

Two Books. Two Authors.

An Inside Look at a Unique School Visit Partnership on the Civil Rights Movement

Bethany Hegedus and Kekla Magoon

Standing side by side, on the spot-lit auditorium stage, we glanced at each other nervously. It was our first presentation, to a crowd of 350 middle school students. The students, initially squirmy, had fallen silent. But were they really that deeply engaged ... or had they fallen comatose with boredom? Bethany stepped forward. "We need six volunteers," she called. We held our breaths for barely a beat, before hundreds of hands shot up.

We looked at each other and smiled. It was working.

Race and class—few subjects are as highly debated in our country, and few subjects are more likely to divide rather than to unite. While this may be true, it is their differences that bind us—authors Kekla Magoon and Bethany Hegedus—in a multifaceted creative partnership. We are co-editors of the literary journal *Hunger Mountain*, friends who often critique each other's work, and most importantly, co-creators of "The Movement: A Decade of Change in America, 1959-1968." In this joint endeavor, we present a series of talks on the civil rights movement touching on two controversial aspects of the era: the formation of citizens' councils in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and the social and community contributions of the Black Panther party. In this article, we discuss how our partnership came to be, and the impact our work is having on young readers.

Creating "The Movement"

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Our friendship struck up in the fall of 2004, when we ran into one another in the crowded teen section of a Barnes & Noble bookstore on Manhattan's Upper East Side. At the time, we were both enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults Program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. So, we had seen each other before, but in Vermont, not in New York City. Our faces were familiar to one another, and we exchanged occasional glances as we independently browsed the teen new releases, each thinking, How do I know this woman? Ah, we both finally realized. From school. And we started a conversation.

That day, the threads of our friendship began. Not only were we both pursuing the MFA degree, we both were writing civil rights era novels, and ones that were different from any already on the shelves. Kekla's brave book, *The Rock and the River*, is the first children's book to tackle the multi-faceted and often misunderstood Black Panther Party. Bethany's *Between Us Baxters* is a warm, compelling novel

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with strong, rich characters, that makes the impact of the Citizens Councils' racist actions feel immediate and personal.

We each bring our unique, individual perspectives and experiences to our work, and to our partnership. Bethany is a White woman, who spent time in both the North and the South growing up. Her novel, *Between Us Baxters*, set in Holcomb County, Georgia, in 1959, tells the story of 12-year-old Polly Baxter and 14-year-old Timbre Ann

Biggs. Because Polly's mother and Timbre Ann's aunt have always been close, the two girls consider themselves almost sisters, despite their different races. But when well-to-do Black businesses are set afire, Polly and Timbre Ann's bond of friendship is tested.

Kekla is a biracial woman raised in the Midwest. Her Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award-winning novel, *The Rock and the River*, follows the story of 13-year-old Sam Childs in Chicago in 1968. Sam's father is a well-respected civil rights movement activist, so Sam is shocked when his older brother and best friend, Stick, joins the Black Panther Party in the wake of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The confusion and turmoil in Sam's community, in his family, and in his own mind leave him struggling to understand which path is right for him.

As we got to know each other, it became clear that we were dealing with similar issues through our writing, albeit from radically different perspectives. The overlapping, yet distinct, core messages of our novels intrigued us, and we quickly realized we had the components of something really dynamic at our fingertips.

One book is set early in the movement and one set toward the end. One takes place in the South, the other the North. One features a poor White girl, the other a middle class Black boy.

Between Us Baxters and *The Rock and the River* complement each other well. One book is set early in the movement and one set toward the end. One takes place in the South, the other the North. One features a poor White girl, the other a middle class Black boy. The two books do not just contain opposites. There are similarities as well. Both deal largely with communities in racial turmoil, communities that look and feel so different from one another, but are at the brink of change. Both books debate what constitutes justice, and both investigate personal choices and the responsibilities of one's own actions. The fact that we come at these issues from different angles makes for a dynamic discussion.

As authors and individuals, we complement each other well, too. All of the ways we are seemingly opposites—Bethany is White, Kekla is Black; Bethany is outgoing, Kekla is reserved—come together into a unique package that shows young readers that “A Writer” doesn't have to look or act one certain way.

We both knew from the beginning that we had the makings of something special here. Yet, by being welcomed into schools, what has emerged is something richer and more complex than we had initially anticipated. Students bring their own perspectives and ideas into the conversation. They constantly point out new connections between our two books and our two main characters that even we, the authors, have not seen.

Unexpected Insights

Through “The Movement” and our school presentations, we strive to bring our books to life for our teen readers. We challenge them to imagine what life was like for people who lived in the South in 1959, and in urban centers in 1968. We inspire them to stand in the shoes of our characters, just for a moment, to imagine someone else's life. In-

evitably, they connect the life of that other person to something within their own experience.

For instance, as a way of getting the audience to consider why people take rash actions, like some of the characters in our books do, we ask a series of questions. “Who here has ever felt angry?” Most hands go up. “Who has ever been really angry, but tried to hide it, to hold it in?” Some hands go up. “What happens?” All hands go down. The students sit quiet, uncertain. We wait to see if anyone comes up with anything. What we're trying to illustrate is that if you hold in your anger too long, it eventually bursts out, maybe in ways that are beyond your control. Sometimes we get an answer along these lines. And sometimes, the students surprise us.

At Franklin Middle School in New Jersey, one very tall boy stood when we asked explicitly: “What happens to us when we store our anger, rather than find constructive ways of expressing it?”

“Eventually the anger and frustration leaks out,” he replied. “And you end up bleeding words.”

Bleeding words. The poetry and conciseness of the phrase gave us chills. Haven't we all, when heated and furious, bled words we wanted to take back? Words and actions we'd later need a band-aid for ... or more?

The rest of the students got it after that. Nods all around. In that moment, everyone in the room became closer to a new understanding—of our books, of the world, of each other, of themselves. It was powerful.

Our Program

We structure our presentation around a range of visual, auditory, and interactive elements to be sure we're meeting the needs of a wide range of students and learning styles. The centerpiece of our program is a Readers' Theatre, in which students act out a scene from each book, then compare and contrast the readings as a group. Before engaging students in this way, though, we prepare them for the discussion by presenting background information on the civil rights era, and introducing each book.

It's important to us to keep students actively involved and engaged throughout our entire visit, so we begin by inviting them to tell us what they already know about the civil rights movement. They shout out words that remind them of the era, such as “segregation,” “protest,” “Dr. King,” and “I have a dream.” The number and variety of words they share with us give us an initial feel for how much the students know about the topic, and how willing to volunteer ideas they are. If the words are really specific, or they give us a lot of answers, we know that they are already well grounded in civil rights movement history. If the group is shy, or offers only a few suggestions, then we are prepared with a slide of many words that we came up with, and we can spend a few moments calling them out ourselves, and offering some additional background that will help the students understand the presentation that will follow.

A short video/photo essay set to '60s music gives the students a glimpse of some iconic images from the decade of civil rights, some which are likely familiar to them while others may be new. Some are shocking, like images of hooded Ku Klux Klan members, and fire hoses being turned on protesters, while others are uplifting, such as the crowd outside the Lincoln Memorial as Dr. King spoke at the March on Washington, and the faces of children their own age who participated in the movement. The barrage of images never fails to move the crowd, and afterward we invite students to share how the video affected them. We discuss the images that may have been new to them and those that are familiar. We ask them to share some of the emotions they felt while watching the photos go by.

