



# The Depiction of Islam in Children's Non-Fiction

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[136](#) [2]

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**Shereen Pandit** on the need for diversity.

To what extent do books exist which promote in young minds respect for and understanding of Muslims and their beliefs, lifestyles and practices? To the extent that such books exist, do they promote cultural diversity and combat racial or religious stereotyping? **Shereen Pandit** investigates.<!--break-->

Challenging negative images of any group of people is best done through positive practical engagement between people of that group and others. When people of different cultural, language and religious backgrounds work, live, play and eat together, stereotypes are replaced by real people who are colleagues, friends, schoolfellows, neighbours. The Nazis, like the Apartheid rulers of South Africa, fully understood how much more easily people could be dehumanised, vilified and ill-treated by being segregated.

However, the media and books can and do play an important role in promoting negative images of people ? for the purposes of this article, Muslim people. Equally then, they can play an important role in debunking the kind of myths which promote Islamophobia.

## Are the books out there?

A decade ago, I found that my toddler's multicultural collection of books had a huge gap in it where Islam and the Muslim world were concerned. Ordinary bookshops, and even progressive bookclubs, had few fiction titles and these few seemed to confirm stereotypical images of the Muslim world and Muslims. Non-fiction titles were almost non-existent, the bitterly few that there were providing only the barest information about Islam.

Judging from the pile of non-fiction titles sent to me for this article there has been some growth in this area. **My First Arabic Alphabet Book** and **Stories of the Prophets from the Qur'an** are board books for babies. Like their English and Christian-based counterparts, they are attractive first books. **My First Arabic Alphabet Book** has one large, bold, easily traceable/copiable letter per page. **Stories of the Prophets from the Qur'an** consists of simple sentences beneath pictures. One step up there is **My Arabic Words Book**, with letters linked to words, pictures and sounds. There are also a few collections of animal stories for younger children (eg **The Dance of the Eagle and the Fish, Faisal and Friends**) and folktales for older children from the rich tradition of Arabic and Persian literature, in which the characters are usually animals.

## The depiction of Islam

Mainly, however, the growth has been in titles such as **Muslim, I am a Muslim, Muslim Imam, Islam, Eid-ul-Fitr**, et al. Thus, lots of titles for younger children about being a practising Muslim and what the key beliefs of Muslims are ? all

similar in content.

To some extent, the very existence of such books challenges negative images. For non-Muslim children, the board books are helpful in teaching them about the Arabic language and Muslim views of the prophets shared with Christians and Jews, the Muslim names for the prophets, etc. Such books could have been even more helpful if more ran from back to front, or if the English stories had the Arabic alongside, showing that Arabic is read from the right. Thus both similarities and differences with English/Christian counterparts would have been raised and all confirmed in young minds as valid ways of writing and reading.

These books about Islam fill the information gap, setting out the basic tenets of Islam and showing how practising Muslims, in a Muslim community, live. Thus they contribute towards some understanding of the Faith and its fully observant adherents. Moreover, for Muslim children everywhere, it is refreshing to have books which show that their Faith is held in the same regard as any other by writers and publishers.

### **The totality of Muslim life?**

But are explanations of Islam and a practising Muslim lifestyle enough to combat negative images about Muslims and Islam? The dominance of information books about the Faith and the religious lives of Muslims in the small body of non-fiction about Muslims for children, suggests that writers and publishers think that they are sufficient for the task. Whilst a few such books are necessary for information, as a genre they do not present an adequate, rounded view of the lives of Muslim children. As a body of non-fiction about Muslims everywhere, they lack a basis in the reality of the lives of many Muslim children.

Islam is a rapidly spreading faith, expanding far more, presumably, in the West than in Muslim countries where the Faith already holds sway. Islam then is practised, and Muslim boys and girls are as likely to live, in a modern, largely secular world, as in a predominantly practising Islamic one. Whether they live in the non-Muslim world, or in predominantly Muslim countries, their lives do not escape the impact of the secular modern world of TV, radio, computers, the internet, Western styles of dress and behaviour. We were taught that Islam is more than just a religion, that it is a way of life, yet today religion is not the totality of Muslim life.

