

How Sharjah Heritage Institute serves as bridge for different cultures

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Institute head and prominent Emirati writer talks of the invaluable currency of heritage

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Dubai: The Sharjah Heritage Institute is a premier institution that devotes concrete efforts to support researchers and institutions concerned with heritage

Built under the directives of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, the Sharjah Heritage Institute seeks to emphasise the importance of heritage, preserving it, and passing it on to future generations

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In an exclusive interview, Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Musallam, a prominent Emirati writer and researcher, who is the president of Sharjah Heritage Institute, spoke of the role of the institute in bridging cultures.

:Excerpts

Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Musallam: I did not imagine that the Encyclopedia of Mythical Beings book would meet with an acceptance other than Arabic. The book has been translated into more than one language: English, French, Portuguese, Italian, and finally Russian. Perhaps the Russian public differs from the audience in other countries because it highly appreciates the myth and the mythical being, and has a special taste for them

The Book Authority presented 58 translated books during our visit to Moscow. About 600 copies were sold out of a thousand copies and the rest were donated to public libraries. There is an association called “The Hidden Animal World” — its president asked to meet me. That is when he looked at my book. The Russian reader asks a lot of questions about heritage

A. I have two stories for children. A heritage story was rewritten by Oweid Al-Henna and illustrated by Kuwaiti artist Noha Al-Dukhan, director of Al-Saghir Al-Arabi. And a second story that I and my children wrote, which is a collective book, entitled “A Star in the Garden”, also drawn by artist Noha

Al-Dukhan. I reprinted three books that were issued by the institute “The Intention is Gold”, which I completed in the form of Arab tales and gave them to the Egyptian artist Muhammad Baghdadi, who painted them in the old Sinbad method. I have a collection of poetry entitled “Do You Know”, which is an anthology from my four collections

This large number of publishing houses in the Emirates has weakened the product ... and the outputs are very weak. But in the Clement publishing house, I deal with great experiences. There are publishing firms that release 100 books, of which only 20 are read

Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Musallam

My experience as an orphan is brought forth in “A Star in the Garden” which I submitted to Dar Kalimat in the form of four fairy tales for children. It is now in school libraries. Through the Department of Culture, I issued two stories, a Badiha story. “Fajira” in Bahrain, “Smimjah” in Kuwait, and “Badha” in Oman and it is the local Cinderella. and the one who fulfils the requests is the fish. Hamda is our Cinderella

A. In the fairy tale. I think that in the UAE there is a huge treasure trove of fairy tales. In the 1980s, I collected a large number of tapes, and now I work on them through new devices. I present fairy tales wherever I go. They are records of people who died for more than twenty years ago, and they are recorded by narrators who were not affected by the modern atmosphere

A. My tryst with publishing goes back several years when I was a member of the publishing committee in the Department of Culture and Information, as well as in the Sharjah National Theatre. As for the publishing house that I founded, it works to publish the selected books on a not-for-profit basis

Profile

Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Musallam, an Emirati writer and researcher, is known for his research and scientific interests in the Gulf and Arab cultural heritage. He has made tangible efforts to support researchers and institutions concerned with heritage, and is currently the President of the Sharjah Heritage Institute and Editor-in-Chief of Al Mawrouth and Marawd Magazine, in addition to being a member of several international organisations and associations concerned with cultural heritage. He has won several awards and decorations, and has many publications in culture, fairy tales, popular memory, and Nabati poetry. Some of his works have been translated into English, Italian, Spanish, and Czech, including his book “Encyclopedia of Mythical Beings” which was recently translated into Russian. Dr Al-Musallam holds a doctorate in history and heritage from the Hassan II University of Casablanca, in Morocco

Last year, I opened a small stand at the Sharjah Book Fair. I received several books that are completely unfit for publication. Through my publishing house, I am trying to create some kind of cultural interaction. A few days ago, we held the first literary salon in the Book Garden Cafe in Sharjah ... and .in the cafe, you could sell books and raise awareness

Without the directives of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, the Institute would not have seen the light, and it would not have become a scientific, academic, knowledge, practical and field that seeks to emphasise the importance of heritage and its place, and definition, preserving it, and passing it on for generations. The Institute's activities include analysis and photography workshops, training courses on manuscript sterilisation, preservation and archiving, inclusion of cultural heritage in cultural and media vessels and .a workshop that dealt with Strategies to reach the public

The Institute's achievements include the implementation of the six professional diplomas programme .that took off at the beginning of the current academic year, the first of its kind at the Arab level

A. What is new, different and distinctive, not only in Sharjah, but in the Arab world, is what was presented by the Sharjah Heritage Institute this year under the name of professional diplomas, to form an educational centre and an Arab and international platform for teaching various types of tangible and intangible heritage. These diplomas are an integral part of the educational strategic plan of the institute, .and the preparation for them took a year of continuous effort

We did not imagine that the number of applicants would reach 130 students, as I expected the number .of students to not exceed 60. This is a huge challenge for us

A. The goal between us and the government is to publish 50 books from Sharjah Heritage Institute. We are publishing two magazines, 'Al Mawrouth' and 'Merwad' — and we will publish a magazine for children. And we started translating our books into Chinese and Russian. and we made hundreds of .publications, books and publications dealing with the world and heritage affairs

A. The Sharjah International Narrator Forum is an exceptional cultural event organised by the Sharjah Heritage Institute, which celebrates the informants and narrators who bear cultural heritage, or as .Unesco calls them living human treasures

This year we celebrated the Arabian Nights (A Thousand and One Nights), which is a celebration of the richness and majesty of Arab culture — a celebration of the efforts of the narrators and storytellers, who spread these tales around the world, and added a lot to it. More than a hundred participants from

forty-two countries took part. This celebration came by considering the Thousand and One Nights as a legacy of human heritage centred on many civilisations. We have invited to this forum a large number of specialists in this field, including Dr. Mohsen al-Mousawi, professor of Arabic literature at Columbia University in New York, who has written books on the heritage of One Thousand and One Nights. As for intellectual seminars, we made sure that they are accompanied by theatrical and cinematic shows.

.Shakir Noori is a journalist and writer based in Dubai

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