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At Newton Country Day School in Massachusetts, we presented to an all-female, middle school student population, and the girls seemed especially affected by the visuals. They shared a range of emotions, from anger, sadness, and disbelief over the photos of racism in action, to hope, comfort, and happiness over the images of people uniting to demand change. The girls' responses demonstrated a deep understanding of the era's complexities; they seemed quite intrigued to see things they had only read about in history class come to life in a different way.

Our Original Content: *Between Us Baxters* and the Citizens Councils

Between Us Baxters is set in 1959 in the years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. In 1954 the Supreme Court made racial segregation in schools and other public facilities illegal.

In the fictional Holcomb County small town, a Citizens Council forms. Bethany tells students, "Citizen Councils, I wish, were something I imagined. Instead, they were very real. In towns all over the south, bankers, doctors, lawyers, legislators, preachers, teachers, and merchants came together to fight the implementation of the Brown decision. Polly, in narration thinks:

The Citizens Council was supposed to make sure school stays segregated—colored or white. The Klan, on the other hand, was all about dirty dealings. Always was. Scaring folks whatever way they knew how: lynchings, beatings, cross burnings. But if what Timbre Ann said was true, why, then both groups were cut from the same cloth, even if the Council didn't play dress up in pointy hoods." (65-66)

After sharing a bit more from the book, Bethany says to the students, "Think about your best friend for a moment. The friend you constantly text, go to the movies with, share ear buds as you listen to music." Then she asks them to imagine what it would feel like if your entire town, including the chief of police, frowned on that friendship.

"Imagine the Sheriff pulled up into your driveway," she says, "Where all your neighbors could see and had a talk with you about it, telling you 'Ain't you too old to be playing with the likes of her?' Later in the novel, the Sheriff says, 'Well, you best find a more suitable playmate.' The scene unfolds like this:

I didn't take kindly to him ordering me around. I made sure Mama wasn't around to hear me, to tell me what I knew was right was wrong.

"Seventh grade is too old for playmates, Sheriff." This time I didn't mumble or hang my head.

The Sheriff raised his brow, sure he'd been sassed." (83)

When the students reopen their eyes, we can see that for a mo-



ment they were back in 1959. That they were thinking about the boy or girl next to them—most likely their best friend—and what it would have felt like for their entire town—parents, principals, store owners, bus drivers, fellow students—working hard to break up the friendship. Occasionally some students may have encountered parental disapproval regarding a friendship choice, but when it came to Polly and Timbre Ann's friendship, the disapproval was rampant and could turn violent at any time. It often did.

Between Us Baxters is representative of its place and time, where the Whites were more organized in their protests and opposition to integration and used violence and threats to get their way. During this time Blacks were just beginning to organize, protest, and march, and their efforts would grow stronger over the next ten years.

Our Original Content: *The Rock and the River* and The Black Panther Party

Skipping ahead ten years, we touch on another rarely discussed aspect of the civil rights era: the shift toward militancy in the latter part of the movement. In *The Rock and the River*, Sam is torn between the traditional civil rights activism and joining the Black Panthers. Most of the time, a good portion of the students have never heard of The Black Panther Party, which was founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. It quickly spread to other cities around the country. The Black Panthers believed that non-violent protest wasn't working. Even after ten years of holding demonstrations, they still saw a lot of racism, injustice, and violence, like police brutality, happening in their communities. They abandoned passive resistance in favor of a self-defense platform.

Kekla introduces the Panthers and offers a little bit of background on their movement, including why we don't usually hear much about them. "For us today, talking about the BPP can be uncomfortable, because they did use violence. We know that violence is never really a good solution to problems. But people knew that in 1968, too, so why did so many people decide to join a militant group like the Black Panthers?"

For one thing, the Panthers gave people something to do besides wait and protest. They were community organizers, helping people help each other in poor neighborhoods. They offered free breakfast programs, built health clinics, set up legal aid, and provided protection from police brutality. The message was: We don't have to wait

any longer. We're going to do something about this right now. They put out a call for "land, bread, housing, clothing, justice, education, and peace," and communities responded.

Those who turned to the Black Panthers weren't all interested in violence—a common misconception. People often shy away from teaching about the Panthers because it seems like it could be advocating violence to do so. Yet we're comfortable teaching about every war that's ever been fought, and how and why it came about. To talk about the civil rights movement as though violence wasn't part of it diminishes the contribution of thousands of citizen activists who put their lives on the line for what they believed in. Even their non-violent acts took place in an atmosphere of intense racial violence and required a special kind of courage, which should not be discounted as merely "peaceful."

When we choose volunteers, or when the teachers cast the characters, we strive for gender- and race-neutral casting.

It took years to achieve even small changes. People, especially young people, grew angry and impatient. And can you blame them? "Today, we know that the civil rights movement worked," Kekla says to the students. "Changes happened. The country is a lot different today. But in 1968, they couldn't see the future. People were desperate for change, and willing to do anything to get it. When I was writing the book, I had to ask myself over and over: what would I have done? When you read *The Rock and the River*, you'll find yourself wondering the same thing: what would you do if you were in Sam's place? In his time? It's not so easy."

Bringing the Books to Life: Readers' Theatre

To showcase the novels and engage our young readers, we've pulled two scenes from each book and created Readers' Theatre scripts. These scripts can be provided to teachers in advance or on the day of the presentation. Adding a performance aspect gets students up and out of their seats and gives them the opportunity to walk for a while in Sam's and Polly's shoes.

Our Readers' Theatre scenes are carefully selected to complement each other and promote discussion. They are also scenes that do not require students to have read the books in advance to understand what is happening. In the scene from *Between Us Baxters*, Polly witnesses a Black mother getting thrown off a city bus because her baby is crying. Will Polly intervene? Should she try? And in the scene from *The Rock and the River*, Sam is accused of shoplifting, when he hasn't done anything but reach into his pocket for his money. Should he leave the store, indignant, or go ahead with his intended purchase? Students never fail to express a variety of opinions about the characters' actions, making for a lively debate after each performance.

When we choose volunteers, or when the teachers cast the characters, we strive for gender- and race-neutral casting. It doesn't matter if the person reading "Polly" is White and a girl or if the one reading "Sam" is an African-American boy. It doesn't matter if the prejudiced bus driver and the racist store owner are played by someone White. What matters is that during the scene performance each student—those reading on stage or at the front of the room and those

listening in their seats—thinks about the choices and consequences each character makes.

"I liked acting out the scenes," said twelve-year-old Neha Hinduja. Another student agreed with her. "I can't wait to read the rest of the book now," he said.

Relating It All to Real Life

During the Readers' Theatre discussion at Franklin Middle School in New Jersey, an African-American student commented that Sam was "smarter" (less naïve) than Polly, because his actions protected him instead of putting him in danger, as Polly's could have. Hmmm. Interesting point. As the authors, we both raised our eyebrows. We hadn't heard that one before. Was it true?

A dialogue emerged over whether Sam's actions were truly "smarter" or whether his experiences gave him a different perspective on the situation. In helping to shape the discussion, Bethany commented on the time period difference—how much had changed between 1959 and 1968—and Kekla questioned whether the characters' races might have had an impact on their behavior. Shyly bouncing in her seat, the girl who made the original comment grinned. "Yeah. I know what you mean. I didn't think of it like that. Sam would've dealt with stuff like that before."

We then went on to discuss instances where the students attending the presentation may have encountered racism or discrimination, either firsthand or as bystanders. While they were reluctant to share actual stories, heads nodded around the room. "Could something like this happen today?" we asked. "Yes," the group readily agreed.

"The Movement" on the Move

We have had the unique opportunity to present to a wide range of student groups in locations across the Northeast, and we look forward to visiting schools across the country. We've presented for racially mixed groups and predominantly White groups, wealthy to working class, private school and public school, single-gender and co-ed, and we offer the same presentation to any demographic. The presentation works equally well in a small group of 15, a library packed with 80, and an auditorium with over 300.

