

Jehan Helou of the Tamer Institute, Ramallah, Palestine talks with author Elizabeth Laird



Jehan Helou was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1943, but her family were made refugees in 1948. They moved to Lebanon, where Jehan was to grow up. She was one of five sisters, and her father, who himself had not received a good education, was determined that all his daughters would get the best possible education. Jehan did not disappoint him. She went on to study at the American University in Beirut, then worked in the Institute of Palestine Studies, starting literacy campaigns among women and children in the refugee camps, establishing libraries and kindergartens.

In 1972, Jehan married a Palestinian professor of Political Science and History, but during the civil war in Lebanon, he disappeared. She searched for him for four years, but has never discovered his fate.

After some years living in Britain, where she worked as a journalist and editor in the Arab Press, she returned to Palestine, as Director of the Tamer Institute in Ramallah.

Jehan, what are the aims of the Tamer Institute?

Tamer was established during the first Palestinian uprising, ten years ago. Education was extremely disrupted, as the schools were constantly closed by the occupying forces. Tamer was set up to minimise the damage to children, by finding informal alternatives to school education, in particular by encouraging reading. It became the focal point for reading campaigns in Palestine.

What do the reading campaigns do?

We organise reading weeks, in which hundreds of local institutions take part, as well as creative workshops, storytelling sessions, and school visits by poets and writers. We also produce posters and pamphlets. One of the most popular things we do is our passport scheme. Since our children are not allowed passports in the real sense, we give them a “reading passport” once they’ve read seven books. After the next seven, they get a new passport in a different colour. When they’ve acquired seven passports, they can become a member of a reading group.



What are the children’s favourite books?

They enjoy Arabic literature and folk stories, but we also have many books translated from other languages, including fairy stories and children’s classics by authors like Lewis Carroll, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, R.L. Stevenson and many Russian authors.

Do you encourage children to write as well as read?

Yes! For the past ten years we have run a “My first book” competition during the reading weeks. Children write and illustrate their life stories. A committee chooses between three and five of them, and publishes them as books. This year, we published a whole collection of them in one big hardback book. These stories are very popular with children. You can see some of their work on our website: www.tamerinst.org.

Do you publish any other books?

We’re beginning to. We have always encouraged Palestinian writers. In the past, these were mainly writers of folk stories, but we are now giving writers more opportunities of training, and we’re publishing their original work. We’re also working in collaboration with the British Council to translate and publish picture books and children’s novels which give positive images of equal opportunities, in the fields of gender, disability and ethnicity. The books and illustrations have to be acceptable, of course, to Palestinian culture and tradition, and they have to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

Can you give me some examples of books you have translated?

Yes. So far, we have produced *Seal Surfer* by Michael Foreman, and *Journey to Jo'burg* by Beverley Naidoo. We’re currently working on *Winnie the Witch*, by Valerie Thomas and Korky Paul, *Paper Bag Princess* by Michael Matchenko and Robert Munsch, and *Chain of Fire* by Beverley Naidoo. We’re also translating books into Braille.

Are you doing any other work with children with special needs?

We run workshops in music and creative writing for visually impaired children, and are trying to integrate deaf children into our library activities.

Is most of your work based in libraries?

Yes. Both in Gaza and the West Bank, the libraries are very active, encouraging children to draw and write book reviews,

take part in drama sessions and reading groups. It’s amazing to see that the moment the curfew is lifted, the kids rush to the libraries.

Have the libraries suffered in the present intifada?

Yes, many of them have. Some have been shelled, and in some cases the Israeli troops have entered the library, taken the books and destroyed the computers.

What other problems do you have in the present situation?

Very severe ones! We’re totally pinned down. If we want to visit the libraries we have to travel over rough back roads. A journey of a few miles can take five hours, and we often have to turn back. We can’t run our workshops or training programmes. We try to do as much as we can by email and telephone, but many activities have just ceased.

Children must be under great pressure, confined indoors and unable to go out for days at a time. How do you try to help?

Whenever they can, librarians beat the curfew to get into people’s houses and apartments with crayons and books. Some authors are managing to do story telling sessions for the children from the same building. Artists are working with traumatised children, helping them to express their feelings through drama and drawing, and referring the severe cases to counsellors. It’s wonderful how the older children are working with the younger ones. We encourage this as much as we can. After the previous round of destruction in Ramallah, we organised the young people in the libraries to help clear the debris from the streets.

What are your hopes for the future?

We are just hoping that one day this occupation will end! We want our children to have a normal education and a normal life. This year, the schools have been shut so often that around sixty school days have been lost, and some schools have been destroyed altogether. But we cling to our view that literature is a good basis for peace, and can foster understanding. We want to go on translating more children’s books to reflect different cultures, and bring to our children the best of the world’s children’s literature.