

Arabic Books en Vogue: A Brief Interview with Mike Masri

Vladimir F. Wertsman

I am sitting in the hospitable office of Mr. Mike Masri, manager of the Dahesh Heritage Bookstore. I interviewed Masri six years ago about the life and writings of Dr. Dahesh (1909–1984), a prolific author, philosopher and art collector, who expressed his love of books in the following words:

I love books immensely
For through them . . .
I see all things and actions of the human race,
Without having to budge from my place.
The books always play this part,
So a great love for them forever fills my heart. (*MultiCultural Review*, 11:2, June 2002, 44–45)

This time, while having coffee and Arabic pastries, our interview focused on the strong and increasing demand for Arabic and multilingual books

I read in the New York Times and other publications that in the last few years Arabic became one of the fastest-growing major languages and that enrollment in Arabic courses in all colleges (two year and four year studies) jumped from 10,000 students in 2002 to about 24,000 in 2006. Is this trend reflected in your business too?

Oh, yes, in the first place, we see new and increased orders from academic and public libraries like New York University, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Borough Public Library. At the same time, we recorded new customers: Monterey Language Institute (California), West Point Academy, public libraries in Toledo (Ohio), San Francisco, Wisconsin, and Chicago public libraries, to name a few examples.



Mike Masri (left) with Vladimir Wertsman.

Do you sell to other places as well?

Again, my answer is positive. Orders have come from various American centers of learning Arabic and bookstores; Arabic vendors in California, Ohio, Michigan, and Florida; as well as foreign buyers in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, France, Germany, England, Sweden, and Japan.

What about individual customers?

The size of our clientele has been augmented by many college and high school students, university professors, scholars and other researchers, and translators and interpreters, including people from the United Nations, from various Arab and other countries embassies, and, of course, from the Department of State. Our visitors also include authors, persons in the media, even people working in finance and other businesses who are interested in culture and new ideas.

Could you briefly describe your book collections?

We have about 20,000 titles: two-thirds in Arabic and one-third in English and bilingual. The Arabic collection encompasses fiction, poetry, religion, history, philosophy, fine arts, music, and translations of world classics into Arabic. We also have English translations of Arabic masterpieces. You'll find in the collection leading authors such as Ameen Al-Rihani, Girgi Zeidan, Nazar Qabani, Mahmood Darwish, Taha Husein, Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqaad, Najib Mahfouz (Nobel Prize winner), Jamal Al-Kitani, Nawal Al-Sadawi, and Ala Al-Aswani. Arab and Arab-American authors writing in English are represented by Kahlil Gibran, Ala Al-Arji, poet Nathalie Handal, Elias Khoury, and several others.



What are your most popular books translated from English into Arabic?

Many of the books popular among English-speaking readers are popular among our customers too. We should mention *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, Shakespeare's plays, the Harry Potter series, Bill Clinton's memoirs, and the collected works of Kahlil Gibran.

Who are some of the new Arabic authors whose work you like?

Standing out are the Egyptian Salwa Bakr, the Algerian Yasmina Khadra, the Moroccan Mohamed Shukri, the Lebanese authors Amin Maloof and Elias Khoury, and above all, the old yet always new Dr. Dahesh.

What other topics are popular?

Teaching Arabic for children, how-to books, American citizenship books and cassettes, and travel books. Especially popular are 300 Arabic bilingual dictionaries for 85 languages, including English, French, Spanish, Russian, German, Romanian, Sanskrit, Persian, Mongolian, Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, and Swahili. We also have English-language literature on CDs and cassettes and elementary, intermediate, and advanced programs to learn the English language on CDs and DVDs.

What are your suggestions for future translations of Arabic books into English?

In my opinion, we need more Arabic novels made available in English and more books about Arabic life and culture. There is a need for books of philosophy, sociology, and public health and medicine from an Arab perspective. We also need more modern interpretations of Islam so that Americans at large have a better grasp of the Arabic mosaic, contributions, and aspirations.

You are an independent bookseller at a time when the independents are being squeezed by the big-box chains and online booksellers. How competitive are your prices?

Academic and public libraries have a discount of 20 percent regardless of quantities of purchased copies. There is a 30 percent discount on language dictionaries, and shipping on the first order is free. Individuals receive a discount of 20 percent for the first order. Shipments of books are within a week from the date of the order.

Where do you advertise and promote your bookstore?

We use *MultiCultural Review*; *New York Times*; *Daily News*; Arab-American publications such as *Arab Voice* (New Jersey), *Watan-Al-Arabi* (Detroit), and *Arab Times* (Los Angeles); other ethnic newspapers in the United States, such as *France Amerique* (French), *Hoy* (Spanish), and *Zeitung* (German); and the foreign periodicals *Al-Abram* (Egypt), *Al-Hayad* (Lebanon), *Banipal* (U.K.), and *Arab Forum* (Germany).

What additional aspects would you like to mention?

Our publishing house, the Daheshist Publishing Company, puts out the *Dahesh Voice*, a bilingual (English/Arabic) quarterly covering literature, philosophy, poetry, art, medicine, and other topics. The authors are university professors, scholars, medical authorities, distinguished poets, and other qualified contributors. This publication distributes 6,000 copies quarterly in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Spain, the Middle East, China, Japan, and India. The publishing company, which owns the bookstore, is also the printer and distributor of Dr. Dahesh's writings—over 100 titles of poetry, fiction, philosophy, travel impressions, and other subjects in Arabic and translations into foreign languages. The Dahesh Museum in New York City was founded in his memory.

Mr. Masri, thank you very much for your kind hospitality, time, and interesting conversation.

Vladimir F. Wertsman is Chair of the Publishing and Multicultural Materials Committee, Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) of the American Library Association. The interview took place on April 29, 2008, in the office of Dahesh Heritage Bookstore/The Daheshist Publishing Company in New York City. 📍

Coming in the Next Issue:

- Recently Published Children's Books About American Indians
- Children's Literature About the U.S.-Mexico Border
- Interview with Young Adult Author Matt de la Peña
- African-American Fiction Roundup