An advantage to our partnership is the ability to connect with and inspire more young people in one visit. Not every student will feel a bond with Bethany, and not every student will feel a bond with Kekla. Yet, between the two of us, there are plenty of opportunities for the students to find points of connection. This is one reason our joint program appeals to educators. "There's something there for everyone," said Margaret Auguste, librarian of Franklin Township Middle School. "There's a 'boy book' and a 'girl book.' One of the reasons I was excited about your presentation was that I knew it would appeal to all my students."

Our Rock Star Moment: All-Girls Private School

Our first presentation was to the middle school girls of Newton Country Day School in Newton, Massachusetts. The girls proved incredibly attentive, and quite a few raised their hands when we wanted to know who among them liked to write. They asked a long series of thoughtful questions about what it means to be an author and writer in the world today. Having two authors presenting was a strong benefit that day, as we were able to discuss our different processes and work styles. There's no right formula for how to be a successful writer, and our sharing of the ways we are alike and the



Kekla Magoon, Margaret Auguste and Bethany Hegedus

ways we differ added depth to our presentation.

When the formal presentation finished, we held a book sale and signing. Many of the girls did not have money to buy the books, but all were eager to get our autographs on postcards and notebooks. After the fact, we joked that we felt like rock stars, the way the young ladies clamored for a chance to talk to us and get our autographs. In addition to it simply being fun to witness their energy and enthusiasm, it was also a truly empowering experience. It often seems that film and television are edging literature out of the way as a preferred pastime for young people today. It was exciting to be in an environment where books and authors could be celebrated in a similar way.

Our Keynote Presentation: Special Event for Minority Students

Later, we spoke at a Middle School Students of Color Conference, sponsored by the Associated Independent Schools of New England. The day, jam-packed with activities, gave minority students a chance to be the majority, plus the opportunity to meet with affinity groups of their own ethnicity. During small group breakout sessions, we each led writing workshops for the kids. Our keynote presentation, centered around our Readers' Theatre pieces, brought all students together for reflective discussion.

We were nervous about presenting to a huge auditorium of 350 students. The Readers' Theatre requires 12 student readers. Our big fear: what if no one volunteers to come forward and participate? We needn't have worried. Nearly every hand in the room went up, much to our pleasure. As the students came down to read, we projected the text of the scene on the overhead screen so the audience could follow along. Amazingly, the whole room paid full attention through the readings. The discussion that followed was rich. That day, we became truly convinced that diving right into the pages is the best way to get teens engaged in these stories. It was wonderful to recognize how easily they were able to become excited about reading the rest of the books after just that tiny nudge.

Our School Visit: Suburban Public School

Six months later, we visited a school and library in suburban New Jersey, Franklin Township Middle School. We had a unique reception there, as the students had taken it upon themselves to prepare in advance for the Readers' Theatre portion of our talk. They pre-cast the roles—without regard to race, interestingly enough—and rehearsed stage blocking and movements. They even created and collected fun props. We were thrilled to see these classes taking the initiative to expand the impact of our presentation beyond the hour and a half we were with them in person. It proved a great opportunity to practice teamwork and exercise some creativity.

After the formal presentation, we had the opportunity to sit down with a small group of students who had read at least one of the books in advance of our visit. "I like to read," said twelve-year-old Jason Wang. When we asked how he liked our books, he said he finished one of them in a single day. "I couldn't stop reading it so I put it up on the mirror, and read it while I brushed my teeth."

"I was excited," said twelve-year-old Jay Parekh when asked what he thought about our visit. "I read so many books and now I could connect to real authors and find out what they were thinking when they wrote the story and why they wrote it."

At the End of the Day

Through diverse experiences like these, we've interacted with youth from a range of backgrounds. Wealthy, middle class, and working class. All imaginable races and ethnicities. Eager readers and reluctant readers. We've run the gamut, and we found that these young people share a great deal of common ground. They love stories and can empathize with characters far removed from their own experiences. They can think, analyze, share, listen, and play in ways that delight and amaze us.

"I am really glad you both came to the school," Ms. Auguste wrote to us about a week after our visit. She reported that, "The kids are still talking about it and reading the books."

No matter where we've been, we always leave our school visits feeling a wonderful combination of drained and re-energized. It's a tough day's work, engaging with and responding to students on these compelling topics, but it invariably also reminds us why we do what we do. It moves us, hearing their laughter when our characters say something silly, and watching them cringe moments later when the characters are experiencing pain. Getting up close and personal with our readers is how we can see our writing at work in the world. The students' questions inspire us to think more deeply; their insights start our imaginations rolling in new directions. We never cease to be amazed by their creativity, understanding, and boundless energy. We can't wait to head off to our next visit!

Bethany Hegedus and **Kekla Magoon** are the co-creators of "The Movement: A Decade of Change in America, 1959-1968," and co-editors of YA and Children's Literature for *Hunger Mountain*, the arts journal of Vermont College of Fine Arts. Visit us online at bethanyhegedus.com and keklamagoon.com. Want to book us? Email: TwoBooksTwoAuthors@gmail.com. 

Why I Write About Race and Class
Bethany Hegedus, author of *Between Us Baxters*:

For much of my life, I've straddled the racial and class divisions between the North and the South. I was born outside Chicago, Illinois, and as I moved through elementary and middle school, I developed friends of all races. At 13, when I moved to Augusta, Georgia, I experienced a bit of culture shock. The high school I went to, of course, was integrated, but the kids divided themselves. Pockets of White kids and Black kids (the Asian Americans and the Indian Americans could mix in where they pleased) stood on different sides of the Commons Area, ate at different lunch tables. I suppose this would have happened in Illinois, as I moved from junior high into high school, but I found it strange. My Black friends weren't considered "Black" since they were in college prep classes. One was a cheerleader, the only African-American student on the squad. No one was burning crosses and the days of lynching were thankfully long gone, but there was tension, an insidious tension that I felt, that my friends felt, that all of us who carefully walked the color boundary felt.

This became more apparent to me when I started my career as a young educator. I'd landed a plum job as an English and theatre teacher in a rural Georgia high school. The school was primarily African American. Multicultural wisdom was just making the rounds. It was to be on our radars as teachers. I had two remedial English classes per day. Only one of my students was White. In my theatre classes, the ratio was the exact opposite. This angered me and I sought to include students of all races in the afterschool theatre program. Soon, though, I was warned to be careful in terms of my casting—no interracial couples in romantic roles. The Ku Klux Klan was still active in the county I was teaching in. This was 1996. Call me naïve, but I was shocked.

Why I Write About Race and Class
Kekla Magoon, author of *The Rock and the River*:

I grew up in a predominantly White community in northeast Indiana. As a young person, I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about race. It wasn't a huge problem for me, day to day, though I believe my early experiences of straddling race and class divisions affected me deeply. As a biracial woman with a White American mother and Black African father, I never quite fit into either the Black community or the White community, but this is much more apparent to me looking back. At the time, I was able to rely on my upper middle class socioeconomic status to keep me in honors classes and to make it socially acceptable for me to be spending time with large groups of White students. The vast majority of my friends were White, though we had a fairly strong African-American student presence in my high school.

As I emerged from the cocoon of my hometown, I began to see that my particular experience of Blackness was as important as my ability to assimilate into a White community. However, as a biracial person, it remains difficult to find a place to fit in racially, even in adulthood. My cultural background doesn't jive with that of most Black Americans, or of any White Americans. This often keeps racial issues at the forefront of my mind.

