Announcement of 2013 MEOC Book Awards

The Middle East Outreach Council’s 2013 Middle East Book Awards recipients celebrate citizen activism, heroism, inventive genius, and cultural heritage. Winners were announced at the Middle East Studies Association conference held in New Orleans, LA, in October.

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 this award, the Middle East is defined as the Arab World, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Afghanistan.

Awards are given in three categories: Picture Books, Youth Literature, and Youth Nonfiction. This year, the committee was led by Dr. Regina Higgins, Outreach Director of the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies.

The MEOC Book Award Committee is a volunteer committee consisting of MEOC members representing primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions. Past recipients of the awards can be viewed here. Nominations for the Middle East Book Award are made by publishers, educators, librarians, and the general public. If you would like to nominate a book, please contact Regina Higgins at regina_higgins@unc.edu

1. Picture Book Category:
   The committee was chaired by Jean Campbell of Eugene, Oregon, MEOC’s former president.

   The winner is: Hands Around the Library: Protecting Egypt’s Treasured Books, by Karen Leggett Abouraya (author) and Susan L. Roth (illustrator) (Dial)

   Hands Around the Library: Protecting Egypt’s Treasured Books, by Karen Leggett Abouraya, illustrated by Susan L. Roth (Dial) This remarkable picture book features beautiful and varied illustrations of an actual event, with photo montages at once captivating and playful. It makes the Egyptian uprising accessible to young children through the lens of the library and offers useful background information and possible extensions across the curriculum. Reviewers were pleased to note the inclusion of Arabic writing, details in illustrations with Alexandria’s seacoast setting, colors and significance of the Egyptian flag, and issues important to those protesting. Highly educational and suited for extension on many topics and subject areas.

   Honorable Mention: Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors, by Hena Khan (Author) and Mehrdokht Amini (illustrator) (Chronicle Books)
**Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors, by Hena Khan (Author) and Mehrdokht Amini (illustrator) (Chronicle Books)** impressed reviewers with its beautiful illustrations and easy-to-read yet engaging prose. The text in rhyme makes it pleasing to younger students who may be hearing the book read aloud. Reviewers pointed out that the glossary at the end further supports learning about Islam.

2. **Youth Literature Category:**

The committee was chaired by Betsey Coleman, high school English teacher in Denver, Colorado.

The winner is *The Girl Who Fell to Earth: A Memoir, by Sophia Al-Maria* (HarperCollins)

*The Girl Who Fell to Earth: A Memoir, by Sophia Al-Maria (HarperCollins)*

With its insight into the rapidly changing society in the Gulf, a world infrequently read about by American youth, and a central character caught between two worlds, one of her American mother and the other of her Qatari Bedouin father, Sophia Al-Maria’s *The Girl Who Fell To Earth* is this year’s Middle East Book Awards winner. The memoir not only reveals conditions in another part of the world, but will help readers be more aware of similarities, good and unfortunate, between the “other” culture and their own. The central narrator’s engaging and witty, voice manages to weave references from Eastern and Western culture in the 1980s and now. Where else could you read about the starry night in the Qatar desert; Carl Sagan’s videos; star-crossed lovers from East and West; the oilification of the Gulf or Ziggy Stardust- David Bowie as an alien? Humor, surprises, plot twists make this memoir very appealing to readers.

Honorable Mentions are *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return, by Zeina Abirached (Graphic Universe)* and *A Fort of Nine Towers: An Afghan Family Story, by Qais Akbar Omar (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux)*

*A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return, by Zeina Abirached (Graphic Universe)* With its compelling plot, characterization and imagery, this graphic novel gives faces and stories to the families from the Lebanese civil war trying to survive. The historical content focuses on the civic geography of living so close to a green zone which divides a city during a war. It is a story about families, war, survival, and above all community. The stark black blocked illustrations work well to convey the content of fear during war. Because of its simplicity, *Game for Swallows* is a book for all ages; young children will grasp the basic situation: two young children like themselves whose parents are away but who are looked after by other adults. Older readers will be interested in the background of the story and want to discuss why the writer-illustrator created the book as she did. Adults will focus on the subtleties--slight changes in facial expression, for instance--that can reveal a lot about characterization and relationships. This is a compelling and meaningful book for all readers.
A Fort of Nine Towers: An Afghan Family Story, by Qais Akbar Omar (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux) Described from a young person's point of view, A Fort of Nine Towers gives a vivid, intimate, and detailed picture of life in another culture and the violence besetting the society of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 90s. The memoir is a complex cultural tapestry of a range of Afghan tribes and dialects through the travels made across nine years of fleeing to safety during the war. The narrator’s openness to the novelty and differences amongst the people he and his family meet is a fantastic contrast to the strife bred by religious differences between warring factions in the country. Told from the perspective of an Afghan youth experiencing what no adult should ever have seen, the memoir brings new perspectives to Western readers.

3. Youth Non-Fiction Category:

The committee was chaired by Lisa Adeli, outreach coordinator, the Center for Middle East Studies, University of Arizona.

The co-winners are: The Compassionate Warrior: Abd el-Kader of Algeria, by Elsa Marston (Wisdom Tales) and The Arab World Thought of It: Inventions, Innovations, and Amazing Facts by Saima Hussain (Annick Press)

The Compassionate Warrior: Abd el-Kader of Algeria by Elsa Marston (Wisdom Tales) is a well-written account of a 19th century Algerian freedom fighter, Abd el-Kader, who won respect in the West for his humanitarian values and compassionate policies during the struggle against French colonialism. In fact, Abd el-Kader is commended by Abraham Lincoln, has a town in Iowa named after him, and is the subject of a yearly essay competition for U.S. high school students. Evaluators felt that this book will be an excellent addition to any high school classroom or library because of its clear, interesting writing style and relevance to World History, U.S. History, and Constitution classes.

The Arab World Thought of It: Inventions, Innovations, and Amazing Facts by Saima Hussain (Annick Press) is a wonderful, compelling book with “sufficient text to explain the beautiful photography.” Middle school and high school students will love learning about developments in the medieval Islamic world that affect our lives today. They will be intrigued by stories – and photos – showing how soap was invented, how the scalpel was developed for use in surgery, how wind was first harnessed for power, and many others. Teachers will love the accompanying map, timeline, and index, which make the book useful and informative as well as fun.