



**MIDDLE EAST OUTREACH COUNCIL ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF  
THE 2021 MIDDLE EAST BOOK AWARD**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Washington, D.C.  
December 7, 2021

**Contact:** Craig Cangemi and Katie Aslan, Co-chairs of the 2021 Middle East Book Awards committee, [ccangemi@qfi.org](mailto:ccangemi@qfi.org) or [kaslan@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:kaslan@austin.utexas.edu).

Picture books and novels about access to education, a mobile library in Afghanistan, the history of cities, how the characters find ways to cope and find belonging and friends in new homes, how children cope with war, and interwoven stories from multiple cultures, connecting in ways that can be shared by all. These are the winners of the 2021 awards. Register for our webinar with a winning author in June 2022 at <https://internationalizingsocialstudies.blog/>.

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 2021 Middle East Book Award, titles must have been published between January 2020 and June 2021. 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:

## **MEOC 2021 WINNING BOOKS**

### **Picture Books**

Committee Chair: Dr. Angela Selena Williams, Committee Members: Suriati Abas, Nnenna Odim, Mary C. Tuck

#### **Award Winner:**

[\*The Library Bus\*](#), by Bahram Rahman; Illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard (Pajama Press, 2020)

It is still dark in Kabul, Afghanistan when the library bus rumbles out of the city. There are no bus seats—instead there are chairs and tables and shelves of books. And there are no passengers—instead there is Pari, who is nervously starting her first day as Mama's library helper. Pari stands tall to hand out notebooks and pencils at the villages and the refugee camp, but she feels intimidated. The girls they visit are learning to write English from Mama. Pari can't even read or write in Farsi yet. But next year she will go to school and learn all there is to know. And she is so lucky. Not long ago, Mama tells her, girls were not allowed to read at all. Author Bahram Rahman grew up in Afghanistan during years of civil war and the restrictive Taliban regime. He wrote this book to tell new generations about the struggles of women who, like his sister, were forbidden to learn. The story is brought to life by pensive and captivating artwork of illustrator Gabrielle Grimard. Ages 5-8/ K-3rd grade

#### **Honorable Mentions:**

[\*Seven Special Somethings\*](#), by Adib Khorram; Illustrated by Zainab Faidhi (Dial Books, 2021)

Kian can't wait for Persian New Year! His family has already made a haft-seen arrangement, and Kian's baba and maman told him that all the things on it start with S and will bring them joy in the new year. Kian wonders if he could add just one more S, to make his family even happier. Hmm . . . Sonny the cat's name starts with S--but Sonny knocks the whole table over! Can Kian find seven special somethings to make a new haft-seen before his family arrives for their Nowruz celebration? Author Adib Khorram and illustrator Zainab Faidhi have created a colorful and comical book, perfect to be read with early readers who will be able to identify the letter 's' in the special objects.

Ages 4-8/Pre-K-3rd grade

[\*Song of the Old City\*](#), by Anna Pellicoli; Illustrated by Merve Atilgan (G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2020)

Follow one little girl on her busy day through the old city of Istanbul--from the Galata bridge to the Grand Bazaar--as the city opens its arms to her. All along the way, the generous people she meets share many gifts with her: sesame rounds, hot tea, a boat ride, rose candy, pomegranate juice, even a scrub in a Turkish bath! But she doesn't just keep the gifts for herself. At every turn, she finds a way to share what has been given to her and pass it on so others can enjoy it too. With poetic text and radiant artwork, author Anna Pellicoli and Turkish illustrator Merve Atilgan bring us this heartwarming tale of kindness and generosity in the city known as the crossroads of the world.