I've always been interested in Black history, and I've struggled to understand all the ways it relates to and intersects with my own life experience. Writing *The Rock and the River* emerged from my exploration of the civil rights movement and the decisions young people had to make at the time—between non-violence and militancy, between standing in silence and taking a stand, between finding ways to diffuse anger or simply letting it rage.

Excerpt from *Between Us Baxters* Readers' Theatre

- Bus Driver:** Listen, gal, that ain't my problem. I just need you off this bus, and now.
- Narrator 1:** I could see the red creeping up his pale neck, like ketchup dribbled onto grits.
- Bus Driver:** You're disturbing the other riders.
- Narrator 2:** Why, this wasn't fair. Not fair at all. The woman set her son, still bawling, down beside her. Hurriedly, she grabbed up her things.
- Woman on Bus:** Ssh, ssh, hush now.
- Narrator 2:** All the eyes that had been staring, making hateful glances, one by one, looked away. Big bullies. All of them. Just like Sally Jean. Just like whoever threw those bricks. I inched my butt off the seat and dug in my pocket for the nickel I knew was there. When we got back from Fulbrights, Henri gave it to me as payment for going with Timbre Ann to run to the store for the eggs the Judge needed.
- Mama:** Polly!
- Narrator 1:** Mama put her hand on my arm. Her way of telling me no, to stay seated. I stayed where I was.
- Narrator 2:** When the driver was satisfied the woman and her boy were leaving, he turned, made his way back to the front of the bus. I caught the lady just as she was about to get off.
- Polly:** Here.
- Narrator 1:** A nickel wouldn't stop Timbre Ann from seeing me as a white girl first and as her forever-friend second, but I had to do something.
- Polly:** It's not a full fare but it's enough for a lollipop.

Excerpt from *The Rock and the River* Readers' Theatre

- Shop Clerk:** Put it back.
- Narrator 3:** The voice startled me, and I turned. The old man behind the counter glared at me.
- Sam:** What?
- Shop Clerk:** I said, put it back.
- Narrator 1:** He moved out from behind the counter and approached me, shaking his fist.
- Sam:** Put what back?
- Shop Clerk:** Don't give me sass, boy. You think I can't see?
- Narrator 4:** He came up and grabbed my wrist, yanking my hand out of my pocket.
- Narrator 2:** Two dollar bills and some coins dropped onto the floor as he pried open my fingers.
- Sam:** I don't understand. I didn't take anything.

Love in Action: A Healing Art Workshop in Chapala, Mexico

Michael Kyne

In November 2009 I joined painter and graphic artist Metin Bereketli for a workshop at a children's shelter in Chapala, Mexico, a small village close to Guadalajara and situated next to a spectacular lake. I was there to assist Bereketli as he worked his magic and charm with his "Healing Art" program. We were at the Amor en Acción/Love in Action children's shelter, a home for abandoned and abused children, four months to eighteen years of age. The state of Jalisco sends children to the shelter and supervises its operations, with 50 to 60 children living there along with staff. Volunteers from the community, other places in Mexico, and abroad offer their services and help with fundraising, thus supplementing the shelter's funding from the Mexican government. More information on the Amor en Acción/Love in Action shelter may be found at www.loveinaction-center.org.

Born in Turkey, Bereketli is an internationally acclaimed artist who has created artworks for a variety of nonprofit organizations and conducted workshops with children in hospitals and in other stressful situations. His extensive body of art, including works created for charities, may be viewed at www.hollywoodpainter.com. The goals of his programs and workshops for children are to lift up their spirits and to help them escape, even if just for a little while, whatever unhappiness is in their lives at that moment; to give them the chance to experience the exuberant immersion into color; and perhaps to entice them to take the first hesitant step into the world of art.

The children in the Love in Action shelter are either abandoned, abused, or orphaned. In one horrific case a girl's father had held her hands on a stovetop until the skin became charred and blackened. Bereketli traveled to Mexico to help heal their wounds, both mental and physical, with his special brand of kindness.

As with his other workshops, the Healing Art workshop in Mexico began with a show. The children faced a stage adorned with a backdrop and flooring of white cloth. The artist came onstage dressed from head to foot in white, including a white bandana that covered his head. He announced in English in his booming Turkish-accented voice—followed by a translator—that he was going to introduce new painters to the assembled crowd. Then the approximately 30 children filed onto the stage from smallest to tallest, all dressed exactly like Bereketli, in white bandanas, shirts, and pants. With the assistance of the beautiful young woman who served as his translator, he got all the children lined up to his left and right with himself in the



center. With their white outfits and the white backdrop, all that shone from the stage was a row of bright faces with looks of excitement, trepidation, and maybe a little fear—as they had no idea what was about to happen.

With a loud voice the artist announced as the kids shot their arms in the air, "Ladies and gentlemen...PAINTERS!" Then, after a big bow, the children sat in a semicircle facing him.

Bereketli selected a little boy, handed him a painter's pallet with colored paints and a brush, and led him to an artist's easel center stage. There was already a large canvas there with the beginnings of a painting of a large circle representing the circle of life. He invited the little one to paint whatever he liked on the canvas. At this point the crowd began to laugh because unbeknownst to the child, Bereketli had poured different colored paints on his head and had put handprints on his back. The other children thought this was hilarious and joined in the laughter. Bereketli then dipped his fingers in the paint and gently painted the little boy's face. Then he invited the child to paint his (the artist's) face, and while this was being done, he poured different colors onto his own head. This brought shouts and laughter from everyone, particularly the children, because they now "got it"; they had been given permission to jump into the figurative mud puddle. When the first "victim" was finished, he was held aloft as Bereketli yelled out in unison with the child, "Ladies and gentlemen...I AM A PAINTER," with everyone clapping and cheering, much to the wildly smiling child's delight.

This process went on, child after child, with everyone getting more and more enthusiastic and the children getting more and more excited waiting for their turn. By this time the children were painting each other and dumping paint everywhere. One reluctant young girl who had difficulty overcoming her shyness was finally persuaded to come onstage. When she had first come to the shelter, one foot was completely bent to one side, making walking next to impossible. The shelter had arranged with a local hospital for her to have multiple operations, until she was finally able to get around by herself, though with some difficulty. With all the excitement, she was having trouble standing. Without fuss, Bereketli gently put his big arm around her and helped her onto the stage so that she, like all the other children, could express her feelings in color.

When the canvas was completely covered with every child's efforts in art (most of them painting for the first time), the finished piece

was put to one side. With all the children once again sitting in a paint-splattered circle, Bereketli egged them on by liberally spraying them with multicolored jets of paint. Every child began enthusiastically painting the others and even themselves.

The next step was to have everyone paint the white background with anything they wanted. It was interesting to note how each child put color to feelings, some dark, some joyful, and some even destructive, smudging others' work. One smiling girl wrote "I LOVE YOU" in Spanish in impressively large letters. Finally Bereketli finished the piece with his traditional rainbow from one side of the stage to the other, completing a communal work of art eight feet high by twenty feet long. Being a showman to the last, he then lay on the ground and the children attacked him like brightly colored vampires, shrieking with delight as they deluged him with paint from head to foot.

Eventually Bereketli emerged from the pile of children, looking like a slowly melting, multicolored candle.

Finally, all the children—once dressed in shining white—were lined up in front of their masterpiece, themselves dripping in color and becoming living art. With a final bow and cheers of "Viva México" and "La vida es fantástica," they threw their arms and pallets in the air, graduates of the Healing Art Program in Chapala, Mexico.

