



Middle East Outreach Council announces winners of the 2017 Middle East Book Award

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington, DC
November 19, 2017

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Inspiring tales of refugees from their homelands, memoirs of childhood in the Middle East, humorous reflections on the awkwardness of being a Muslim teen, and profiles of prominent Egyptian Coptic Christians are among the titles recognized at the 2017 Middle East Book Awards, announced on Sunday, November 19, 2017 at the Middle East Outreach Council's annual business meeting in Washington, DC.

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, 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 2017 Middle East Book Award, titles must have been published between January 2016 and June 2017.

This year's recognized titles are:

PICTURE BOOK

WINNER: *Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush's Incredible Journey*, by Doug Kuntz and Amy Shrodes, Illustrated by Sue Conelison (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2017)

This heartwarming true story about one lost cat's journey to be reunited with his refugee family gently introduces children to a difficult topic and shows how ordinary people can help with compassion and hope. Based on a true story, *Lost and Found Cat* sheds light on the perilous journey that many refugees from the Middle East have embarked upon. The story is clear and hopeful, and provides an important educational message that individual people can make a difference. Many children can relate to losing a pet, providing them with a way to empathize with the family in the story. The illustrations are beautiful and clearly communicate the action for the reader. The endnotes with photos are powerful and will likely engage slightly older readers even more.

HONORABLE MENTION: *My Beautiful Birds*, by Suzanne Del Rizzo (Pajama Press, 2017)

A young Syrian boy is forced with his family to leave home and seek shelter in a refugee camp. But he can't forget the pigeons he left behind at home. *My Beautiful Birds* offers an opportunity for children to learn about life in a refugee camp. The story addresses both loss and regained hope, and children will be attracted to the unique clay-creation illustrations that present beautiful textures and colors.

HONORABLE MENTION: *Stepping Stones*, by Margriet Ruurs, translated by Falah Raheem, illustrated by Nizar Ali Badr (Orca Book Publishers, 2016)

Stepping Stones tells the story of Rama and her family, who are forced to flee their once-peaceful village to escape the ravages of the civil war raging ever closer to their home. With only what they can carry on their backs, Rama and her mother, father, grandfather and brother, Sami, set out to walk to freedom in Europe. This story is told in both Arabic and English on each page. The stone art illustrations by Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr are powerful and will inspire students to create their own stone art. The book presents many opportunities for discussion such as using what you have, perseverance and migration, among others. The book ends with a listing of organizations who are working in relief efforts allowing readers to take informed action.

The 2017 Picture Books subcommittee was chaired by Emma Harver (Duke/University of North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies), with reviewers Jacqueline Brown-Williams (Tryon, NC), Rosanne Dlugosz (Phoenix, AZ), Jennifer Metzler (Tucson, AZ), Holly Shaw (Lyons, CO), and Cheryl Wiens (Fountain Hills, AZ).

YOUTH LITERATURE

WINNER: *Salt Houses*, by Hala Alyan (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

Depicting the story of Palestinian displacement in the 20th century, *Salt Houses* is a brilliantly written, captivating novel that leaps through time with effortless bounds. From the vantage point of one family's members through generations, *Salt Houses* proves once again the truth behind the 1960s adage that the personal is political. This novel will engage mature readers with its multiple narratives and perspectives, and provides a superb overview of the major contemporary historical issues in the Middle East.

HONORABLE MENTION: *Saints & Misfits*, by S. K. Ali (Salaam Reads, 2017)

Alternating between humorous and poignant, *Saints and Misfits* presents Muslim teens and the Muslim community in an honest and fresh way. Moving along at a fast clip, this contemporary YA novel has an authenticity that both adolescent girls and boys will appreciate. We learn above all that Muslim teens

think about the same things that *all* teens do: getting along with their parents, having crushes, going to parties, and how to navigate becoming an adult.

HONORABLE MENTION: *Balcony On The Moon: Coming Of Age In Palestine*, by Ibtisam Barakat (Macmillan 2016)

Balcony on the Moon continues the memoirs of Ibtisam Barakat, picking up where 2007's *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (also a Middle East Book Award winner) left off. Told in approachable, engaging language, an American middle or high school student will connect to the author's experience, which includes her father's disability, sibling's angst, and her own desire to live an authentic life. The story captures the unwavering strength of a young woman coming of age in challenging circumstances both personally and societally.

HONORABLE MENTION: *The Girl in Green*, by Derek B. Miller (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

The Girl in Green is a riveting look at contemporary Middle Eastern politics and conflict with enough action to keep teenagers fully engaged. Miller's style brings out the complexity of the region's many different players while simultaneously building empathy through multiple perspectives and frequent use of humor. This book unfolds like a major motion picture but has the exceptional character development found only in a well-written novel.

The 2017 Youth Fiction sub-committee was chaired by Jon Vogels (Colorado Academy, Denver, CO), with reviewers Betsey Coleman (Denver, CO), Mark Gudgel (Omaha, NE), Kara El-Kadi (Atlanta, GA), Trina Williams (North Little Rock, AR), and Kari Wimpish (Charlotte, NC).

YOUTH NON-FICTION

WINNERS: *A Refugee's Journey from Syria* and *A Refugee's Journey from Afghanistan*, by Helen Mason (Crabtree Publishing Company, 2017)

Part of the *Leaving My Homeland* series, these books stood out for their clear writing, vivid pictures, and broad usefulness to K-12 teachers. Although the books are intended for elementary readers, middle school educators felt the books have sophisticated enough content to engage middle school and even struggling high school readers. Difficult words are defined, the historical content is interspersed with the story of one refugee family, and there is a service learning component at the end. Overall, the books are well-written, informative, interesting, and useful.

HONORABLE MENTION: *A Refugee's Journey from Iraq*, by Ellen Rodger (Crabtree Publishing Company, 2017)

Also part of the *Leaving My Homeland* series and following the same structure, this book was vivid, interesting, and very useful for elementary and possibly middle school teachers.

HONORABLE MENTION: *Roadmap to Success: Inspiring Journeys of Ten Iconic Coptic Leaders*, by Dr. Shahira Abdel Shahid (Archway Publishing, 2016)

This book provides positive role models of inspiring leaders from non-traditional Middle Eastern backgrounds. Since each of the ten leaders are interviewed separately, the book can be easily excerpted (students assigned one chapter to read) for a variety of classes: Middle East Studies, Leadership, Religious Studies (due to the book's Christian content), or even English classes.

The Youth Non-Fiction Subcommittee was chaired by Lisa Adeli, Ph.D. (University of Arizona), with reviewers Rachael Eggebeen (Tucson, AZ), Marjorie Hunter (Marion, AR), Mia Kang (Simi Valley, CA), Jay LeBlanc (Littleton, CO), Constance Onsaie (Tucson, AZ), and Julie Wakefield (Sparks, NV).

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ABOUT MEOC

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>