

I höstas besökte **Fatima Sharafeddine** den Internationella barnboksveckan i Stockholm som varje år anordnas av Internationella biblioteket. Sharafeddine, från Libanon, är en av de mest tongivande barnboksförfattarna från den arabisktalande delen av världen, med förlag både i Mellanöstern och Europa.

Nu kommer hon också på svenska tack vare Bokförlaget Trasten – dels med ungdomsboken *Fatine* och dels med bilderboken *Ibn Battuta*. IBBYs Mats Kempe skickade henne några frågor om hennes skrivande, förlag, språk och framtiden.

Fatine och Ibn Battuta från Libanon

You will soon publish your first two books in Swedish. It is the novel *Fatin* for teenagers and the picture book *Ibn Battuta*. Can you tell us a bit about the two books and how you see them in reference to the rest of your literary work?

Fatin is my first young adult book. It is the story of a 17 year old girl who was forced to leave school in the village at the age of 15 to work as a maid in an upper class family in the capital, Beirut. Fatin is bright, and is determined to change her fate. With her determination and strong will, she succeeds to change the path of her life.

The events take place during the civil war in Lebanon in the 1980's. I drew a lot from my own experience of living in the war while writing the story. Besides, the character of Fatin is based on a true person.

In the Arab world, there are very few good books that are written for young adults. That is why I decided to venture in this field, as most of my other books are directed to children from 0 to 10 years. *Fatin* was very well received because of this lack in the market. I am very happy it will be translated into Swedish.

Ibn Battuta is a biographical book of the famous Arab traveller. It is part of a series of books

I am writing to introduce important Arab historical figures to the new generations. The book is directed to the age 7 to 10. There are several series of similar books in Arabic, but what makes this one different, is the style in which it is written and the events I decided to include. I chose to write it in the first person, as if Ibn Battuta himself is telling us his life story.

How did you become a writer of children's literature? What books and authors have been important for you in your own writing process? Can you be inspired by other things outside literature as well? And if so, what can that be?

Before I started writing for children, I worked for several years as a lead teacher in pre-schools in the USA, and afterwards I taught Arabic at the university level. At some point, I felt unsatisfied and needed to find a way to express all my feelings and ideas. My love of children's books, and my educational and professional experiences set the stage for the birth of the writer in me.

When I started writing children's books, I did it because I felt it was fun. Nothing more. But before I knew it, I was getting requests for more books from various publishers; and soon I was getting requests to give workshops for new writers and to participate in events related to the

field in different countries in Europe and the Arab world.

During my many years in the USA, I read a very big number of children's books. I did not know at the time that I was accumulating a reservoir and acquiring techniques of building a story for children. Some of my favourite writers are Eric Carl, Astrid Lindgren, and Beatrix Potter.

I am mainly inspired by what goes on around me. A little detail that might mean nothing to someone else could be the nucleus of a new story. I also draw a lot from my own childhood memories and from the childhood of my own children.

When we meet at the International Children's Book Week in Stockholm you were talking about the language-situation within the Arabic world, and your wish to write in a more "every day spoken" Arabic, but so far being forced to stick to classic Arabic due to, for instance, the publishing houses. Can you recapture for us some of your views on these things?

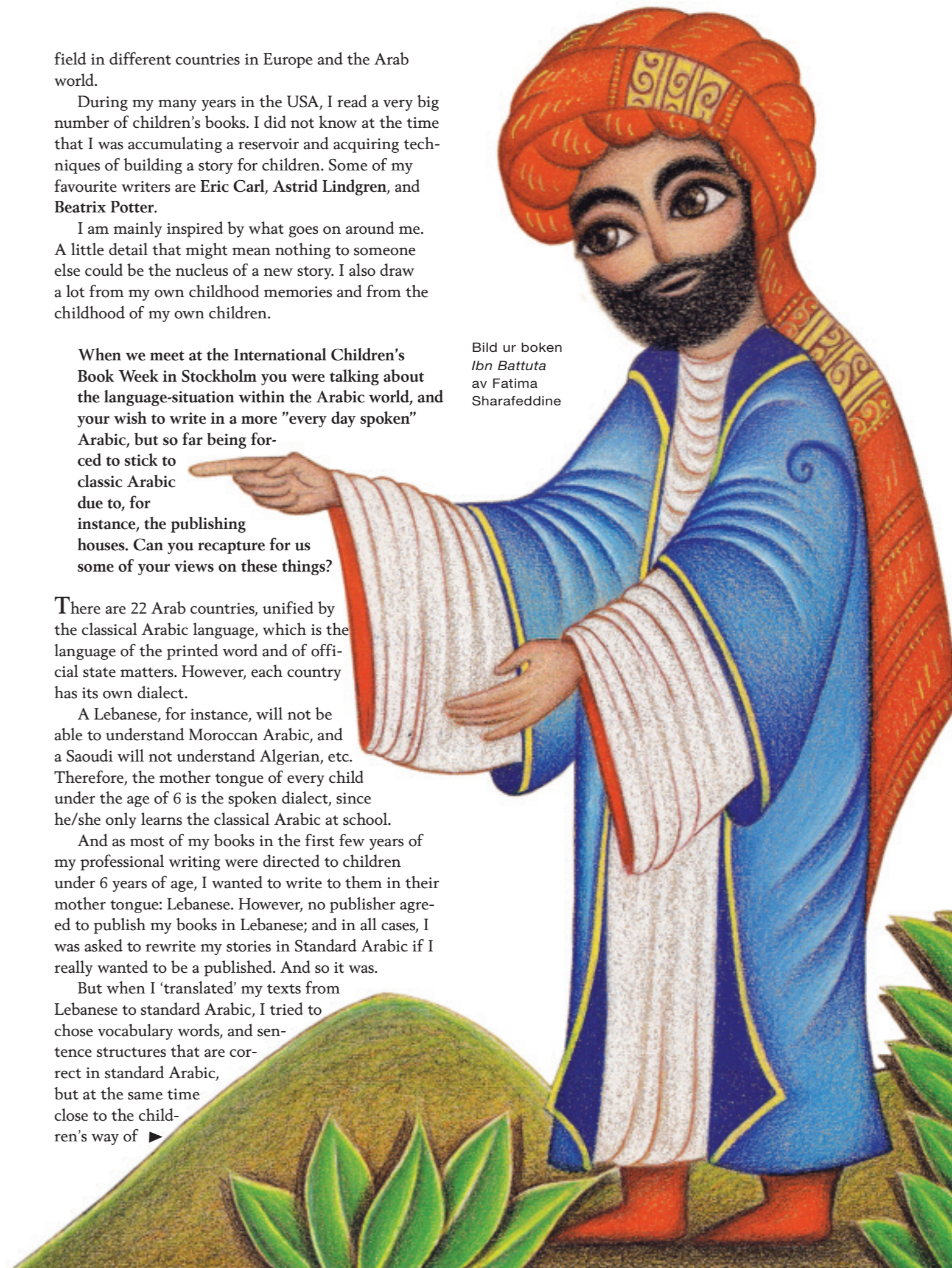
There are 22 Arab countries, unified by the classical Arabic language, which is the language of the printed word and of official state matters. However, each country has its own dialect.