Michael Kyne is a British writer and photographer. Those interested in supporting the work of the Amor en Acción/Love in Action shelter in Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico may visit www.loveinactioncenter.org. 🌍



“Ladies and gentlemen...
PAINTERS!”

Finding a Place Through Books and Writing: An Interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca

Loriene Roy

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in 1952 in New Mexico where he lived in an orphanage after his grandfather died. He moved to a life on the streets as a young teen and eventually spent five years in prison in Arizona. There, he discovered words and reading and starting publishing poetry. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the International Hispanic Heritage Award, the American Book Award for Poetry, and the Pushcart Prize. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of New Mexico in 2003.

I first met Jimmy Santiago Baca in September 2009 at events organized to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Salinas (California) Public Library. We both spoke at a dinner held at the John Steinbeck House, where invited guests assembled to promote discussion of the development of the city as a City of Letters. We met again briefly in November 2009 when Baca spoke at the fourteenth Texas Book Festival in Austin as part of a panel of authors exploring the depiction of Mexico in their writings. The Nation describes his voice as “brutal yet tender”; we welcome Jimmy Santiago Baca, also a literacy advocate and a supporter of all things library.

You're known as a poet but your writing now includes a collection of short stories, a screenplay, a memoir, and a new novel, A Glass of Water. In addition, you are an advocate for writing among young people and those incarcerated. I'd like to start by asking a few questions about how you engage others in writing and in your literacy efforts. I am interested in learning more about your work with young people, including the writing workshops you organize. Can you tell me about this work?

For three decades I've taught illiterate kids and adults how to read and write. Since literacy had such a life-changing impact on me, I felt I was obligated to share the gift and have to hundreds of thousands. Over the years I've trained hundreds of interns to go out into impoverished environments and serve the people of that community by teaching children and adults to read and write. We've held extended workshops, given out thousands of books, published their work, sponsored poetry readings, and re-connected the people to their own unique voices. Voices that henceforth warrant self-respect and dignity and purpose in life.

In your memoir A Place to Stand, you note that you “learned to believe in myself and to dream for a better life” in prison. How does your life history help young readers and writers similarly discover a sense of belonging? How do children and teens with troubles and challenges respond to you? How do you encourage young people to find their own voices?

It was a surprise to me when my memoir, *A Place to Stand*, took off. People everywhere from all walks of life were buying. It proved to me that people young and mature are hungry to discover their sense

of belonging. Countless teachers have e-mailed me how at-risk teenagers who hate reading couldn't put it down—they love it. To this day I continue to visit schools to help students realize how emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually powerful they are.

In A Place to Stand, you wrote about how, as a young person, you hated books and how they separated you from other people. How do you work with young people who might share these feelings?

I show them in concrete terms how literacy and education in general connects one to the world and beyond in an intimate and empowering way. My life is proof.

“The library is
indispensable
to every community's
quality of life.
It nurtures leaders,
morally and socially.”

I saw a description of your prison literacy project on your website, jimmysantiagobaca.com. What is new with Cedar Tree?

Cedar Tree, Inc. is my non-profit dedicated to teaching prisoners, at-risk kids, and neglected adults in the community to read and write. We've been at it for a long time and have thousands and thousands of testimonies on how reading and writing have improved their lives.

I first met you in the context of a public library event. How does your work overlap with the work of libraries in promoting education, especially reading? What do you see as the library's role in literacy, especially in promoting reading to teens and underserved populations, including those who are incarcerated? What innovative services do you see taking place in libraries?

I love libraries and think they should be the central focal point of any community. I've helped to start and stock libraries, and many times

I have done book drives to donate books to rural schools. In my eyes, librarians are the bravest advocates for literacy. Without librarians there would be no democracy, no society, no civilization. The library is indispensable to every community's quality of life. It nurtures leaders, morally and socially. The greatest progressive aspect I've witnessed recently in extraordinary libraries and librarians and their wonderful staff is they have made the library a much-loved part of people's everyday routine. So vital to the community's health.

I would also like to ask a few questions about your novel, A Glass of Water. I am curious about the image of boxing in your life and in A Glass of Water. In A Place to Stand, you described how your father had a wish that you would be a great boxer, how your grandfather fought to make extra money, and how you fought as a teenager. One of the brothers in A Glass of Water, Vito, encounters boxing as an alternative life path. How has boxing played a role in your life? Why did your potential as a boxer appeal to your father? How did you choose this sport as the skill for Vito, one of the two brothers who are main characters in this novel?

It has taken time for me to appreciate the sport of boxing. In my late teens and early twenties I boxed a little, and even though I was pretty good, the Spartan training interfered with my devotional and heart-searing dedication to become a poet. My father loved to watch boxing matches, and I guess he imagined me a boxer one day because it was one way for a poor kid to earn some good money and make it in society. I guess I made Vito, the character in the novel, a boxer because in my barrio there once lived a world champion boxer named Vito. He died from a blood clot in his brain while jogging on the ditch bank one day.

Vito thinks of his life as "a patchwork of coincidences." How has your own life followed coincidences, whether they resulted in difficult or pleasant circumstances?

Considering that I had no family, that I was abandoned at five years old, and how I had no education or parental guidance, my life is a daily miracle. Endlessly so.

The lives of Vito, his parents, and his brother, Lorenzo, are tied to each other through dreams and through a curse resulting from a violent death. How does someone find balance and restitution? How can someone continue their life when they have been met with injustice?

One can't teach hope or faith, one has to strike out on the journey of life alone and become humble and learn to forgive. Learn to yearn for love. Even if it never comes.

How have readers responded to your fiction and, especially, A Glass of Water?

A Glass of Water was published at the beginning of November, and halfway through the month the first printing has sold out—people (alas, thankfully!) love it.

As a parent, how have you explored children's literature with your own family? What were some of your children's favorite books? Have these writings impacted your own writing?


My five children absolutely love books and read every night before going to sleep. They love all books! And yes, I have an ongoing journal/diary of children's stories I've written. They will be published by Heinemann in two volumes in March 2010, along with a DVD and an interview of me doing a writing workshop with high school kids.

Finally, what's next for you as far as future writing projects? Do you have any plans at this time to write for younger audiences such as teens?

I'm working on a YA novel and a new book of poetry.

Congratulations on publication of A Glass of Water. We appreciate your work and look forward to witnessing how more readers encounter your writings.

"Considering that I had no family, that I was abandoned at five years old, and how I had no education or parental guidance, my life is a daily miracle."

Dr. Loriene Roy is a professor in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin and a past president of the American Library Association. An Anishinabe (Ojibwe), she is enrolled on the White Earth Reservation and is a member of the Minnesota Chipewewa Tribe. Her interview with Joy Harjo was published in the winter 2009 issue of *MultiCultural Review*. 

Muslim Women Empowered by Their Religion

Weam Namou

Twelve years ago, while I was at Heathrow Airport, I went into a bookshop and saw a rack of Middle Eastern novels written by Western authors. Their covers all portrayed veiled women running away from an abusive husband, father, or brother, women I'd never known personally, at home in America or in my birth country of Iraq—although I realized that they do exist everywhere.

I came home looking for stories that portrayed the healthier part of the Middle Eastern world. There were hardly any out there. Unfortunately, the situation is the same today. As a result, Westerners and non-Muslims are left with one general perception of the people of that region, and empowering stories like the one about Prophet Muhammad and his first wife Khadija are rarely told, much less learned from.

