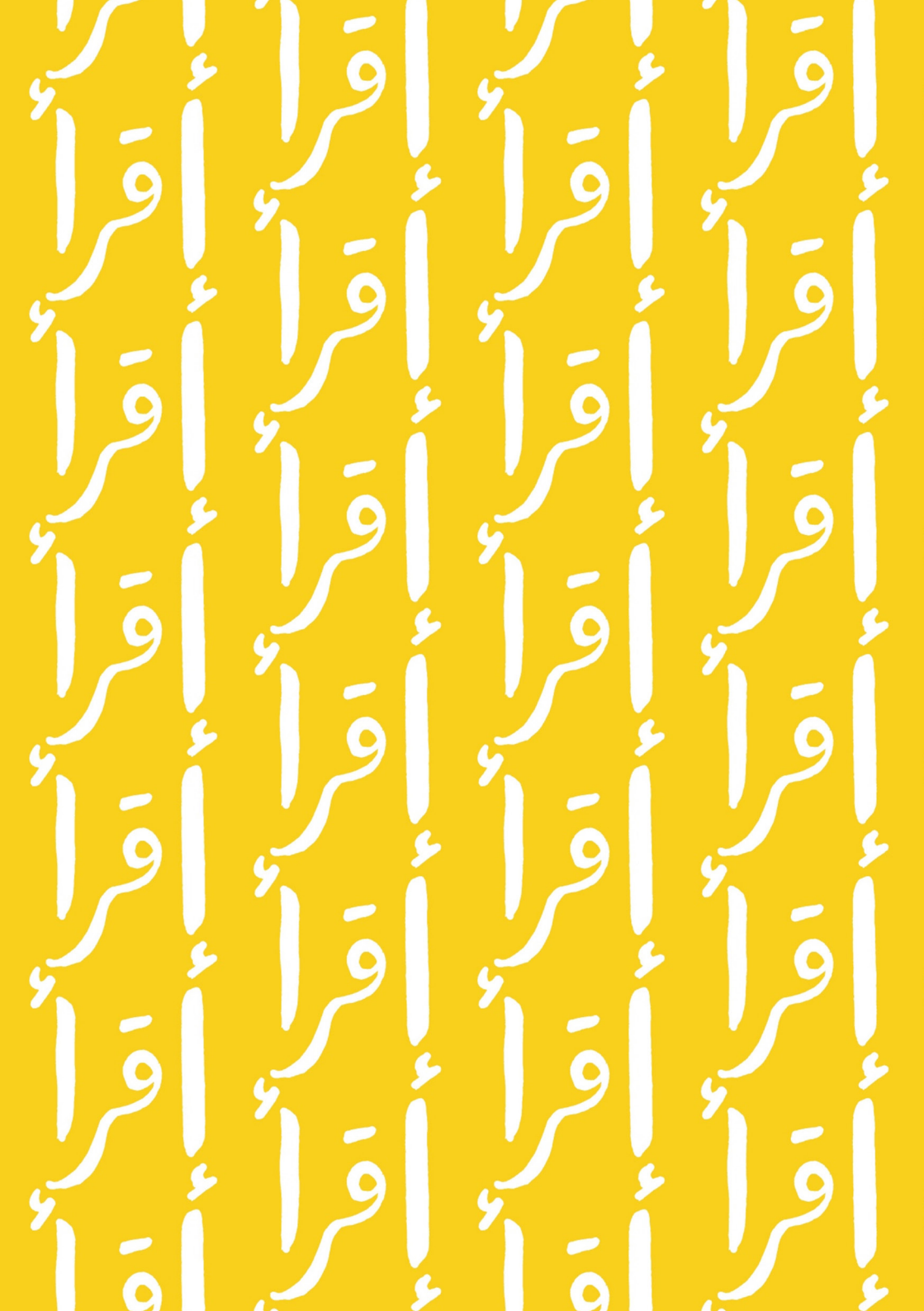


We Love Reading: An introduction



Dr. Rana Dajani



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Rana Dajani

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The greatest companion through time is a book.
-Al-Mutanabbi



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PREFACE

A long time ago, my daughter gave me a card. On it she wrote, “I love you, so be happy.” I take this message to heart every morning, and make a conscience decision to try to be happy whatever I am doing. I ask my readers to think the same way—to remember that it is our decision what we do with the things we can control in our lives. Of course, the sphere of our control is limited: most things we cannot control. But let us focus on what we can control, and take those things with the utmost seriousness.

Too often, we go through our lives without thinking about the bigger questions. We are forced to work to survive, and to survive to keep working, in an endless cycle. The routine goes on. But on certain days, we wake up and ask ourselves about our purpose. Is it to live in harmony with our fellow human beings on this earth? Everywhere around us there are things that are profoundly wrong. Can we really make a difference? Who am I, only one person in this massive world, to presume to try? Even if I do what I think is right, others will not. Most times, we bury these feelings deep down and keep moving.

