the Kindertransport program, and the two stories weave together beautifully, bringing to life the hope and the hardships that refugees have faced both in the past and the present. Author Catherine Bruton, an English teacher, gives readers a character to root for. Aya's life in Aleppo comes alive in flashbacks, portraying the harrowing journey her family made to get to safety. Facing a new life in the UK, Aya slowly finds friendship and connection as her love for ballet re-ignites her passion and self-expression. Madam Helena's empathy for Aya and her family envelops them in warmth that they don't often see in the systems that control the lives of newcomers. Bruton presents us with a realistic situation and an unvarnished truth that so many refugees face in their new countries, starting over with very little.

Winner: *OTHER WORDS FOR HOME* by Jasmine Warga (Balzer + Bray, 2019).

Jasmine Warga presents us with a stunning novel about longing and belonging. *Other Words for Home*, written in piercing verse, leads us into the heart of young Jude, a middle school girl who has been exiled to Cincinnati along with her pregnant mother, escaping an increasingly volatile life in Syria. She longs for the father and brother left behind, along with her beloved friends and her country. Jude faces learning to belong in Cincinnati. Can she ever feel at home living with a first cousin who ignores her? Will she be accepted in the drama club wearing her head scarf on stage? Will Jude ever hear from her beloved father and brother? Will her devastated mother ever seem like herself again? In *Other Words for Home* we find that Jude uses love, kindness, patience, persistence and bravery to adapt and eventually thrive in her new world. She discovers how to belong and teaches us her secrets.

Honorable Mention: *ONCE UPON AN EID: STORIES OF HOPE AND JOY BY 15 MUSLIM VOICES* by Editors S.K. Ali and Aisha Saeed, illustrated by Sara Alfageeh (Harry N. Abrams, 2020).

A collection of short stories from prominent authors of young adult literature. Eid is a celebration. These stories weave us through food, family, prayer, and traditions held deep in this marking of the end of the month of Ramadan. From different living rooms and kitchens throughout the world, the reader is given the opportunity to be an observer through the eyes of many. Poetry, illustrations and lyrical sentences of humor and relativity bring us closer to the people in each story. A valuable piece of literature in a time when global awareness is important and necessary. Good for all ages to read alone or together.

Sub-committee Chair: Betsey Coleman, Educational Consultant and Retired Educator from Colorado Academy; Reviewers: Kimberly Klett, English teacher, Dobson High School, Mesa, Arizona; Barbara Petzen, Director of Training Initiatives, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.; Lois Pipkin, AIG teacher, C.W. Stanford Middle School, Hillsborough, North Carolina; Julie Wakefield, social studies teacher, Robert McQueen High School, Reno, Nevada.

NON-FICTION AWARD

No award was given in this category this year.

**

ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST OUTREACH COUNCIL

Established in 1981, the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) is a national nonprofit organization working to increase public knowledge about the peoples, places, and cultures of the Middle East, including the Arab world, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. MEOC's members comprise a national network of educators dedicated to disseminating apolitical and nonpartisan information, resources and activities representing multiple voices and viewpoints that further understanding about the Middle East.

MEOC's target audience is non-specialists at the K-12 and college levels, although its services are also relevant to broader community needs. MEOC has members around the country and its services include a member listserv, annual book award and a website.

This press release may be accessed at: www.meoc.us.