At the age of 25, Prophet Muhammad became employed by Khadija, a wealthy Christian woman, twice widowed, and a merchant 15 years older than he. He made several successful journeys to Syria which impressed Khadija, and she ended up proposing to him. Rather than focus on Khadija's age and be intimidated by her confidence and power, Muhammad esteemed her brilliant character, superior business acumen, and humanitarian efforts that led her to be hailed as the Princess of Mecca. Thus, he made her his wife and remained monogamous for 15 years until her death. She was the one person he turned to for advice, and she helped him both financially and intellectually to found Islam.

Given Muhammad's history, it should not be a surprise that, contrary to popular Western belief, he cared about elevating the status of women. Over 1,400 years ago Islamic law guaranteed rights to women that women in Europe and America obtained only in the 1900s. According to Islamic law, women have the right to own property, operate a business, receive equal pay for equal work, have total control of their wealth, marry whom they want, keep their own name when they marry, inherit property, and have their marriage dissolved in the case of neglect or mistreatment.

I interviewed three Muslim women from various backgrounds about their roles in Islam, and each described why she feels empowered by her religion.

Divorce

Norma Kassim lives in Malaysia, is a single mother of six children who works full-time as a business development manager in a male dominated industry—construction—and is a part-time doctoral candidate in Islamic Philosophical Thoughts at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. She is the author of *A Walk Through Life: Issues and Challenges Through the Eyes of a Muslim Woman*.

“Islam provides me with the discipline and guidelines for carrying out my responsibility as a mother to six children,” said Kassim, “the correct ethics to fulfill my job duties, and the spiritual strength from the knowledge that I gain from scholars in my school. Equipping myself with knowledge of the Islamic faith and what is required of me as a Muslim woman helps me to be in control of my life and to understand my destiny.”

Kassim comes from more than five generations of conservative Muslims. Her father and grandfather were *imams*, Muslim religious leaders, who provided the women in the family with a comfortable living while encouraging them to gain higher education and work outside the home. Kassim chose to be a housewife after she got married.

“We follow the Shafi'i Mazhab and practice Islam diligently,” said Kassim. The Shafi'i school gives equal weight to the traditions (*hadith*/sayings of Muhammad) and the Quran, emphasizing the consensus of the Islamic community as the most important secondary source of law. “The women in the family are protected, not discriminated by the men and they are amply provided for. My mother even persuaded my only brother [among five sisters] to take just one share of his inheritance from my late father as he is not married and has no responsibilities. We eat together in family meals, voice our opinions freely, are allowed to travel and go out on our own, and use our income independently.”

In her book *A Walk Through Life: Issues and Challenges Through the Eyes of a Muslim Women*, Kassim encourages women to take responsibility and accountability for their life choices and to increase their self-esteem and self-respect. She sheds the myth that Eastern

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women are expected to be submissive and are thus oppressed. Using specific examples, she discloses various ways in which the Quran and Prophet Muhammad helped elevate women's status over 14 centuries ago.

Kassim attributes gender discrimination to ignorance; to lack of exposure to information about women's rights as a Muslim, wife, and mother; to people becoming comfortable with the contemporary life and forgetting the real reason for existing on earth; to accepting age-old cultural and traditional practices, some of which are not acceptable to Islamic values; and to being excessively influenced and immersed in identifying their lives according to Western values.

Using Khadija, Prophet Muhammad's first wife, as an example, she reminds women that it's okay to initiate marriage proposals and that those who do have high self-worth and therefore are ready to face the risk of rejection. She points out that women in Kelantan (a state in the East Coast of Malaysia) take a more proactive role in initiating marriage, breaking the old relationship theory that man is the hunter and woman the hunted.

Advising women to create a mutually supportive and rewarding relationship in marriage, through communication, non-judgment, responsibility, and forgiveness and by maintaining her independence, Kassim also discourages women from remaining in physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive relationships. She urges women in such situations not to blame themselves and to seek help and support rather than get caught in the trap.

Kassim constantly looks at the big picture, allowing for healthy relationships—even with an ex-husband, his mother, and his new wife. She realizes the importance of raising children well, having the insight not to be led by personal insecurities and, most importantly, confiding in God to walk a loving and strong path.

"Even though my marriage ended with a divorce, it was a good marriage as my ex-husband was responsible in his duties as a husband and father," she said. "I have a healthy attitude towards marriage and love. I prefer to look at any failed love relationship in my life as the responsibility of both parties involved."

Work and Motherhood

Nouran Abdul Jawad is a married Saudi woman from Medina who has been living in Malaysia for almost two years and is pursuing her master's degree in Islam. She lived in England for seven years and was then raised in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. She says that Muslims regard the whole universe as a big mosque, that every good occupation man is involved in is a chance for him to get closer to Allah.

"Some people might wonder why righteous Muslim women would waste their time in useless jobs such as hairdressers and makeup artists," she said. "But Islam regards all occupation as a noble thing as long as your intention is good."

She states that in the Quran, Allah refers to males and females as being created from the same soul. "It is he who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he

might dwell with her in love" (Quran, *Al-Araf*: 189).

"During the days of the prophet women involved themselves in all occupations even in battle, and their role was more than just raising the morale of the fighters and nursing the wounded," she said. "Nusaibah bint kaa'b and Safiyya bint Abd al-Muttalib were reported for participating in the actual fight."

She points out that around the world, many women work not out of desire but because they have to help support their families. Yet in Islam it is the man—husband, father or brother—who is responsible for earning the money. "This is an honor Islam gave to women," she said, explaining that most Muslim women go to work because they want to benefit others and to have a social life. The heavy load of gaining money to spend on children is removed from women's shoulders. Also, a husband doesn't have the right to ask his wife where she spent her salary.

"Islam regards the duty of raising the children in the best manner as the noblest occupation a woman can do," she said. "As you can see women who are very occupied in their jobs might neglect their children. Therefore Islam regards the care of the children as the most important duty on both parents and on a mother specially. Her

care for her children and home is regarded as a form of worship. Prophet Mohammed mentions that paradise is under the feet of mothers; this is an indication of the important role a mother plays in Islam. If a mother knows that she can arrange herself between her house and job then she is most welcome to involve in the profession she desires."

She adds that Islam does not blame Eve for original sin but finds both Adam and Eve responsible for it. She adds that while the West labels many of Islam's issues (of which they have little understanding) as oppressive to women, they fail to see their own oppression of women. "Women in the West are being used sexually," she says. "They are regarded as an object for man's pleasures. We frequently hear of western men cheating on their wives, but we don't label her as oppressed. We do however do that when a Muslim man marries another woman—for a crucial reason—and informs his wife before arranging for his marriage."

In the past, men were able to marry an unlimited number of women. Islam actually restricted the unrestrained polygamy of the Arabs of the time, and put many laws into place to protect the well-being of women, like ending the pagan Arab practice of killing their baby daughters when they were born.

Islam limited the number of wives to four, and only allowed that number under certain circumstances. A Muslim husband was able to marry another woman if, for example, his wife was barren or neglected her duties towards him, for instance, abstaining from sex for a long period of time. "The man, instead of having all different kinds of affairs and cheating, Islam premised him to marry another," Abdul Jawad said.

In all situations, a man must discuss his need for a second wife with his first wife, and if she doesn't consent, she has the right to leave him.

"Marrying another wife is a serious and huge burden on the husband," she said, "because Islam gave the permission for men to marry

In her book, Kassim encourages women to take responsibility and accountability for their life choices and to increase their self-esteem and self-respect.

but asked them to be equal and just towards all their wives. In order to be just, man needs to have the wealth that enables him to be equal to both his wives and to his children from both wives.”

Abdul Jawad reveals that her home life has both positive and negative aspects, as does everything else. The positive is the strong family relations. At least once a week, the whole family gets together for lunch. This creates a strong bond between children, parents, and grandparents as well as aunts and uncles. Because family plays such an important part in her country, all families support each other at the time of marriage and on different occasions. This bond leads the male figures to be very close to and supportive of females.

