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Jabra Ibrahim Jabra Memoir Traces Growth of Famed Arab Intellectual

By Susan Muaddi Darraj

The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood

By Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. Foreword by Mohammad Shaheen. Translated by Issa J. Boullata. Hesperus Press, 2012

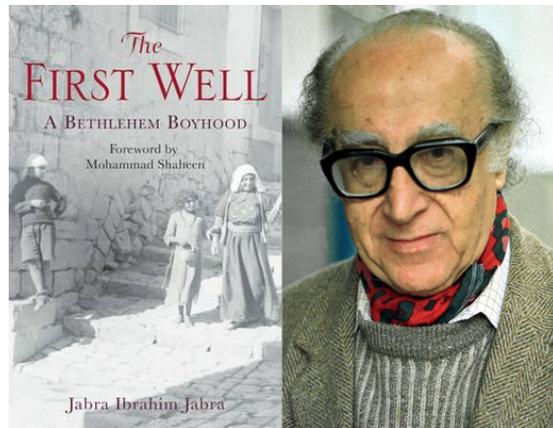
Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s father once said to his sons, “I rejoice immensely, and so does this mother of yours, when we see you both reading books. Why? Because the word is holy. Yes, indeed. The word is from God.” Jabra and his older brother Yusuf developed an interest in storytelling because of the tales their father often spun for them and for the entertainment of the family.

Later, when young Jabra was unjustly thrown out of the Rashiddiya School in Jerusalem over a misunderstanding, it was his illiterate father, broken by years of hard labor and a painful case of sciatica, who limped to the school’s headmaster and begged for a chance for his son to be reenrolled. The once scornful headmaster, deeply moved, said, “I am proud to see a man in as bad a condition as you are, who insists on educating his son.”

“The First Well”, a memoir which covers Jabra’s earliest childhood recollections, offers insight into the way in which a young boy, from a humble upbringing, the son of two illiterate parents, who often spent his childhood nights watching the rats crawl through the rafters of his simple house, became one of the Arab world’s greatest intellectuals. As he describes his antics – the day he mistakenly allowed his family’s three pigs out of their pen and had to chase them through the streets – and his fond memories – the hours he spent up in the tall tree outside the family home – the reader glimpses the marvel of any memoir: tracing the clues, present in childhood, that help explain the later development of the adult. One witnesses Jabra’s early interest in literature, such as the wonderful passage in which he details his first encounter with “1,001 Nights”, his emerging interest in music, the way in which he was captivated by art. This is, after all, the story of the child who would later become a novelist in his own right, who would translate Faulkner, Beckett, and Shakespeare into Arabic, and who would influence the culture of the Arab world.

Indeed, the title of the memoir does not reference a physical well. Rather, Jabra explains in his preface that, while writing, he kept in mind Wordsworth’s saying, “The Child is Father of the Man.” Childhood stories, he says, “are stories of events which have become a blend of memory and dream,” but they are important to record because of their “nearness to the source of being.” The well is the metaphorical place, where experiences are collected like rainwater to be hauled up and sipped at a later time.

In detailing the ways in which his love of literature, history and music were initially sparked, Jabara also does something else; he paints a realistic and important portrait of life in Bethlehem in the 1920s. “The First Well” is a careful and thorough depiction of the neighborhood, the school system, the business and personal interactions of Bethlehemites, along with the bright and dark moments of everyday Palestinians during the British mandate. It is a



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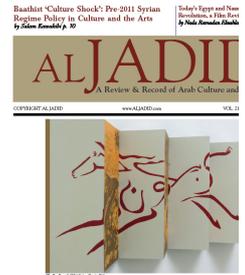


PREVIOUS ISSUES

rendering of the ways in which people, who had suffered through the First World War, survived in uncertain and difficult times. Given the efforts made to erase and rewrite Palestinian history, "The First Well" fulfills an important role in testifying to what once was.

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Bashtin 'Culture Shock': Pre-2011 Syrian Regime Policy in Culture and the Arts
By *Sham Karam*, p. 10

Today's Egypt and New Books: A Film Review
By *Nadia Ramadan Elshakhs*

What Does it Mean to be an Arab Intellectual? Today's Often Apologizing Arab Being Intellectual?
By *Muhammad Pasha*

The Decline of the Lebanese Press? A Story of Politics, Corruption, Nepotism and Sectarianism
By *Elie Chahade*

"The Iranian Trilogy" Broken Promises: The Incurved Inevitability of Iran, a Film Review
By *Agnes Rogers*

Patrick Scaife (1930-2016): A Palestinian Sage: A Conversation with Dr. Hisham, p. 20

Governmental Historians' Journalists, Lovers of All Things Syrian, Even the Assad Regime, by Tim Larkin, p. 12



Manufactured Expertise: Selling Out Arab News
By *Sham Karam*

Arab Rejectionists Missed Movements to Target Iran
By *Joel Faber*

Reckoning with Darkness: Looking Back on Algeria's

A Syrian Doctor Returns, from Home!
By *Lynne Rogers*

'Sun Imaging': How Arab Impacted the Modern World
By *Elie Chahade*

Dispersed Arab Women We of Shahrazad and Female
By *Nadia Ramadan Elshakhs*

The Arab-Christian Predicament Before and After the Rise of the Islamic State
By *Elie Chahade*

New Book Examines Middle American's Twilight of Influence
By *D.W. Anany*

Films: Lynne Rogers Reviews "On the Banks of the Tigris", p. 20

Books: Nora Elshakhs Reviews "This Muslim American Life", p. 20

Essay: J An Into Progress



There's No Place Like Home
Director Reine Miri Pieces Together A Lebanon I
By *Angela Ellis*

Khaled Khalifa Speaks His Mind On Books and Drama under Syrian Censorship
By *Rebecca Jabin and AJ Naddaf*

Yasar Kemal: Champion of Anatolian Literature and Social Justice
By *Abis Salamy*

Visionary Egyptian Novelist Gamal al-Ayyubi: Dead But Not Forgotten
By *Nadia Ramadan Elshakhs*

"The Power of History: Reappraising Syria's Past," a review of "Seeing the Room: Syria Past and Present," p. 17

A Day of Dignity: Ramana with the Head of History, a film review of "Kanna Ha-Na-Wah," p. 10

"The Redemptive Power of Literature": A Book Review



Revisiting "Community in Syria" by Yasar Kemal
By *Sham Karam*

Contemporary Arab Literature of 2012-2013: Century Book of the Year
By *Elie Chahade*

When a Corpus Becomes an Event
By *Elie Chahade*

Reminding the Road Begins with Many Questions
By *Angela Ellis*

Review of the Revolution: A Book Review
By *Angela Ellis*

Teeth of History: Rereading Joseph's Revolution
By *Nadia Ramadan Elshakhs*

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By *Elie Chahade*

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By *D.W. Anany*

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By *Tim Larkin*

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