

September 5, 2008

I have just returned to Cambridge from my summer in Amman, working with the Jordan River Foundation. Being my first time in the Middle East, this summer was full of surprises and enormously educational experiences for me, due to my complete immersion in Jordanian culture and the highly engaged hands-on nature of my work.

The Jordan River Foundation asked me to ascertain the current state of children's publishing in Jordan – supply and demand, areas of unmet need, profit margins, etc. -- in order to determine how they as an organization could effectively engage in a child literacy project that could tie in with the storytelling programs they already administer as part of their work in child safety and children's rights. In order to answer their questions, I surveyed virtually all points of sale for children's literature in Amman, visited public libraries, schools, and publishing houses, interviewed authors, publishers, and educators who are invested in the field of children's literature, and conducted wide-ranging research into possible partner organizations for JRF in their efforts to enhance the literacy culture in Amman, and in Jordan at large.

At the end of my study I was sorry to present the JRF with less-than-encouraging news. Because of the socioeconomic situation in Amman today, and because of the educational politics of the country, it would be difficult for the JRF to develop and distribute a line of children's books on child rights that would be profitable enough to help support others of JRF's child rights programs, as they had hoped. I did, however, uncover much information about children's literacy as an immense area of need for the city, and brainstormed with the JRF staff about other creative approaches to that problem, albeit ones that would not necessarily involve raising money for the organization. I presented JRF with a comprehensive report addressing all their original questions of research, along with a resource guide giving them ample avenues for further reading on the subject of children's literacy and publishing in the region, a formal write-up of our alternate possibilities, and an extensive list of potential partnering organizations for efforts in this arena. My concluding discussions with JRF staff were encouraging and all parties involved seemed to hope that this would spark an ongoing dialogue about literacy issues in Jordan, a dialogue in which they invited me to continue to take part.

Despite difficulties of language, culture, and logistics, I feel that I was able to make significant progress in my work this summer. These past two months, while brief, will surely influence my future professional and academic plans in a profound way. I hope to return to the region within the next two years, to continue to learn from and contribute to local efforts towards sustainable social justice, and to further develop my skills in the Jordanian/Palestinian spoken Arabic. I am proud of what was accomplished, and I am extremely grateful both to the Women's Leadership Program for the opportunity to travel and work in Jordan, and to the Jordan River Foundation for extending to me the renowned Jordanian hospitality!