Ages 4-7/Pre-K-2nd grade

## **Non-Fiction**

Committee Chair: Dr. Roberta Robinson. Members of Committee: Dr. Susan Douglass, Marina Huyler

[\*Drawn Across Borders: True Stories of Human Migration\*](#), by George Butler (Candlewick Studio, 2021)  
Follow award-winning artist George Butler, who made a series of pen-and-ink and watercolor portraits in war zones and refugee camps over the course of a decade. Butler features migrants and refugees in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Asia, and tells the humans stories behind the headlines, “sketching by the hospital bed of a ten-year-old Syrian boy who survived an airstrike, drawing the doll of a little Palestinian girl with big questions, or talking with a Masai herdsman forced to abandon his rural Kenyan home for the Kibera slums, George Butler turns reflective art and sensitive reportage into an eloquent cry for understanding and empathy.” These beautiful and inspiring stories help explain the complexity of why people all over the world are compelled to leave home.

Ages 10-17/Grades 5-6

### **Honorable Mentions:**

[\*Explore the Old City of Aleppo\*](#), by Khaldoun Fansa (Cune Press, 2020)

The author, a former resident of Aleppo, now having to live abroad, is an architect who was involved in restoring Aleppo’s old city. This book offers the reader delightful images of beautiful architectural details of buildings, bazaars, homes and some inhabitants of Aleppo. This World Heritage site has been under threat since the hostilities began. The reader has a chance to learn about this beautiful city from a resident.

Ages 11-14/4-6th Grade

[\*Maryam’s Magic\*](#), By Megan Reid, Illustrated by Aaliya Jaleel (Balzer + Bray, 2021)

This is the true story of Maryam Mirzakhani, an Iranian woman, whose love of stories helped her to see math differently. As a child, her love of stories propelled her toward the world of books. When at the age of 12 she was introduced to geometry, she saw math in a different way. Combining story and geometric shapes in ways that helped solve math’s most complicated problems, she was the first woman, and the first Iranian to win the Fields Medal mathematics award.

Ages 4-8/K-4th Grade

## **Youth Literature**

Committee Chair: Gretchen Stulock. Members of Committee: Kim Klett, Barbara Petzen, Julie Wakefield, Megan Beals

### **Award Winners:**

[\*Everything Sad is Untrue\*](#), by Daniel Nayeri (Levine Querido, 2020)

Early in Daniel Nayeri’s autobiographical novel, he writes “Persians aren't liars. They're poets, which is worse.” Thus begins the story of Daniel, a refugee and middle schooler in Oklahoma. While his day-to-day school experience might feel typically angsty and cruel for his age -- with bullies, boring classes, and smelly lunches -- his mind is a chaotic compilation of family memories and stories. Daniel blends folklore, legend, and oral tradition into his own experience as a young Persian navigating American school, captivating his teacher and peers with mysterious tales from the times and places before. Daniel blurs the lines between truth and fiction, and simultaneously uncovers the significance of inherited stories when we’re separated from the very people and places that shape us.

Ages 12-18/7-12th Grade

[Beni's War](#), by Tammar Stein (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2020)

Tammar Stein's *Beni's War* brings 1970s Israel and the Yom Kippur War into view as families and communities experience the uncertainties and pains of wartime. When Beni's brother, Motti, gets called to war, the family agonizes over his absence. Beni's friends and mechanic skills give him the boost he needs to act out of empathy, courage, and sacrifice to protect his community and family. This compelling novel will engage mature middle school readers in discussions about history, cultural context, and the importance of community.

Ages 9-12/4-7th Grade

**Honorable Mention:**

[...Too Far From Home](#), by Naomi Shmuel, Illustrated by Avi Katz (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2020)

Shmuel's novel highlights diversity within Israeli society with Meskerem, a Jewish girl from an Ethiopian American family. Meskerem is the only child of color in her fifth grade class and will do whatever it takes -- even lie -- to fit into her new school community. As she learns of the struggles her parents and grandmother experienced when seeking asylum in Israel, she begins to accept her multifaceted background. This novel explores what it means to question our identities, stay true to our individuality, and provides hope of acceptance for young readers.

Ages 8-13/3-7th Grade

\*\*

**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: <http://www.meoc.us>.