



**The Nights of Shahr Zizi: A Tale within a Tale within a Tale**

لیالی شهرزیزی

Written by Hadil Ghoneim

Illustrations by Sahar Abdallah

Published by Dar al-Balsam, Cairo (2019)

Target age: 9+

Pages: 53

Awards: Etisalat Award for Arabic Children's Literature, Children's Book of the Year 2020

Original Language: Arabic

Rights enquiries: Dar al-Balsam, Egypt [dar@al-balsam.com](mailto:dar@al-balsam.com)



Divided over ten nights of storytelling, this new adaptation of the Arabian Nights updates the cluster of tales known as the Fisherman and the Jinni and brings it to present day children. The frame story is reimagined in a contemporary setting in which the three main characters are all children: Shahr Zizi, the clever girl who tells stories to her grumpy little neighbor, Amro Yar and to her younger sister, Dina Zuzu. Readers are captivated by the cliffhanger that ends each night, and further teased by the enticing illustrations of some of the magicians, sultans, talking birds, and people who turn into fish that populate the book. A bundle of interlinked stories that is characteristic of Arabic storytelling.

**Sample translation**

*Translated from Arabic by Hadil Ghoneim*

On the first floor of a two-storey building, lives Shahr Zizi with her parents and her little sister, Dina Zuzu. On the second floor, the young boy, Amr Yar, with his grandmother and his father, Suroor.

One day, Shahr Zizi was reading a book in peace when her sister barged into the room in tears. "What's wrong, Dina Zuzu? Are you okay?" she asked.

"Amr Yar was so mean to me today!" Dina Zuzu exclaimed, starting to sob.

Shahr Zizi hugged her little sister and dried her tears.

"I'm never going to play with him again!" said Dina Zuzu after a minute. Her decision seemed to make her feel strong again and she was calmer.

"You can choose not to, of course. But I wonder if his behavior has anything to do with the accident. Wasn't he a good friend to you before he got hurt?"



## World Kid Lit #SeekingaPublisher

Arabic children's book recommendations 2022

“He used to be nice! Now he’s different. Anyway, I’m going out with Mama”

“Okay, I hope that makes you feel better, and I will go talk to Amo Suroor.”

\*\*\*

Shahr Zizi went up to their neighbors’ apartment. Amo Suroor opened the door and greeted her warmly. “Hello Shahr Zizi, come on in.”

“Hello, Amo Suroor. How are you all doing?”

“We say *Alhamdulillah* gratefully no matter what.”

“Dina Zuzu told me that Amr Yar was upset today.”

“I’m sorry he was unkind to her. He’s been so angry since his injury because he’s stuck in bed all day, not being able to go outside to play. Sometimes he even smashes up his toys. He throws his food on the floor and yells at us!”

“Is he sitting there all alone right now?”

“Yes, he’s been spending most of his time by himself, watching cartoons. His friends don’t visit him anymore because of his fits. The thing is, I can see that he’s in pain from the injury *and* from being lonely”

“Do you know how long it will take for him to heal? What did the doctor say?”

“The doctor was here today and said it’ll be a long time before the cast comes off. That means many more days and nights of Amr Yar being cooped up like that.”

“Amo Suroor, would you let me help? I’m older than Amr Yar and his tantrums don’t scare me. I can come over and give him some company every night after I finish my homework.”

“You’re welcome here any time, Shahr Zizi. But it won’t be easy. After a night or two, you will get tired and wish you had never asked.”

“Oh I won’t get bored. Even if it takes a thousand and one nights!” said Shahr Zizi.

Suddenly, loud screams and crashes came from Amr Yar’s room. Amo Suroor hurried in to see him and came back a little later, looking nervous.

“Thank you for trying to help,’ he said to Shahr Zizi. ‘You’re a good neighbor, but I’m worried that this might be too much for you. What are you planning to do exactly?’

“Don’t worry, Amo Suroor. All I’m going to do is tell Amr Yar some of my stories. I have



stories that can take his mind off his pain. I'll start tomorrow!