But we should believe in ourselves and our capacity to act to make the world a better place. We should not wait for others. We must take it upon ourselves to go out and do something. What counts is that we try. In Arabic, there is a word we use—*Al Falah*—which means, essentially, that we must plant seeds of change, even though we cannot know whether these seeds will grow. There are too many factors beyond our control that will determine the fate of our efforts today. But if we do not make these efforts, then we will never achieve anything, even when conditions are ripe for change.

We are born as children into our families and communities. We go about life interacting with other humans in our circles. Through the course of these interactions, we develop our personas, and we come to understand who we are. We posit our own values and morals. We come to discover that there are aspects of our world which are unjust. We question them and we object, but we are told that this is just the way things are—that we cannot change them because we do not have the power. Or we are told it is not our responsibility; it’s the responsibility of higher-ups, governments, states, the wealthy, etc.

Yet as human beings we have the innate capacity to identify problems and to experiment with solutions. We all have it in us to be social entrepreneurs. We have to find that inner potential and unleash our own creativity to make change, however small or large. Many have already begun along this path. For some it is obvious, for other less so. But there are always small ripples of change taking place in every community, many whose consequences will not be felt for generations.

We should believe that nothing is impossible. We should acknowledge and expect challenges, but that anticipation itself is half the solution.

Don’t listen to others who tell you what you can and cannot do; trust your gut feeling and push forward. Your bravery will pay off later, and bring your naysayers along with you. That is how I started *We Love Reading*. And in this short book, I want to tell you about *We Love Reading*’s success. I invite you to come and join me in the journey of *We Love reading*.

We Love Reading was created and developed locally, at a grassroots level, through a process of trial and error. Through practical experience and empirical observation, I refined an approach to spreading the love of reading that really worked. That is why it has blossomed and evolved into a global program. We Love Reading provides an effective and intuitive framework for instilling a love of reading in children, a framework based on universal values all of humanity holds in common.

The example of We Love Reading is proof that small actions can and do make big differences in people's lives. The idea of the butterfly effect—that small, discrete developments can lead to largescale changes—is borne out in so many cases in our world. I hope these pages give the reader inspiration to take initiatives and pursue new ideas. The greatest achievement is making someone happy. Believe in yourself, make a difference, be happy.

Dr. Rana Dajani
December 25, 2019

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all of the women and men, young and old, who have been a part of We Love Reading since its inception.

We Love Reading is a social movement that I believe will exist for many years to come.

Thank you to the thousands of We Love Reading ambassadors who have brought the love of reading all over Jordan: Nabeela, Roula, Asma, Majd, Abdullah, and many, many more.

Thank you to the We Love Reading ambassadors in dozens of countries across the world who made this program a truly global initiative. So many of you have moved me and taught me lessons I'll never forget: Raouda from Tunis, who dedicated herself to organizing a We Love Reading Library despite battling Parkinson's disease; Matovu and Amina, who brought We Love Reading to Luganda speakers in Central Uganda; Mohammad Amin, who led the effort to establish the program in Ethiopia, and showed me the meaning of persistence; Dawn from Urbana, Illinois, who organized We Love Reading in her community after learning about the model online, and surprised me when I came to visit for a conference; Marcela from Buenos Aires, Argentina, a retired teacher who saw in We Love Reading a way to bring poetry and literature into the lives of underprivileged children; Nadia from Gaza, who maintained her own We Love Reading Library under dire conditions of occupation and blockade; Omar and his colleagues in Algeria, who began with a single We Love Reading circle and helped it grow into a thriving network of libraries; and thousands of others who made this work their own and allowed We Love Reading to flourish and grow.

Thank you to all of the employees, volunteers, interns, writers, and illustrators who have been a part of We Love Reading over many years.

And to the donors, partners, and contributors who have believed in us and stood by us. Thank you to everyone who has supported We Love Reading, no matter the form of that support.

If I tried to name every individual who helped make We Love Reading what it is today, the list would fill many volumes. All of you have been instrumental to our collective success.

Thank you to my children, who inspired me and offered me their wisdom at every step of the way; to my husband, who ensured that the quality of the organization matched the caliber of our program; to my editor, Dorian Bon, for his collaboration and support in preparing this manuscript.

Thank you, as well, to all of the unknown people who have pushed We Love Reading forward, or will do so in the future. I hope to meet every one of you some day. I am full of gratitude.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to each and every one of the hundreds of thousands of children who learned to love to read with We Love Reading. To see their eyes light up is the greatest gift a person can receive. I know that they will grow up and read to their own children and their own communities one day, creating a chain reaction which, I believe, can change the world on a scale we never thought was possible.