“Many help their wives with house chores,” she said. “Just like my husband, since we are both students in Malaysia and we don’t have a maid, he helps me with house chores. If a woman has a party at night and has to leave the child[ren] at home, her husband will watch them. But of course this varies depending on the nature of the man.”

Abdul Jawad was engaged when she was 22 and married at 23. Her husband was a cousin who loved her for a long time without her awareness. He proposed to her parents after he returned from Canada.

“I felt comfortable in his presence and initially approved,” she said. “I told him, ‘I need some time to know more about you.’ We were allowed to speak privately but in the presence of the family. For example, we used to take a corner in a room where some members of our family who are occupied in their own talks exist, and we had our own private conversation. We were allowed to go out to public places like restaurants and coffee shops to talk. Both of us were very frank and honest to each other and this helped me much in forming the correct image about him. The moment I felt deeply connected to this man and happy with the idea that he would be my husband we decided on a date for our wedding.”

She says that while in some countries parents force their daughters to marry certain men, such an act is forbidden in Islam. “A marriage without the bride’s approval is not valid.”

Aside from family unity, the Islamic traits of generosity and hospitality are also important qualities in Abdul Jawad’s home town, especially when they concern guests. “Our happiness is derived from the comfort of our guests,” she said. “If I was wearing a ring and my friend compliments it, I immediately take it off and offer it to her. This is a habit Prophet Mohammed used to practice with people.”

A negative part about her country is the fundamentalist mentality that exists mostly in the capital. The western side in Saudi Arabia includes Jeddah, Makkah, and Medina, and it is very different in nature from the capital, in that one rarely finds fundamentalists there.

“Fundamentalist practice things in the name of Islam which has totally no relation to Islam,” she said. “For instance, these people cover their faces and regard the voice of women as seductive. They think that women shouldn’t wear trousers because she would be intimidating guys. All of these ridiculous thoughts which have nothing to do with Islam are being practiced by narrowminded people

who are in total distance to Islam.”

The Student

Sarah Alfaham, a student at the University of Toledo, is president of the Muslim Student Association. She is also assistant director of photography and a news reporter for the *Independent Collegian*. She worked as a reporter for the Society of Professional Journalists’ *The Working Press* publication at the SPJ’s annual convention in Washington, D.C., in 2007, and she will intern this summer at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

Alfaham strives to insert Islam into every aspect of her life because she feels that as a woman, Islam has strengthened her—from her image as a woman to trying to perfect her grades as a student. Islam has helped her to go out into the world, to speak out and be active, and, as a journalist, to get the facts straight because she is held accountable for them.

“I think that non-Muslims who look for something negative will take any verse (of the Quran) out of context and run with it,” she said.

In the past, men were able to marry an unlimited number of women. Islam actually restricted the unrestrained polygamy of the Arabs of the time, and put many laws into place to protect the well-being of women

Alfaham has one sister and one brother. Her father has encouraged all his children to choose careers that they are passionate about. Her everyday life consists of going to school and working six to seven days a week. She’s out of the house from about 9:30 a.m., until she comes home between 6 and 10 p.m. Because she is active in her community, she attends many conferences and events.

“Although my sister and I are always tired when we get home,

we are expected to help out around the house for at least 10 minutes every day,” she said. “My brother, who is still in high school, comes home a lot earlier and definitely does a lot more than 10 minutes in addition to helping take care of my youngest sister.”

Alfaham says that in her household they are not judged by gender but by conditions and circumstances. “As long as I put family first and I get good grades, I can go after what I’m passionate about.”

Wishing that people would better understand the meaning of *hijab*, or head scarf, she once posted an article on Facebook called “Why I Wear Hijab—Not Your Typical Answer.” She had noticed that a lot of Muslim girls didn’t know why they wore hijabis and that non-Hijabis didn’t understand what motivated the Hijabis to wear them. And non-Muslims had no idea why Muslim girls wore “that thing” on their heads.

She wrote: “Hijab in Arabic literally means a barrier. In the context of the scarf that we wear, while the cloth on the head is called hijab, it’s not only limited to that meaning. Hijab is really the entire manner of walking, talking, being modest, and holding yourself in a manner that’s respectable. In Arabic that’s all one word, but in English it’s like a paragraph.”

Alfaham believes that God made it mandatory for women and men to cover up in different ways and that women taking off their clothes are in reality enslaving themselves to their bodies by having

men look at them like pieces of meat.

“Women are more than just a piece of meat or a body,” she said. “I feel a hijab forces me to act and hold myself up in a certain dignified manner, someone who is proud of being Muslim. A friend put it in a good way by saying, ‘Hijab is a tool that enables you to have a voice and command yourself with respect in all arenas.’”

She also feels that hijab is about her identity as a Muslim American. For her, taking it off would mean denying her religion.

“When minorities first come to the U.S., they are discriminated against—any minorities and all minorities,” she said. “African Americans started becoming more integrated in society in the ‘40s and ‘50s. There were young African-American youth that were doing everything they could to be like White Americans, to the point of changing their hair or trying to lighten their skin. Before groups like Marcus Garvey and the Nation of Islam (NOI) as well as other groups which helped shape the identity of African Americans in this country, many African Americans were not proud of their skin color.”

She uses the movie *Malcolm X* as an example. In it, there's a scene where the young Malcolm X, at the time not Muslim, does a "conk" in which he straightens his hair.

“This, to me, is the ultimate form of denying your culture and degrading yourself,” she said. “When African Americans at the time were not proud of themselves, they were looked down upon. When they started to unite and be proud of who they are, they were respected and the level of their status in society started to rise. Not to say that they are where they want to be... it's still a long way, but at least the key way to get there was found by respecting themselves rather than watering down their culture and identity.”

She states that while this is her take on why she wears hijab, it is not in any way meant to degrade or to put down Muslim women who don't.

“I know way too many non-Hijabis that know more about the Quran than I do, have better knowledge of Islam, or have done more for this Ummah (Muslim community) than I could ever dream of for me to put anyone down like that,” she said. “Only Allah can judge us.”

Perspectives on Islam

All three women attribute the negative outlook against Islam to Western ignorance, a few extreme fundamentalists, and the media that takes these people as the face of Islam. For the most part they agree that Muslims and non-Muslims alike are to blame for the lack of understanding.

“Issues about Islam analyzed from the Western perspectives have a totally different spiritual outlook and developments,” said Kassim, “thus causing distorted understandings even among the Muslims. The Muslims themselves are guilty of not practicing and interpreting the true teachings of Islam in totality.”

“Muslims who are Muslims just by name and who do not reflect Islam in their behavior are misrepresenting Islam throughout the world,” said Abdul Rahmad. “Also, non-Muslims who are either ignorant or prejudice[d] tend to divert people from Islam through their wrong interpretations about Islam.”

“I wish people understood Islam as a religion that is very similar to the monotheistic religions,” said Alfaham.

Conclusion

The most interesting aspect of Islam is that, unlike other religions, it is not named after its founder or the community and nation of its birth. Islam is an attributive title that signifies submission to God, Creator of the Universe. Whosoever possesses this attribute, may he or she belong to any race, community, country, or clan is a Muslim. This includes the sun, moon, earth, and stars, since matter, energy, and life all obey God's laws and grow and change and live and die in accordance with those laws.

