



Damascus: The Story of a City

Written & illustrated by Alaa Murtada

Published by Dar al-Balsam, Cairo (2018)

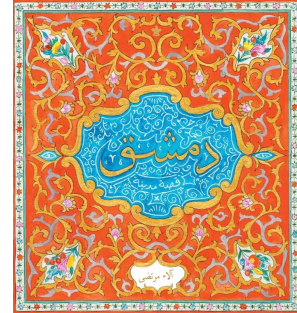
Target age: 6+

Category: picture book / history / folklore

Awards: 2019 Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's Literature, for Best Text

Original Language: Arabic

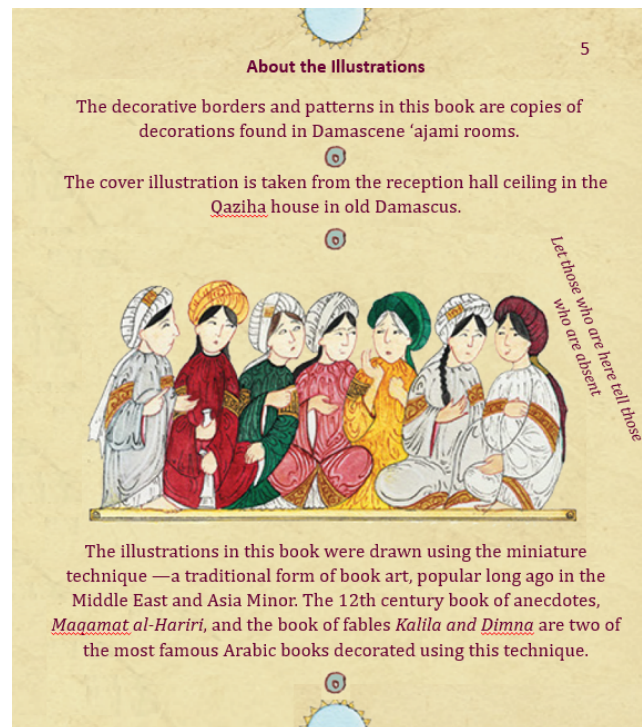
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Damascus: The Story of a City explores the ancient and enduring history of the capital of the capital city of Syria, widely believed to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with evidence of habitation dating back thousands of years. The book follows Kitkitkan as he explores the story of the great city of al-Sham, one of the names for Damascus. The illustrations in this book use the miniature technique, a form of book art popular in the medieval Middle East.

Sample translation

Translated from Arabic by Marcia Lynx Qualey





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Arabic children's book recommendations 2022

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To Damascus, years are only moments, decades are only flitting trifles of time. She measures time, not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise, and prosper and crumble to ruin. She is a type of immortality... Damascus has seen all that has ever occurred on earth, and still she lives. She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires, and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies.



Mark Twain
1835 - 1910

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We shall remember... Damascus, the "Pearl of the East," the pride of Syria, the fabled Garden of Eden, the home of princes and genii of the Arabian Nights, the oldest metropolis on earth, the one city in all the world that has kept its name and held its place and looked serenely on while the Kingdoms and Empires of four thousand years have risen to life, enjoyed their little season of pride and pomp, and then vanished and been forgotten!



Mark Twain
1835 - 1910

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This story has been passed down through the years.
From tales. From tears. From Ja'far al-Barmaki, the grand vizier.
From Digmaq. From Ishaq.
From a stuffed lamb hung up at the gate of the zuqaq.



Once upon a time, the story goes, there was a boy named Kitkitkan.
One day, he jumped up and went to the store.
There, he found himself a wonderful spool of yarn.
Then he went to see his neighbor, 'Um Adnan.