### **Not just prayermat and pilgrimage**

From the non-fiction about Islam and Muslims available, one would suppose that all Muslims live in simple, pious, almost closed communities, where the practice of the Faith dominates all things. In real life Muslims are also single parents, asylum seekers, immigrants, ordinary school children, workers, professional people and so on. Absent from the body of non-fiction for children too, is much about the ancient or modern history of the Islamic world, its contributions to geography, mathematics, architecture or literature or any allusion to what is happening to Muslim children from Palestine to Iraq, South Africa to Sudan.

The preponderance of books purely about the religious aspects of Muslim life presents the danger of another stereotype? that of the Muslim child, its family and community, as purely practising Muslims, disengaged from the world around them. They remain 'other' rather than demystified, part of the ordinary world. There is a need for more books reflecting the totality of Muslim life.

### **A response to Islamaphobia?**

In an understandable response to Islamaphobia, it appears that the writers of these books wish to present Islam as a simple faith, requiring from its followers but five essentials of observance and a lifestyle of humility, obedience, care and kindness in which no-one can find anything to hate, fear or despise. This is understandable in the current climate, where Saddam Hussein and the Taliban are held up as representative of the Muslim world.

However, in presenting Muslims as a pious, community based people, what gets missed out is the ordinariness of the lives of Muslims, the diversity of practice of the Faith, the diversity of tradition, appearance, language amongst its

adherents, the rich heritage of scholarship, entertainment, intellectual engagement, writing, reading and storytelling stretching back centuries before the birth of Isa (peace be upon him).

There are books which, consciously or otherwise, redress this imbalance. One such, borrowed from my daughter's school, is J. Bourgoin's **Islamic Patterns**. Not specifically aimed at children, the book consists wholly of patterns of Islamic art. A brief introduction cites Muslim opposition to human figures in art, as a factor in creating an abstract Islamic art of 'incomparable elegance'. It talks about the 'inventiveness of Muslim artists, who are able to transform 'simple geometrical forms ' into countless incredibly beautiful pictures'. Thus, we have an art book free from stereotype. We need more such non-fiction for children, presenting the Muslim world as one of culture and erudition, of conflict as well as accepted diversity, of secular engagement as well as religious practice. Otherwise, Muslims and Islam may continue to exist in young minds (and later older ones) as 'other' even if not so bad 'other'.

**Shereen Pandit** is a writer who has taught English and creative writing to refugees, mainly women, from many countries.

#### **Books referred to:**

**My First Arabic Alphabet Book**, Siddiqa Juma, Iman Publishing, 0 9527895 0 7, £4.95 board

**Stories of the Prophets from the Qur'an**, containing **Adam, Ibrahim (Abraham), Isa (Jesus), Muhammad, Musa (Moses), Nuh (Noah)**, Siddiqa Juma, Iman Publishing, 1 879402 64 5, £16.95 for boxed set of six titles

**My Arabic Words Book**, Siddiqa Juma, Iman Publishing, 1 879402 33 5, £6.95

**The Dance of the Eagle and the Fish**, Aziz Nesin and Kagan Güner, Milet Publishing, 1 84059 316 4, £4.99 pbk

**Faisal and Friends**, Anne Eccleshall and Rachel Verity, Iman Publishing, 0 9527895 3 1, £9.95 hbk

**Muslim**, Richard Tames, Franklin Watts 'Beliefs and Cultures' 0 7496 2058 7, £11.99 hbk

**I am a Muslim**, Manju Aggarwal, Franklin Watts 'My Belief', 0 7496 4175 4, £5.99 pbk

**Muslim Imam**, Akbar Dad Khan, Franklin Watts 'My Life, My Religion', 0 7496 4065 0, £10.99 hbk

**Islam**, Richard Tames, Franklin Watts 'World Religions', 0 7496 3374 3, £11.99 hbk

**Eid ul-Fitr**, Susheila Stone, A & C Black, 0 7136 4083 9, £4.99 pbk

**Islamic Patterns**, J Bourgoin, Dover Publications, distributed by David & Charles, 0 486 23537 8, £5.95 hbk

In case of any difficulty in obtaining Iman Publishing titles, the publisher can be contacted via tel: 01923 251490, fax: 01923 218332 or e-mail: [iman@alif.co.uk](mailto:iman@alif.co.uk) [3]

Page Number:

16

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