PART ONE: OUR PHILOSOPHY

Reading for pleasure, also known as intrinsic reading motivation, has been found to be a more significant factor for the cognitive development of children than parent's educational level. This transcends a child's socio-economic background and is the reason why fostering literate environments for children is essential.

–Dr. Alice Sullivan and Mr. Matt Brown

CHAPTER ONE

WHY READING FOR PLEASURE IS IMPORTANT

Reading is immortal

Reading is identity, exploration, and discovery

Reading is the interpretation of life

Reading is a catalyst, an accelerator

One lives one life, but in reading one lives 5,000 years of life

Get lost reading

Discover yourself reading

–Rana Dajani

The more that you read, the more things you will know.

The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.

–Dr. Seuss



Despite the enormous progress humanity has achieved in overcoming illiteracy during the last century, the love of reading remains stifled. Throughout most of both the industrialized and developing world, the pastime of reading is marginal in popular culture and shows few signs of expanding. For most of us, reading for pleasure becomes an alien concept beginning in childhood. This is a tragedy, because reading for pleasure is essential to our humanity.

Why is reading for pleasure important? Why should we strive to instill a love of reading in our children? The answer has many parts, reflecting the many benefits and gifts of reading. When children learn to read for pleasure, they start to master all the following skills—among many, many others:

1.How to draw upon the experiences of others

Reading allows children and young adults to transcend their own circumstances and learn about the experiences of human beings in different times and places. The opportunity to engage with the worlds of other people through their stories and ideas opens the reader's mind to countless new possibilities. The most successful societies are always those that can cull from the richness and wealth of previous civilizations passed down to us in writing. Jared Diamond describes the Spanish conquest of the Incas, noting that one factor in the Spanish conquest was the Inca's lack of a written language. As such, the Inca experience was limited to inherited oral histories, while the Spaniards were able to draw from the wealth of experience of previous civilizations in written form.¹

2.How to find their own heroes

In literature, children draw the courage and confidence to become the heroes they read about. This is especially significant for those that do not receive encouragement or support from their societies. Through reading, they lose themselves in stories and learn to embody heroes of many different types, building their subjectivity and character.

3.How to develop their creativity

The practice of reading for pleasure lays the foundation for children to respond to challenges creatively, expand their imagination, and think outside the box.

4.How to build their vocabulary

Immersed in books from a young age, children build up their vocabulary and grammar, mastering the tools they need to express themselves both in speech and in writing. With these tools, young people are better able to describe their environment and their life experiences. For hundreds of years, Islamic communities have promoted the memorization of the Qur'an from an early age. The Qur'an is written in literary Arabic, which exposes children to a sophisticated lexicon of ideas and terms. As Salim Abu-Rabia has shown in the journal *Reading and Writing*, children accustomed to reading literary Arabic develop better reading comprehension skills than their peers who have mastered only colloquial Arabic language.²

The more words children are able to incorporate into their vocabulary, the more choices

1 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1999).

2 Salim Abu-Rabia, "Effects of Exposure to Literary Arabic on Reading Comprehension in a Diaglossic Situation," *Reading and Writing* 13, no. 1-2 (September 2000): 147-157

they have when searching for the ideas they need to respond to their environment and resolve the ambiguities they face. The fewer words a child has in their vocabulary, the less prepared they are to deal with ambiguity. Mexican novelist David Toscana once recounted how he spoke in front of an audience of around three hundred young teenagers about the importance of reading, and when he asked the crowd who among them loved to read, only one child raised their hand in the entire auditorium. When Toscana took a smaller group of students aside to ask them about why they didn't like to read, they could not articulate their thoughts or explain themselves to him.³ Vocabulary is tied to creativity and self-expression. Of course, there are many ways to express oneself, and some of the greatest minds have not been literate. But the benefits of a rich lexicon cannot be underestimated. When a child knows more words or synonyms for the same object, this leads the child to become more creative because she can think of more than one way to describe that object and more than one function for it.

Building an expansive vocabulary is also a potential source of psychological wellbeing. Recent research demonstrates that the capacity for emotional granularity—or the ability to perceive the nuanced, “granular” differences between different emotions and feelings—is often a key component of mental health.⁴ By gradually assembling a detailed and robust verbal toolbox, we put ourselves in a position to read emotions at this granular level, which bolsters our emotional maturity and strength.

5. How to respect others

Reading encourages respect for others, even if we disagree. This is the single most important requirement for communication and peace building. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey describes an optical illusion in which one object appears differently to its beholder depending on their position.⁵ The reality is that each one of us perceives the world in different ways because of the influences around us—and we are often unaware of these differences, believing the only possible perspective is our own. As we read, we learn to embody the viewpoint of others. This crucial skill is what underpins the art of respecting others.