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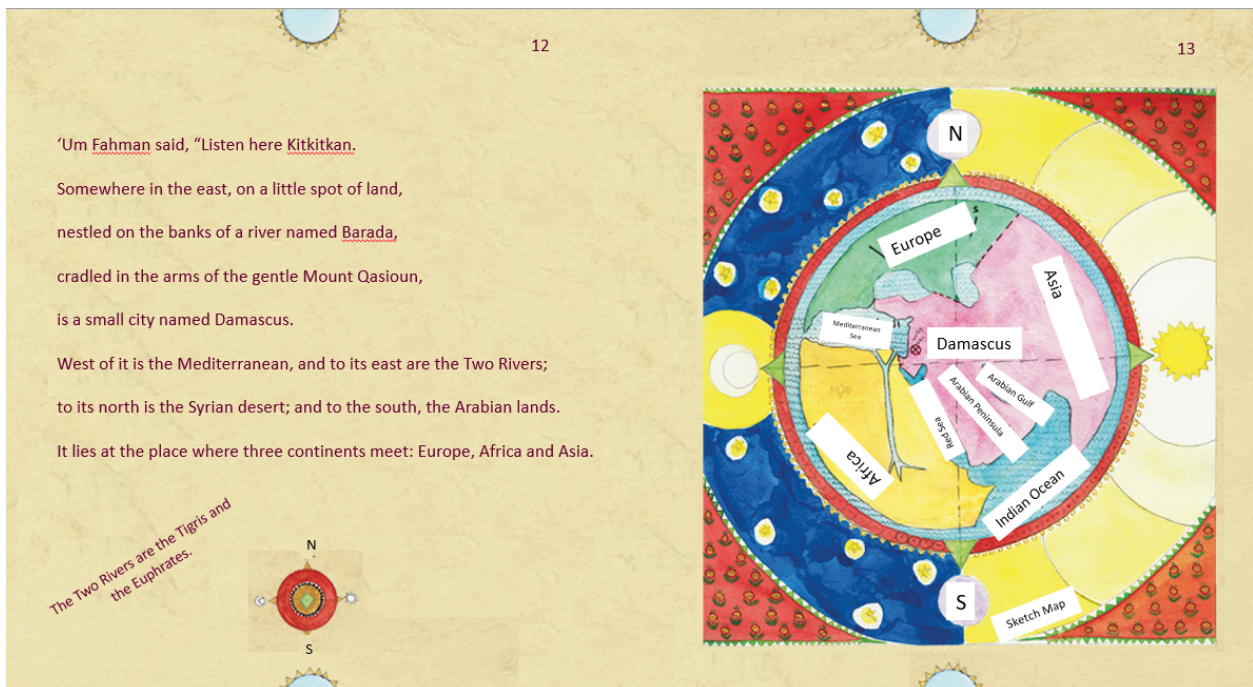
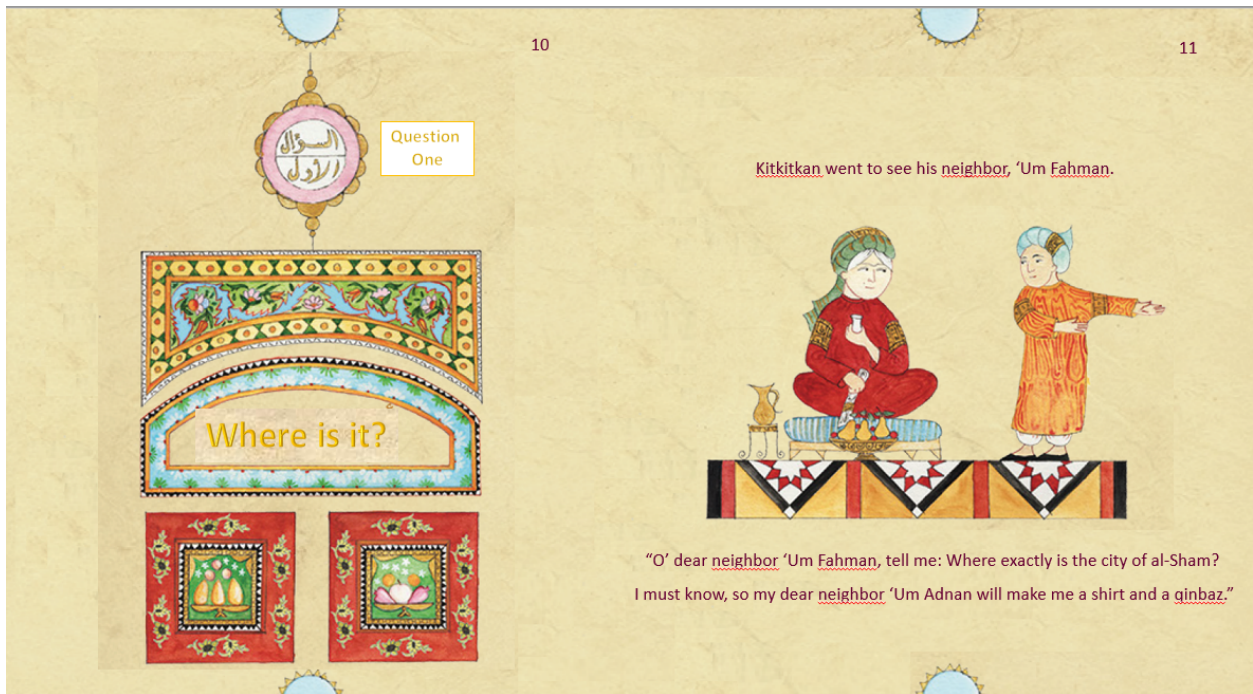
"My dear neighbor 'Um Adnan," he said,
"please make me a shirt and a qinbaz."
"I won't make you a shirt and a qinbaz," she said.
"Until you tell me all about the city of al-Sham."

al-Sham is another name for Damascus.



A qinbaz is a traditional robe popular in the Levant. It's long and open in front.

Where is it? Who built it? Who gave it its name?
What weather is seen in its skies?
Where do its people find water to drink?
And what are their houses like?





"And this small place, called Damascus," 'Um Fahman said,
"is sacred beyond measure.
For we're told by Ibn 'Asakir, the historian both famous and clever,
that there, between Mount Qasioun and the Paradise Gate,
rest some seventy thousand walis, believers, and saints.
And it's said that the first person passed Mount Qasioun on his travels,
and worshiped in a cave on that gentle slope.
Cain murdered Abel there, and gave us history's first grave:
a lesson that echoes from age to age.

Paradise Gate or Bab al-Faradis is
one of the ancient city-gates of
Damascus.



A wali is holy person or saint in
Islam

The Prophet Yahya — or John the Baptist — is buried in Damascus.
And to its Ghouta orchards, Jacob brought his sheep to graze.
Further north, in Barzeh village, Abraham was born
and in the name of One, Majestic God, Abraham gave praise.
Jesus Christ journeyed through Damascus with his mother Mary.
And there, Elijah found protection from the tyrant king.
These tales have passed from them to us, in turn, from mouth to ear.
And proof?
We've none —but in Damascus, these are stories that everyone holds dear."