One wonders why the West embraces the teachings of many different religions yet has not only deviated away from Islam but has linked it to stigma. As a result, we are completely unaware of the words Muhammad used in his last sermon, which was delivered on 632 A.D., ninth day of Dhul al Hijjah, 10 A.H. (Anno Hegirae, of the Islamic calendar) in the Uranah valley of Mount Ararat:

“Fear Allah in your women! For the one whom honors them is indeed an honorable man, and one whom humiliates them is indeed a base (lowly and ignoble) man... O People, it is true that

you have certain rights over your women, but they also have rights over you.”

Women aside, what Muhammad also expressed in his last sermon is a true form of tolerance and equality about society in general: “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action.”

As a Christian, I am able to see the benefit of such words and use them to my advantage as well as to the advantage of our earth, without losing sight of my own religion. Thoughts, words, and actions are not restricted to any land or religion. They are created by God and are free for all to sample.

Weam Namou was born in Baghdad, Iraq, as a minority Christian and came to America at the age of 10. She received her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University, and she studied screenwriting at MPI (Motion Picture Institute of Michigan) and poetry in Prague. She is the president of IAA (Iraqi Artists Association) and the author of three novels, *The Feminine Art*, *The Mismatched Braid* and *The Flavor of Cultures*. Her articles and poetry have appeared in numerous notable journals, and she currently she is a features writer for several local newspapers in the Detroit area. 📖

From Baghdad to New York City: An Interview with Saad Abulhab

Vladimir F. Wertsman

Saad Abulhab is currently Director of Technology at the William and Anita Newman Library, Baruch College, CUNY. Sabine, his wife, is German; they have been married for over 20 years and have two teenage daughters. Both are fluent in German, study Arab culture, and aspire to multicultural careers. I conducted this interview with Abulhab about his own career in multicultural librarianship at his office in fall 2009.

All your colleagues know you as an Iraqi American. When did you come to the United States?

Actually, I was born in Sacramento, California, in 1958. My father, an entomology professor, received academic training on a full scholarship at the University of California-Berkeley from 1955 to 1961. After that, our family lived in Baghdad.

When did you return to the United States?

I came back in 1979 to escape Iraq, due to my profound involvement in political activities against Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule.

How did you manage to cross the border and escape?

My escape was a dangerous adventure. I was not able to use an airplane because I was blacklisted and couldn't get a passport. Secret police agents were constantly looking for me. Nevertheless, I decided to take the risk and took a regular and very crowded passenger bus fourteen hours across the vast desert between Iraq and Jordan. After reaching Amman and receiving assistance from the U.S. Consulate, I flew to Morocco and from there happily continued to the United States.

What is your educational background?

In Iraq I studied economics at the University of Baghdad. In the United States I received a Bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the Polytechnic University of New York and in 1990 a Master's in Library Science from Pratt Institute.

Briefly describe your professional career.

Between 1985 and 1998 I worked at the New York Public Library in various capacities. I started as an Arabic books cataloguer at the New York Public Library (Donnell Library Center, Foreign Languages Collection), continued to work as a Senior Librarian at the Mid-Manhattan Branch, and advanced to Supervising Librarian at



Science, Industry and Business Library of NYPL, specializing in computing and library technology. In 1998 I moved to the City University of New York, first as Systems Librarian of the Mina Rees Library of the Graduate Center, followed by my current position, which I have held for the past nine years.

You told me a few years ago that you are also working for the New York University Library. Do you still work there?

Yes, I have continued to work part-time since 1990 at the Coles Science Center of the NYU Library as an adjunct science librarian. All my life I have been a great fan of science and science literature.

I read in The New York Times (March 15, 2004) that you invented and patented a simplified Arabic alphabet to facilitate reading and writing in that language and to better communication between the West and the Arabic-speaking world. Can you explain your innovation?

I invented the “Arabic” typographic style, rather than “Arabic,” to refer to the original Arabic script and all other 22 scripts sharing letter forms with it. This new simplified style keeps an accepted level of text legibility. However, the letters can take one shape whenever they appear in a word and can be printed in block style or as separate letters instead of a connected cursive form. Additionally, the new letter shapes were designed to facilitate a possible bi-directional (left to right or right to left) utilization. I patented a font design style, which I call the “Muthamathil,” meaning “symmetrical and uniform,” based on the above simplified style.

This has had implications not only for Arabic but also for Persian, Kurdish, Urdu, and other scripts that need special software going from left to right, and a lot of extra programming to render a specific font. By using this “Arabic” style, students of Arabic and other oriental languages will more easily progress to reading traditional newsprint, books, signs, and other printed scripts.

How did you become interested in Arabic typography?

From my youth, I was fascinated by Arabic script and various forms of calligraphy. I studied for many years the history of Arabic script and various schools of calligraphy. I also studied letter forms of old Arabic, Musnad, Nabataean, Aramaic, Syriac, and Hebrew scripts. My interest intensified after the spread of computers in the 1980s. I had the impression that Arabic should not stay on the sidelines demanding technological breakthroughs. I wanted to emphasize the need to free Arabic typographic design from the old and complex calligraphy and handwriting rules. The rules for Arabic typography need not duplicate the rules of calligraphy and handwriting, but that must not mean we completely abandon the beautiful Arabic calligraphy.

How do you view the future of your innovations?

The main objective of my work is to emphasize that Arabic typographical options need to be wide open to ensure a desirable range of selections for users. Only through this openness can these scripts evolve and stay competitive. Arabic typography must address the

challenges of literacy, education, economics, technology, and global competition as well as legibility. Complex Arabic typefaces are expensive to make and handle by computers and other technological media.

Where did you publish your ideas and proposals, and how were they viewed by specialists in the field of typography?

In 2004 I published the article “Muthamathil Type Style: Toward Free, Technology-Friendly Arabic Types” in *Visible Language* (previously *Journal of Typographic Research*), published by the Rhode Island School of Design. This article, along with my patent announcement, received several responses and prompted debates in international typography forums (such as ATypI) and interviews in Arabic and international newspapers. Two more articles—“Typography Behind the Arabic Calligraphy Veil” and “Anatomy of an Arabic Type Design”—were published in *Visible Language* in 2006 and 2008, respectively. In 2009 a two-part article, “Roots of Modern Arabic Script: From Musnad to Jazm,” was published in *Dabesh Voice*, a New York City-based bilingual (Arabic-English) quarterly journal.

Do you have additional considerations regarding your ongoing project?

At the heart of my designs is a desire to have the Arabic script more integrated with the rest of the world scripts. I want to emphasize Arabic simplicity rather than complexity. I want to emphasize what Arabic has in common with other scripts rather than exaggerating its unique characteristics. I want to integrate the script with today’s world cultures rather than isolate it from them. I want to focus on the Arabic script as a powerful and flexible tool to express language rather than a tool to create splendid calligraphic art to hang on walls.

Any new projects?

I just submitted for publication a new and very important article regarding the puzzles of the Arabic Nabataean inscriptions; it is a new interpretation of al-Namrah, dated 328 A.D., the oldest classic Arabic language document on record. My projects also include an Arabic calligraphy database to help researchers and designers locate images quickly of various historical and contemporary calligraphic works, and a comprehensive book in the field of Arabic scripts to serve as a reference source for scholars and as enjoyable reading for laypersons and students alike. Finally, I am pleased to mention that my biography will appear in the 2010 edition of *Who’s Who*.

Thank you very much for your time, knowledge, and sharing the interesting aspects of your work with MultiCultural Review’s readers.

Vladimir F. Wertsman is Chair of the Publishing & Multicultural Materials Committee of the Ethnic & Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) of the American Library Association. He is the author of books on various American ethnic groups and regularly contributes articles, interviews, and book reviews (including ones on Arab Americans) to *MultiCultural Review*. 