Becoming Readers: Our Stories

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All co-authors are students at Zayed University. Khulood Khalfan is a Fine Art student, majoring in Interior Design. Iman Nawfal is in her third year, majoring in Tourism and Special Events. Shaikha Al Hameli is majoring in Public Relations/Creative Advertising. Ayesha Al Hammadi has not yet decided which concentration to major in. Nada Al Hammadi is in her first semester and is majoring in Public Relations Management. Athra Al Zaabi is in her second year and is majoring in Multimedia Journalism.
There is a widely held belief that Arabs do not read for leisure (Al-Huwaider, 2003; Al Sayegh, 2007). A prominent Gulf Arab university college of education website states, “Generally, Arabic is a non-reading culture.” However, as educators, we cannot rely on assumptions alone. If we ask students about their reading habits we might find that such assumptions may simply be, to some extent, what Aronson (2000) calls, “myths masquerading as truths” (p. 5). As part of an ongoing qualitative study of the leisure reading habits of female Emirati university students, six participants were invited to co-author this article with the researcher by writing their stories of how they came to be readers. They were asked to respond to the question, “How did you come to be a reader?” and, although some sub-topics were suggested for their inclusion, the overall content was their choice. The social embeddedness of leisure reading and literacy in general requires rich description that is best expressed through qualitative data. The stories were collated by the researcher and edited by the participants who also approved the final version of the article. It is hoped that by adopting an ethnographic approach, these stories will illustrate the different paths that Emirati women can take to becoming readers and the essential role played by parents and teachers.

Shaikha Al Hameli’s chance encounter with someone her own age led her into a world of reading where she has dwelt with great enthusiasm ever since. Books must be well written to sustain her attention as a reader.

Life is all about experiences, and one should share experiences for the benefit of others so that they can get knowledge about life from a different perspective. What better way to share it with the world than writing it for people to read? Books are about pleasure, knowledge, companionship, experiences and sometimes a diary for one’s hardships. They help you expand your mentality, enjoy the combination of words and get closer to a description of indescribable objects, feelings and thoughts. My personal story started when my father invited a Pakistani family to have dinner with us, a few years back. Their daughter was as old as I was back then. She started our conversation by talking about books, which authors she liked and the books she was eager to read. I did not know how to respond except with silence. I felt ashamed of how little I knew of the book world. The next day, I remember telling my father that he should take me to a bookstore and buy his daughter’s books. Since then, I believe, I became a keen reader.

I have not always been a keen reader in Arabic but, this summer, I tried to correct that by reading some books about young ladies in the Gulf. I enjoyed reading them because they were written in easier Arabic than the more traditional Arabic books which are difficult to read and take a longer time to finish. That might be why I do not read more often in Arabic. I have read many novels and autobiographies (mostly of women) in English. My father often gives me books on self-improvement while my mother encourages me to read about young ladies to gain different perspectives and learn from their experiences. I don’t borrow books from libraries but do borrow from friends who also offer their advice on what to read.

If a book does not interest me from the first few pages I usually put it away and do not continue reading it. At the moment I am in the middle of reading three books at the same time (in addition to my studies) which can be very confusing. I have books on my shelf which include some I haven’t read and those that I love to reread. I really enjoy rereading a book because I have discovered in doing so that a person’s way of thinking changes in a year or so. I read every day but the time spent reading varies. My favourite time to read is just before sleeping because it clears my mind and I don’t think of anything outside my reading.

Nada Al Hammadi’s story comes with a little philosophy and a lesson to other students, not to ignore their teachers’ advice! She is happier reading in Arabic than in English, although boredom is a problem in both languages.
When I realized that reading is a huge school, I started to love it. I tried to have a chance to read one page every day but couldn’t do it, because it is hard for me. When I was in high school, my Arabic teacher encouraged me to read, but I ignored her advice. After I came to university, the foundation program encouraged students to read stories, especially graded readers, to improve their English. I liked this method because I like to have new, interesting stories. Also, in the second year, I had a teacher who encouraged me a lot; I really got my love of reading from her. I like to own books before reading them, which means I do not visit the library to borrow books for reading enjoyment. When I go to the bookshops I buy self-help books because that is my interest. I always read in Arabic and these are some of the titles I have read in Arabic: *My Vision, The Secret of Ambition, How to do Something Different, The Women’s Race, Renew your Life* and *The Five Fingers of Sadness*, an Emirati story that discusses some local issues and behaviour.

My best time for reading is before I sleep, so I bought a small reading light which helps me to read in a dark room. The negative thing about me as a reader is that I get bored in a short time which stops me from reading more than two pages every day. It also means that I buy more books before finishing the ones that I own. I think that a reader is someone who gets knowledge to help with writing. Finally, I wish to improve my reading and I advise my friends to like reading at all times because it helps us to have a high level of knowledge.