### **The First Night**

The next day, Shahr Zizi finished her homework, said goodbye to her mother and took a big book with her upstairs to Amr Yar's apartment. Amo Suroor showed her in and she went straight to the grumpy boy's bedroom.

'Hi!' she said.

Amr Yar was sitting in bed, his back propped up on a big pillow. One leg, in a cast, was stretched out stiffly in front of him. His right arm was set in a cast too, and he held a small ball in his left hand. He looked up at Shahr Zizi for a second, said nothing, and went back to staring at the ball in his hand.

"Amo Suroor said the doctor came to see you yesterday," said Shahr Zizi.

Amr-Yar hurled the ball across the room and shouted, "If this guy touches my broken arm again, I'll make him cry!"

Shahrazizi smiled, unaffected by this outburst, 'Is that how you plan to thank the doctor when he comes back to take off your casts and set you free? You remind me of the story of the Fisherman and the Jinni. Do you know it?"

"No, I don't!" said Amrayar gruffly, without even looking at her.

"Would you like to hear it?"

This time he turned his head towards her, with a puzzled look on his face.

Shahr Zizi didn't wait for an answer. Amr Yar was paying attention and that was all she needed. She chose a seat for herself by the bed, made herself comfortable and started telling her story.

#### **The Tale of the Fisherman and the Jinni**

"My sad, mad little friend, here's the story just as it was told to me. A long time ago, there lived a poor fisherman who had a wife and not one child, but three. One day, he took his net and went out to sea. He cast his net over and over again, but to no avail. He caught no fish, not even a fin or a tail.



On the fourth try, he threw the net as he should, and waited as patiently as he could. When he was ready to pull it in, it seemed like it was caught onto something. So he took off his shirt and into the water he dove. He came back with it to the shore after a few minutes had passed, and inside the tangles he found a small flask!

The fisherman was pleased. He said to himself, "I'll take this to the brass market, and for ten dinars I can sell it." He pulled off the stopper, and turned the flask upside down to clean it from sand and water. Nothing came out. Then suddenly a puff of smoke rose from its spout. The smoke made its way up to the sky, swirled around and formed into a huge Jinni: with a head that reached the cloud and feet that touched the ground. His head was big as a dome, and his mouth was wide as a cave. Every tooth was like a rock, and his nose was like a jug.

When the fisherman saw the Jinni, he shrank into his skin. His hair stood on end, and his mouth went dry. He couldn't tell what's happening to him and why.

When the Jinni saw the fisherman, he said, "Rejoice, little man! I bring you good news!"

"What news?" asked the fisherman, surprised that his voice though shivering, he didn't yet lose.

"I am going to kill you this very hour!" roared the Jinni.

"Oh master of all jinnis, the grace of God you do not deserve, if this is the kind of news you serve. Why kill me, when I have saved you from the depths of the sea, and from your brass prison I have set you free?"

"To answer your query, I'll tell you my story," said the Jinni.

"Tell me, Jinni," pleaded the fisherman, "and please be quick! I'm already scared out of my wit."

"Well", started the Jinni, "a long time ago, during the time of King Solomon, I went through a naughty and mischievous phase. King Solomon warned me, but I ignored him and continued with my wicked ways. To punish me, the King locked me in this flask and threw it to the sea. I told myself, 'I'll grant endless riches to whoever sets me free.' But a hundred years went by and no one rescued me. I told myself, 'I'll open up the treasures of the earth to whoever sets me free,' but another hundred years went by and nobody came for me. I became terribly bored and I got awfully mad that I told myself, 'I will kill the first person I see!' Now do you see?"

"Oh yes, lucky me! said the fisherman. 'Please, Jinni, let me live and all your sins may God forgive! Is that how you return my good turn? This death sentence I did not earn!'"

At this point, Shahr Zizi paused and looked at her watch. "Oh it's time for me to get ready for bed," she said. "I must go now but I'll continue the story tomorrow."



## World Kid Lit #SeekingaPublisher

Arabic children's book recommendations 2022

Amr Yar tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. He nodded instead. The anger and frustration were gone from his face and he looked quite calm.

Shahr Zizi smiled to herself as she left the room. She could tell that her plan was already working.