A Lebanese, for instance, will not be able to understand Moroccan Arabic, and a Saudi will not understand Algerian, etc. Therefore, the mother tongue of every child under the age of 6 is the spoken dialect, since he/she only learns the classical Arabic at school.

And as most of my books in the first few years of my professional writing were directed to children under 6 years of age, I wanted to write to them in their mother tongue: Lebanese. However, no publisher agreed to publish my books in Lebanese; and in all cases, I was asked to rewrite my stories in Standard Arabic if I really wanted to be published. And so it was.

But when I 'translated' my texts from Lebanese to standard Arabic, I tried to chose vocabulary words, and sentence structures that are correct in standard Arabic, but at the same time close to the children's way of

Bild ur boken *Ibn Battuta* av Fatima Sharafeddine



expressing themselves. I am now able to manage to do both, on one hand please the publishers, teachers, and parents, and on the other hand reach the children.

You have worked with many different illustrators. How would you describe a successful collaboration between text and image, between writer and illustrator? And what are your personal thoughts on the fusion between the text and the pictures?

I think writers and illustrators should be put in contact at a very early stage in the making of a book. The purpose of that is not for the writer to suggest ideas to the illustrator, but rather for the illustrator to know the writer as a person so he/she understands where the story comes from.

The writer says everything he/she wants to say in the text, and has no right to have requests for the illustrator. The job of the illustrator is to add his/her imagination to the imagination of the writer. I believe that the illustrations should be complementary to the text rather than interpretative of the story.

The images should not limit the imagination of the child, and they should be of high artistic quality. By presenting such high quality books to children we show them respect, and we guide them to respect the book.

You also work with many different publishing houses – both in the Arabic world and in Europe. Can you tell us a little about your contact with your publishers and advantages and disadvantages with having publishers in different parts of the world. Can you, for example, maintain the creative influence over the choice of illustrators?

I think I am very privileged to be able to publish with several publishing houses. I am a full time writer, and therefore I produce a lot of books for the various age groups.

When I write a new book, I decide where to send it based on my knowledge of these publishers and their different interests. So the advantage is in this large spectrum of choices. The disadvantage is that sometimes I feel one specific publisher is upset about me choosing to give a book to someone else.

A writer can't escape the feeling of being in the middle of the battle fields between some publishers, especially when these happen to be in a small country like Lebanon.

As to the choice of illustrators, usually it is the publisher that decides which illustrator to assign to a given book. As a writer, I am asked if I like the style of

the primary samples of the illustrator. But when it comes to the final details, sometimes the publisher's decision is the final decision, even though I express some remarks for a change (this not true in all cases though).

What are your views on children's books, and children's culture in general, now after the Arabic revolutions? Do you think children's literature can have an effect on the development of the society?

I think this is an opportunity for the Arab world to realize that the future will be brighter if we invest in the new generations culturally, educationally, and socially. Here comes the role of books which will be the children's first window to the outside world.

But before we show our children that reading and love of books is the eye opener to the world, the adults themselves should start loving the book. As you know, there is a stereotype about Arabs that they don't read. This is truly a stereotype and a generalization, but it is also based on some experience. Future societies will be built by our children. We need to equip them with a strong base. The love of books and reading is only the beginning of this investment.

Your own future plans – what will you be doing next? Will you write more books for teenagers? Will you continue to write picture books? Do you have other projects in mind? Will you write for adults too?

When I first started writing, about ten years ago, there were very few other writers who were specialized in children's literature. I humbly say I played a pioneering role in this field in my country and the Arab region in general. Now, the status of Arabic children's literature has advanced a lot. More publishers, writers, and illustrators are fully dedicated to this field now.

The big gap we still have is in Young adult books. I published my first book, *Fatin*, recently, and I am about to finish my second one. I think in the future I would like to focus on this age group, since teenagers have never been treated, in my culture, as a distinct category of readers.

They are one day children, and as they hit puberty, they become adults. I do not plan to write for adults.

Regarding other projects, sometimes I dream of establishing an Art and Culture Children's Center. I do not know if this will happen one day.

Internationella biblioteket i Stockholm har flera böcker av Fatima Sharafeddine.