*One continuous thread in Khulood Khalfan’s reading tapestry is that of childhood. There, she started her love of reading and later, a certain book brought back childhood memories. Parents and siblings contributed greatly along the way.*

Reading is my passion in life. Since I was a little girl I did not care if the story that I am reading has any illustrations or any pictures as long as I can imagine anything that I want. The reason that I love reading is that my family has always encouraged me to read. When I was a little girl, my father used to bring me different kinds of stories from Egypt. I loved the stories because they were about Persian princesses, old Arabic legends and many other interesting subjects. They were very catching and interesting. I will always remember them because they are the reason that I loved reading. My parents encourage me to read because both of them are great readers.

When I was a little girl we moved to a new house and there was a big library that contained all kinds of books of my father’s. The first time I saw the library, I was really amazed and I discovered in that moment that reading is very valuable to me. The other reason that I became a reader is that I was in a private school where they used to give the students stories that were very interesting. My English teacher used to encourage us to read more and more. When I was in Junior high, I loved reading but I didn’t know what kinds of stories were suitable for me, apart from the Penguin Longman Readers series. At the same time my sister was in the university and she helped me to discover my favorite genre in books, namely classic stories, books for teens and non-fiction. When I came to college, it was rare for me to find Emirati girls who love reading so it was hard for me to talk about the subject of reading with anyone. However, there were teachers in the university who encouraged me to continue reading. One teacher gave us a reading journal where we had to write what we thought about something we read and then share it with the teacher if we wanted to. I also joined a book club in the university which assisted me in finding girls that have the same hobby as me.

I like reading in Arabic and once ‘got lost’ in an Arabic book called *Your Eyes, Hamada*, by an Emirati author. It affected me a lot because it brought back old memories from my childhood that I had forgotten. In general, I prefer to read during long vacations, such as, the summer holidays and spring breaks. I think a reader is someone who has a high imagination and enjoys reading every sentence or word. To sum up, I would like to thank the people for helping me be a reader and for giving me the opportunity to imagine. Thank you for letting me know that life does not stop in the line of reality.
Ayesha Al Hammadi’s poignant story relates how her interest in reading was initiated by a school librarian, sustained by a sister who since passed away and relied on as a source of comfort to help her cope with her loss.

Walking around the library at the age of 14, chatting with friends and looking at different types of books, was my introduction to the reading world. We didn’t think about the purpose of the place we enjoyed until that day came: the librarian asked me what kind of books I had read so far. I didn’t know what to say because I used to just look at the books without reading any. She gave me a book and we made a deal. If I read that book but didn’t enjoy it, she would not bother me again. However, if I enjoyed reading it I should promise her that I would not sit around the library without a book in my hand. I really enjoyed reading it and started reading Arabic novels; that was the beginning of feeding my soul with reading. I felt that I experienced the stories and lived the events with the characters. First, I just borrowed books from my school library, but then my sister encouraged me to buy them so we could read them whenever we wanted. I kept reading Arabic books till my foundation year at the university. There, I focused on improving my English and our teachers used to take us to the Learning Enhancement Centre to choose whatever books we wanted. I didn’t like it at first because I felt that I was forced to read. Later on I got used to it and started reading there, independently.

My sister was my example. She gave me books to read, read me some pages that she enjoyed, or shared her views on what she read. Even though she has since passed away, I feel like her books and stories are still forcing me to read them. My favorite book, and one that I never get tired of reading, is an Arabic book called Don’t Be Sad. Every time I feel sad, disappointed or hopeless, this book guides me away from the darkness. It’s written by a famous Arabic writer and speaker called Aayed Al Qarni. Four months ago I bought a book called Why Do I Love These People (Po Bronson). It’s about the families we come from and the families we form. I only read a couple of the pages and I hope to continue reading it. “Love can be made, they had been taught—but they had not been taught how.” I was moved after reading this sentence because I felt like it was talking about me. I circled it and decided to use this book to rebuild my life after facing the hardship of losing my sister. I am also reading a book called The Five Fingers of Sadness by the Emirati writer, Mohamed Hassan Ahmed, who explains his struggle between his past and future in a sad way, and his strong relation with his beloved younger sister.

Other titles I have read in English include, Poppy is Perfect - or is she? (Rosie Rushton), Nectar in a Sieve (Kamala Markandaya) and Charlotte’s Web (E. B. White), but I am interested in reading novels in both languages. Due to my course work, unfortunately, I barely have time to read, but once I finish my assignments, I will start reading again. The most time I enjoy reading is before I go to bed in the quiescence of the night. In my view, reading is not only to read what is written in a book, but it’s to feel and experience what we are reading and use it as a method to rebuild our personality.

Iman Nawfal paints a picture of what has become, worldwide, a fairly typical story: a child starting off as a keen reader, losing some enthusiasm in the teenage years and later regaining her earlier interest.

