



Questions for: Mouza Al Shamsi

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The director of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award and acting executive director, Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, contributes to our Q&A series



Describe your job

I manage the strategic direction of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, establishing international partnerships, raising the profile and awareness of the award, and increasing the global reach of Arabic literature through our Translation Grant.

How has the industry changed in the past decade?

It's been ever-evolving, and immense development has taken place. I'm heartened that people are still choosing to read, despite the evolution in the consumption of media.

There's definitely been a shift towards digital publishing and online content with ebooks, audiobooks and podcasts, yet the demand for and interest in physical books continue to rise, and particularly during the last year throughout the Covid-19 pandemic people have turned to books for escapism.

The digital movement has brought many advantages for the publishing industry, offering publishers a public platform whilst giving customers a seamless and tailored service.

What's the biggest challenge in your job?

I've answered with what I would consider as more of an opportunity than a challenge. Delivering a full cycle of award nominations every year that celebrates literary intellect and new laureates at the end of each prize year is both the most rewarding and challenging aspect of my role.

What are the most interesting things you're seeing at the moment in the industry?

Despite the challenges of 2020, it has been amazing to see the industry join forces to explore creative avenues to continue creating and sharing rich content. Virtual conferences, dynamic panels and specialist talks have offered much-needed engagement in the absence of face-to-face meetings and on the ground activations. We have seen an enhanced interest from partner organisations in collaborating with us to put on events and webinars exploring the industry, publishing trends and the activities of Arabic writers.

What do you think might be the next big trends?



A tricky question to answer. I think the trend towards digital publishing will only continue to grow with audiobooks and podcasts. There are also increasing opportunities for collaborations and partnerships to amplify and co-create content. We hope to see an increase in translations of global literature, including Arabic, to build bridges, connections and open up new worlds to international readers. Of course, I'm also hoping that our 2021 SZBA winners, announced in April, will see huge international recognition and success!

Tell us about a positive force for change in the publishing industry

The prominence of cultural exchange has provided a unique and much needed platform for sharing ideas and promoting a global publishing landscape. The SZBA's Translation Grant aims to contribute to increasing the number of Arabic books that are translated, published and distributed abroad, with funding available for translation of all literary and children's titles that have won the Sheikh Zayed Book Award.

How do you think the industry will come out of the Covid-19 crisis?

The pandemic has undoubtedly had a huge impact on publishing, from the cancellation of books fairs, networking events, and rights discussions, to delays in the supply of books due to travel restrictions. However, as an industry we are enterprising, resilient and innovative.

I believe that content will remain "king" as we come out of restrictions, but maximising visibility through SEO and targeted traffic will be important. 2020 has highlighted the need for online platforms to have a smart digital presence, while delivering personalised content and events to engage and interact with key communities and audiences.

How are you coping with working from a home environment?

I'm coping well - being at home has certainly brought its challenges but there have been many opportunities too. There's now so much more time for online discussions, networking and establishing new partnerships - I've been able to interact with authors and publishers all over the world through our virtual events programme. I have however found that I've had to incorporate tools to be able to balance my work and personal time without the separation of an office space.

What is the best book you've read in the last year?

The Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction: Intertextual Readings, by Richard van Leeuwen, who also happens to be the 2020 winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, Arabic Culture in Other Languages category. I find *The Nights*, as a work of literature, is easily understandable and timeless.

What are you reading now?

I am hoping to start *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, by Doris Behrens-Abouseif.

How do you like to read: on screen, on paper, or do you listen to audiobooks?

I'm still traditional in how I like to read, and that is on paper. There is a special joy in holding a book and going through its pages as the concept unfolds. For me, the experience of sitting down with a book cannot be replaced with an electronic device.

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