

'Tales' Car' roams Egypt's countryside to offer children free books

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Cairo

Reading books and magazines has been a normal activity for children everywhere but sometimes it is a luxury, particularly in Egypt's deprived and remote areas where child labour is common.

Haytham Abderabo, an Egyptian novelist and English teacher, has been trying to provide needy children with books, playing the role of Santa Claus mainly in Ash Sharqia Province in northern Egypt.

“Reading, books and culture represent the first line of defence against whatever is ugly in this world.”

Haytham Abderabo,
Egyptian novelist and
English teacher

Using his car, which children call Arabiyet el-Hawadeet – the Tales' Car – Abderabo roamed the villages of Ash Sharqia to disseminate knowledge to the children in the countryside.

In about three years, the Tales' Car has visited more than 60 villages and other areas, distributing more than 30,000 books for free in Ash Sharqia and other provinces.

The project depends on donations of books and magazines from individuals and enterprises.

The project began by mere coincidence.

“I was once waiting for my father in the car while surfing a children's magazine I bought for my daughter when a child approached me asking about what I was holding. I was astonished to find a child in primary four who does not know about magazines,” Abderabo said.

“I told her that was a magazine that entailed picture stories and tales. She was so excited to hear the word 'tales.' I gave it to her but she said she can't read on her own so I told her to find somebody older to read it with her. It was surprising that a child her age could not read on her own,” he added.



Unique initiative. Children pose with books that they received from the Tales' Car.

(Courtesy of Haytham Abderabo)

“Several other children approached the car asking for magazines but I didn't have anymore.”

Since that encounter, Abderabo collected children's books and magazines until he had about 900. He then decided to distribute them during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

“When I wrote a post on Facebook saying that I would distribute books during Ramadan, I faced sarcastic comments such as I should give away food instead,” he said.

Abderabo, however, did not give up.

“I'm known to the people in my village as a teacher,” he said. “So I started knocking on their doors asking about their children. I gave each child I met a book and promised to give him or her another if [he or she] reads it.”

News spread from village to village about a teacher named Haytham who carries books and maga-

zines for children in his car.

“People started to stop me on the way asking me for books for their children,” he recalled.

Some of Abderabo's former students who had graduated from university volunteered to help him in the project. One started documenting the project, while another created a page on Facebook for the project and a friend of his joined them as a storyteller.

Children have been excited about the project.

“The Tales' Car is a great initiative. I learned immense knowledge and information through reading the books Mr Haytham provided that I had never known about before,” said Rawan Hisham, 11.

Storytelling workshops were added to the activities that Abderabo and his group offered.

“The components of the workshops are so simple. We find a place to sit like an area full of grass and

give children a piece of our hearts,” Abderabo said.

“We choose a story that fits the environment where children live, then we encourage them to add to it. We ask them to add characters and change the course of events and the ending,” he said.

■ In about three years, the Tales' Car visited more than 60 villages and areas and distributed more than 30,000 books for free.

“Storytelling derived surprises like children who can write stories.”

Abderabo's team faced an unpleasant surprise when they visited an Upper Egyptian village.

“We were surprised to know when we held a storytelling workshop for 300 children there that only two of

them continued their education till secondary school. All the others dropped out in primary five or six to work and support their families,” Abderabo sadly said.

“This world is full of ugliness and we are trying to beautify it as much as we can,” he added.

Abderabo said he hoped his project will make a difference in children's lives.

“Culture is a process of transferring knowledge into a behaviour. When a child reads about love, beauty and peace, that will be his or her behaviour and [he or she], in turn, will reject violence and terrorism and learn about accepting the other,” he said.

“Reading, books and culture represent the first line of defence against whatever is ugly in this world.”

Marwa al-A'sar is a Cairo-based journalist.

From the Middle East to Mount Everest

Books



Dunia El-Zobaidi

‘Dreams of a Refugee’ recounts the author's extraordinary experience that led him to preach tolerant Islam.

Many Muslims in the West suffer an identity crisis at some point. Their disillusionment may turn into hate, which Mostafa Salameh, a Jordanian-British mountaineer of Palestinian decent, tries to tackle in his book “Dreams of a Refugee: From the Middle East to Mount Everest.”

