



The Illustrator's Notebook

Mohieddin Ellabbad

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“This book opens on the other side.” The unexpected label on an otherwise unadorned cover promises an unusual and challenging reading experience. And that promise is quickly fulfilled as the reader is drawn into the world of Arabic calligraphy and the mind of an artist.

The author is an Egyptian illustrator, writer, and designer who co-founded Dar Al Fata Al Arabi, the first Palestinian children’s book publisher, and who has written award-winning children’s books in Arabic. Throughout the entries of this *Notebook*—which offers a different thought on each page—Arabic writing is beautifully integrated with artwork. The calligraphy, translated into English in the margins, reveals Ellabbad’s personal reminiscences and thoughts about his art. Sometimes he leaves the reader with a surprising question to ponder: “Have you ever looked at the beautiful landscape that is drawn right in the palm of your hand?”

In this book (which was previously published in Arabic, French, and German, and won prestigious awards throughout Europe), the everyday becomes exceptional. One page contrasts two postcards: a colorful modern scene and an old black-and-white card. But this seemingly ordinary juxtaposition acquires a touch of magic when Ellabbad tells the story of the cards, concluding that: “The first postcard was sent from one place to another, and the second from one time to another.” A blank notebook, a postage stamp, and an Egyptian ten-pound note are other ordinary items that inspire extraordinary thoughts.

One of Ellabbad’s reminiscences concerns skin color. As children, he and his friends used to use an imported color called “flesh pink” to paint people. Then one day he had an epiphany when he noticed that his flesh was not pink at all, and so he learned to mix his own paint to depict his true skin color.

The reader journeying backwards through this book is invited to explore not only a different culture but also a different way of seeing. For example, under the heading “Left and Right,” Ellabbad records a memorable discovery: Arabic-speaking people not only read from right to left, but also draw and view pictures in that direction. The accompanying illustration dramatically demonstrates this by contrasting Superman flying in from the left with a finely dressed and well-armed Arabic hero entering from the right.

Elsewhere, Ellabbad explains that Arabic books once welcomed their readers with the words, “This book is illuminated by your gaze.” His *Notebook* invites readers of all ages to look, to think, to imagine—and so to provide the illumination that will bring to life an intriguing book.

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