There are many factors that motivated me to start reading. Firstly, as I was growing up, my father used to encourage us to read, and used to read us all types of books including books about medicine and electronics. Also, he used to take us almost weekly to a bookstore, where each one of us would choose a book to read. All that was before I was ten years old. When I was 11, my father died and my mother took over the role of educating us; she used to reward us every time we finished a book. This magical reading habit stopped as I started grade 9, because I was so swept up with the teenage period with all the make-up, new best friends, crushes and other things. However, I started reading again in grade 10, this time, romantic Arabic novels. It
was a group addiction which caused us to read during class! My whole class used to read those novels, and we used to exchange them during all 3 years of high school. I have always loved reading in English, and that became quite clear when I was in grade 12, as I started reading again English novels and other kinds of books. I kept reading, even during summer and while traveling. Among the titles I have read in English are The Alchemist, All She Ever Wanted, The Last Victim, Who Moved my Cheese?, 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens and Chocolate for a Teen’s Soul. In fact, while reading the last two I felt like I was living the experiences written there and I wanted to do just what the book said without much thought about the consequences.

As I entered the university, I started reading books on self-help and self-development and anything related to psychology. Now I’m 21 years old, and I read all kinds of books, especially novels, self-help, creativity and sometimes cookbooks. I usually read at least 20 pages per week, but this semester I’ve stopped reading because I’m busy with off-campus activities and volunteer work. I don’t really use our university library much, because I hate borrowing books, since it limits the time I can spend with a book. I like having the book around me for a long time so I can read it with no pressure from deadlines for returning it. Also, there are no new interesting books in our library and I have a better range of choices when I buy! I have become so addicted to reading English books that I do not read Arabic books anymore. The only reason I can think of is that reading in English helps me get an idea of how to write and I want to start my own writing soon. If I were to read an Arabic book it would have to be a really, really, good book. A reader, I believe, is a person who enjoys exploring life through books and who commits to this experience by reflecting on what he/she has learnt and never gives up reading.

Athra Al Zaabi shares the more aesthetic aspects of reading as she carries within her a “beautiful image” of her mother reading. She credits both her parents and her English teacher with setting her on the road to becoming a reader.

My love of reading started for me when I was a small child and that was because of my mother whom I always saw reading. The beautiful image of my mom reading and enjoying herself reading, grew in my mind. Whenever I saw a book since that time I would get so excited and happy and I would keep remembering my mother’s words to me, “books are windows to a dreamland, you never feel lonely with them; they let you travel from your place all over the world.” Complementing my mother’s role in encouraging me to read was my father, who loves Arabic literature very much, something I inherited from him. I remember each time we used to sit together and talk about Arabic literature and poetry. That is, really, how I started to be a reader of Arabic books.

In my first year in University, in level 6 specifically, there was a big turning point in my life. This turning point happened because my English teacher, Miss J., forced me to read English novels and stories at the beginning. With Miss J., and only with Miss J., I started to feel the beauty of reading in English. I started with simple easy reading like, for example, Black Beauty, and then I read books that were a little bit harder and more exciting, such as, Sherlock Holmes and Frankenstein.

I realize at the end that the most important thing when you read in English is that you will get the meaning and the feeling as you read but, when you try to read the same book translated you will lose some of that meaning or feeling which means that you will always get something less from a translation of that book or novel. Now, not only Arabic books captivate me but also English ones.
Conclusion

These stories help to demonstrate that one-size assumptions, such as, “Arabs don’t read” or “our students are not readers,” do not necessarily fit all and should be questioned. Here, each student has told her own story, highlighting for us the often overlooked role that adults - particularly parents and teachers - and peers can play in promoting reading. We are left in no doubt as to the importance of parents who “have a powerful effect in creating enthusiastic readers” (Nathanson, Pruslow, & Levitt, 2008, p. 319). We see in particular, the influence of the father, often being reinforced by the mother. Teachers, too, we are told, play a major role in promoting reading, “Teachers, no matter what grade level or subject they teach, know that nothing is more crucial (or rewarding) than helping a student become a better reader” (Feldman, 2002, p. 6). Adults realize, of course, that powerful as their role may be, as children become teenagers and young adults, a social force with a strength all its own, that of peers, takes over. We see from this article that peers can help readers form that most supportive of social phenomena, reading networks, within which books are swapped and, no doubt, talked about. Moss and McDonald (2004) stress the importance of such reading networks in guiding the choices readers make, “Children have the potential to influence what others do, both by directly recommending, by forming a group which chooses together, and perhaps more indirectly, by making a book visible to others” (p. 404).

Other themes which shine through in these stories are a preference for owning books as opposed to borrowing them – so that they can be reread – and a favourite time for leisure reading, which appears to be just before sleeping.

One cause for concern is an apparently low incidence of reading in Arabic, an area that should be addressed by teachers, researchers and authors. While there are ever more Emirati authors writing for an increasingly highly educated population, there is still a lack of interesting reading material in Arabic for this critical age group. Perhaps these six students, whose stories are written here, will, in turn, become the authors who will promote reading in Arabic in the not too distant future.

References