The book recounts Salameh's extraordinary experience that changed the course of his life, leading him to renew his faith and preach a tolerant Islam, after religion had previously played a very small part in his life.

Born in Kuwait, a chance meeting led Salameh to London then Edinburgh where he partied excessively. One night he had a dream in which he was standing on the highest mountain on Earth reciting the call to prayer. He decided to climb Mount Everest though he had no mountaineering experience.

At first, Salameh described what seemed to be random encounters, including a clash with the Jordanian ambassador in London.

Later, his writing felt like it had more relevance. He referred to Khalil Gibran's “The Prophet” when Gibran wrote of death:

“When you have reached the mountaintop, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.”

He referred to Paulo Coelho's “The Alchemist” and the message that Allah knows the future but Allah is not telling him how to live his life. He wrote: “The way I see it, Allah provides opportunities and puts people in my path but everything depends on my intention and my intention has always been to help my family and parents and brothers and sister, and to be kind and loving to those I encounter.”

While in Edinburgh, Salameh said he felt the need to reacquire himself with God, which led him to explore India.

Hindu and Buddhist teachings spoke to Salameh and he was particularly influenced by a quote of Siddhartha: “No one saves us but ourselves... No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path. Work out your own salvation. Do not depend on others.”

In his book, Salameh spoke highly of the Jordanian king, who encouraged him to climb Mount Everest and to provide inspiration for young people.

He also spoke of the people he met during his climb, such as Suhail, a sports champion represent-

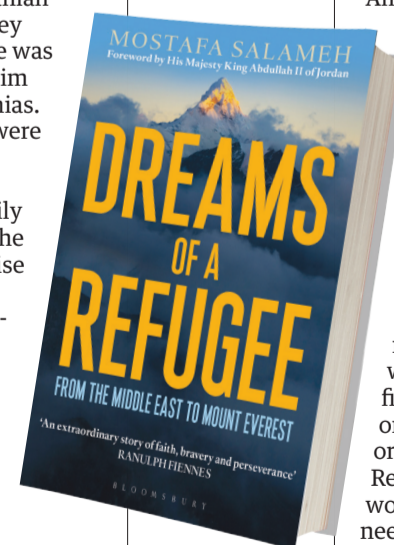
ing Jordan in the next Paralympics.

However, one of Salameh's finest memories of the climb was meeting a team of Iranian mountaineers. He said they got on very well and there was mutual respect, despite him being a Sunni and they Shias. He said: “On Everest we were just Muslims and human beings.”

Salameh presented easily digestible summaries of the Palestinian conflict, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the causes of radicalisation. He quoted British journalist Robert Fisk's prediction “if the West causes trouble in the Middle East, it will come back to haunt them.”

Salameh blamed some European countries for making it difficult for young people to be pious Muslims. They support mosques that centre on one or another national group instead of supporting ethnic minorities to enable them to receive Islamic education in their local language. He reckoned that tackling identity crisis requires mixing with people from all backgrounds.

Salameh complained that the Middle East is deeply fragmented,



Cover of Mostafa Salameh's “Dreams of a Refugee: From the Middle East to Mount Everest.”

noting that “travelling from one Arab country to another is much easier if you are the holder of an American or European passport than an Arabic one. Even if, for example, I visit Dubai on a Jordanian passport, the visa application takes a long time compared with the rapid speed when I travel with my British passport.”

Salameh is committed to spreading the message of tolerant Islam. He is a motivational speaker and activist, trying to turn young people away from radicalisation. He said: “If you want to be a good Muslim, don't fight unless you are attacked or you have to save your family or country. Be kind and honest. Respect other religions. We all worship the same God. There's no need to convert or change anyone. Just accept everyone.”

After two failed attempts, Salameh reached the top of Mount Everest in 2008. He became the first Jordanian to reach the North Pole and to scale the Seven Summits – the highest mountain on each of the seven continents. In 2016, he reached the South Pole, the first Muslim to do so.

Dunia El-Zobaidi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.