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Arabic children's book recommendations 2022

Title: Me, My Friend and the Donkey

Original Arabic title: *Ana, wa sadiqi wal-himar* (أنا وصديقي والحمار)

Author: Mahmoud Shukair

Published by: Tamer Institute, Ramallah (2016)

Target age: 11+

Genre: Mystery, detective, fantasy

Pages: 85 in Arabic (est. 100 in English)

Original Language: Arabic

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Funding: Eligible for an English PEN "PEN Translates" award



Me, My Friend and the Donkey is a humorous detective adventure, with elements of fantasy, set in and around Jerusalem. It tells the story of Mahmoud (the narrator) and Muhammad (his friend) as they try to find Muhammad's stolen donkey. Inspired by detective novels and adventure movies, the pair assemble a group of friends to solve this mystery, some of them adopting code names. Along the way, the donkey appears to the pair in their dreams, talking and roaming about freely. They are also visited regularly by two mysterious girls who know everything about them, and give advice on the mission, but who no one else seems to see. They do—eventually—find the donkey, but the dreams, and visits from the girls, continue. Years later, Muhammad has moved to the US and has a happy and successful life. The pair still reminisce about donkeys whenever they meet, leading Mahmoud to decide that he will honour the donkey by writing its story.

Inspired by the true story of Shukair's childhood friend, the novel is a welcome addition to the flourishing child detective genre. Weaving together Palestinian history, culture, and a healthy dose of humour, readers learn that about the challenges of perseverance and the importance of friendship when faced with adversity.

About the author

Mahmoud Shukair is a beloved and critically acclaimed Palestinian writer. Born in Jerusalem in 1941, he has authored forty-five books, six television series, and four plays. His stories have been translated into several languages, including English, French, German, Chinese, Mongolian and Czech. His novel *Praise for the Women in the Family* was shortlisted in 2016 for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. In 2011, he was awarded the Mahmoud Darwish Prize for Freedom of Expression. His YA book *al-Quds madinati al-ula* (Jerusalem, My First City, 2014), was shortlisted for the 2015 Communication for Children's Literature Award.



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Sample translation

Translated from Arabic by Anam Zafar

Just about two hours before sunset, Ocean Whale came running up to us. We noticed he was completely worn out from running so fast. If only we could have used a carrier pigeon instead! We'd really hoped to use one, to send news to each other. But when we realized nobody used birds to communicate anymore, we didn't dwell on the idea for long.

Ocean Whale had come to tell us that he, Lightning Bolt, and Forest Lion had captured a man with a dark birthmark on his face, just like the thief's. It wasn't above his right eyebrow, but they'd decided the birthmark in itself was enough proof. As we listened, me and my friend Muhammad looked around the Friday market: there was no one around except a few cattle sellers.

We asked Ocean Whale how they'd managed to capture the man.

"We were following him, and he seemed suspicious of us. So we got closer and surrounded him, and Forest Lion said: 'Would you like to introduce yourself?' And the man scowled and said: 'What do you want from me?'"

After seeing pure evil in the man's eyes, Forest Lion decided to play a trick on him and said: "I, Forest Lion, mean you no harm. I am simply inviting you for a drink at the coffee shop."

Ocean Whale went on: "Then the man followed us to the coffee shop, and when we got there, Forest Lion whispered in my ear to come and find you straightaway."

The three of us sprinted along the pavement to the coffee shop. To my friend Muhammad's surprise, that man was not the thief. Muhammad apologized and let him finish his drink. The man accepted the apology, thanked Forest Lion for the coffee, and left, seeming happy and a bit relieved.

We looked at each other awkwardly. Then we left the coffee house, too. Layla was standing at the market entrance, camera in hand—she wouldn't let any donkey walk past without getting at least one shot of the animal and its owner. Glancing at her, Forest Lion said, "That was just our first try. Lots more will follow." There was a proud swagger in his step, as if he was now a seasoned detective.

"Yeah, all you need now is to open your own prison, for all the people you'll capture!" we said, jokingly.



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Forest Lion nodded with determination. It seemed Lightning Bolt and Ocean Whale believed in what he'd said, too. Me and my friend Muhammad exchanged a look—we weren't as convinced as the others. Then we decided to split up and go home before sunset. And that is what we did.

Read a longer sample at arablit.org, or [listen to a reading](#) by the translator.

More information about the book is available from [Anam Zafar](#).