

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST MERCIFUL, THE MOST  
COMPASSIONATE

Speech delivered by

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Co-Winner of the King Faisal International Prize  
In Arabic Literature (1411H/1991)

Your Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Abdel Aziz,  
Representative of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques  
in patronizing this ceremony  
Your Highnesses, dignitaries, and men of science, thinking and literature

Assalam Alaikum w Rahmatullah Wabarakatu

My speech, distinguished gentlemen, consists of a number of points, drops of dawn dew. For ten nights I struggled against insomnia and language. It was easier to catch rays of light, to hold burning embers than to express myself on this occasion.

My first point is that I have waited half a century, beyond my childhood working very hard just to earn my place amongst you today. How this reflects God's promise, "For we will reward the patient with the best that is in their labor". And I am thankful and grateful to the givers, the arbiters, and the Prize Secretariat.

My second point is that the Prize came from the spot where God's light shone on the earth, from the land of Muhammad, and others who have peopled my books, the same books that have won the Prize. Seven years ago, I dedicated my book "The Prophet's Childhood: a Book for Children," to Mecca and Medina in the hope that by such an act I would repay those cities for their favor. Who would have imagined that Riyadh, along with the two, would be so generous tonight. It is as God says, "Today I reward them for their patience..They are the winners."

A writer of children's book is a dreamer, living with kings, queens, princesses—all created by his imagination—But his dream is never quite stretched to where it actually meets a real king represented by his noble brother. Indeed, it is beyond imagination itself that a children writer should receive "the Prize" under the patronage of King Fahd, the first King in history to proudly call himself the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. And, it is wonderful that the Prize bears the name of King Faisal, may God's mercy be upon him, who will always be gratefully remembered for this noble deeds.

Another point is international recognition. About twenty years ago I was on a cultural visit to England and I gave a lecture at the Writers' Union on my writings. At the end of my lecture, the head of the Children's Books Society took me aside and said, "Frankly speaking, your literary standard is definitely international. But, your problem is that you write in Arabic for a limited audience. Write in English and you will be internationally recognized." After I returned home, I asked myself Why do I write for children? Is it for a personal gain? Is it my role to educate English speaking children? The answer was, of course, not! My nation's children are my responsibility and so is the language of this Quran (i.e. Arabic). And I became more enthusiastic for their sake. When I got the King Faisal International Prize, I cabled my friend the head of the English Children's Book Society telling him, I have achieved international status by being a Muslim and an Arab. To offer the King Faisal International Prize in Arabic for children's literature, (to offer it) is an extremely modern, extremely progressive, sign of civilization. It shows a highly developed sense (of civilization), something which should not sound strange coming from the makers of the ancient civilizations of Egypt, the Peninsula, Iraq, Syria or the creators of the Islamic civilization which flowered in Medina, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo. These makers of the Islamic Civilization are humanity's hope for a

real modern civilization, one that goes beyond the others' vanishing material civilization. With this Prize (of ours) we remind them of the wonderful stories of A-Thousand-and-One Nights, of Kalilah-and-Dimnah, of The-Lion-and-the Driver, of Sannouhi, of Gulgamish, of Sindbad, of Aladin, of Ali Baba - - stories written many centuries ago but still fascinating to (their) children today.

One more point is that I am but a symbol of many others. I have personally known Kamil Kailani more than I have known my neighbors and more than Kailani's own children know him. And I have known al-Harawai, al-Uryan, al-Juhaiman, al-Ghool, al-Rusafi, I have known them like they were my own family. On this very special occasion, I must remember with love each and everyone that has enriched Children's Literature in the different countries of the Arab World. And among all of these (brilliant) names, I am indebted the most to two: my mentor, Dr. Suhair Qalamawi, and my teacher, Baba Sharco.

This Prize ranks me among people I have always admired. It ranks me with Yahya Haqqi, an honor beyond my imagination. Some well-wishing friends who congratulated me on this said, "Onward to Mahfouz's and Anderson's Nobel!" --but all I am after is to make Arab children happy whether they are in the mountains of Yemen, the countryside of Egypt, the deserts of Syria and Saudi Arabia, or the bushes of Sudan, or Djibouti, or Somalia, or Mauritania.

I have often been asked if this Prize makes me happy. There are moments when I felt so proud that I wished to find a bottled "Alice in Wonderland" that said "Drink me!" because its magic liquid would return any human to his real size. And I remembered Gulliver travelling between giants and dwarfs and I recalled other gems of world children's literature of which I possess about twenty thousand books in my private library, works that are the pinnacles of art and literature --and they all make me very humble indeed.

My final point is where all the drops join together making one drop that is swallowed by one tiny sparrow. The sparrow glides over the Grand Mosque of Mecca hoping he would see a grain on the ground. He sees one; and picks it up. He had dreamed of the Prize and now he's got it. I want to end this by saying that the real crown of any achievement is to continue it. But this Prize allows me to use this platform, this tower, to emphasize the fact that though we may have their reins in our hands today, children will have those reins in their own hands tomorrow and we must prepare them for it. And we should not do this by thinking that they are cups to be filled by this and that but by letting them be themselves.

I want to thank you. I want to express my gratitude. Thank you most kindly and God bless you all.

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