6. How to deepen their empathy

Developing a routine of reading for pleasure helps both children and adults become more empathetic as people. A pilot study conducted by the We Love Reading program in collaboration with professor Jean Decety and the Child NeuroSuite at the University of Chicago shows that emotional reading intervention causes an increase in empathetic concern for others, as well as greater pro-social behavior.⁶ The connection between reading and empathy is a theme of a growing body of scientific research. To take just one fascinating example, social psychologists at the New School for Social Research have shown that readers of literary fiction are more likely to exhibit empathy in their interpersonal interactions than others.⁷

3 David Toscana, “The Country That Stopped Reading,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2013.

4 Todd B. Kashdan, Lisa Feldman Barrett, and Patrick E. McKnight, “Unpacking Emotion Differentiation: Transforming Unpleasant Experience by Perceiving Distinctions in Negativity,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24 no. 1 (February 2015): 10–16.

5 Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

6 We Love Reading, *Annual Report 2017*, 20.

7 Pam Belluck, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2013.

7. How to care for their social environment

When children read about an aspect of their environment or social life, their behavior toward that object can be transformed. Whether a child reads about city streets, schools, hospitals, family life, friendship, ecology, or religion, whatever the particular area of life may be, their relationship to that part of their existence is changed. In another study we conducted at We Love Reading, we showed that there is a direct link between what children read about and what elements in their environment they choose to treat with sensitivity, care, and curiosity.⁸ It was also noted that the younger the child, the greater the change in their behavior tended to be toward the part of reality they were exploring through reading. This provides further support for the idea that reading-intervention raises social awareness and understanding.

8. How to better communicate their emotions

A culture of reading for pleasure reduces violence among children, as they learn to express themselves and their emotions more clearly through language. Imagine a child who is jealous of a new sibling, whose mother reads to him or her a story about sibling jealousy. With this story in mind, when the child feels jealous, they now have terms to describe that emotion and can share this feeling with their mother, who, in turn, is in a better position to respond to her child's needs. Reading also limits the child's tendency to throw tantrums to attract attention. Children who are given these opportunities through reading will grow into more expressive adults. An August 2015 World Literacy Foundation report found that children without the opportunity to read suffer from more behavior problems overall than their peers with access to education and a culture of reading.⁹

9. How to conceptualize their world

Words are needed to describe our physical surroundings, both natural and artificial. Children can only learn to describe their surroundings to the fullest extent if they immerse themselves in books. When we learn to place words and ideas into our environment, we develop our own identity and creativity, enriching ourselves with all of the elements of reality that we have started to represent and explain in our minds. Robert Macfarlane notes this connection between language and identity in his lament for the loss of hundreds of descriptive terms for natural phenomena that have been removed from the Oxford Junior Dictionary in recent years.¹⁰ In cutting words the dictionary did not consider "relevant to childhood," the editors had removed a number of signifiers for tree and flower species and replaced them with new-age, technological lingo. This reduction in the words we teach our kids about the natural environment limits their ability to perceive all of life's subtle details. According to Macfarlane, the disappearance of nuance in vocabulary is tied directly to apathy, and a "language deficit leads to attention deficit" because it reduces our ability to conceptualize non-human relationships.

8 Randa Ali Mahasneh, Rana Dajani, and Michael H. Romanowski, "A Promising Intervention for Promoting Children's Environmental Knowledge and Behavior in Jordan," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 48, no. 5 (June 2017): 334-46

9 World Literacy Foundation, *The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy*, August 2015, <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/WLF-FINAL-ECONOMIC-REPORT.pdf>

10 Robert Macfarlane, "The Word-Hoard: Robert Macfarlane on Rewilding Our Language of Landscape," *Guardian*, February 27, 2015.

10. How to strengthen their bonds with others

As developmental psychologist Bruce Hood has argued, the growth of the self occurs through interacting with people on a daily basis. Cultivating inter-personal relationships is critical to the maturation of children into healthy young adults.¹¹ Here, again, reading can play a formative role. The experience of reading for pleasure gives children the vocabulary they need to navigate their interactions with others, enriching their relationships and bolstering their sense of self.

11. How to prepare themselves for formal education

Reading provides children with a leg up when they enter school and as they progress through the educational system. Research in the 1970s showed that children whose parents were more educated were exposed to a more sophisticated vocabulary at home than their peers whose parents had not received the same level of education. This gave them an advantage in the classroom. A simple and cost-effective way to bridge this gap is through reading aloud to children.

12. How to protect their native customs, literatures, and identities

When societies build a persistent culture of reading, their individual members find a new appreciation of their own literary and cultural heritage. One of the defining characteristics of our epoch is the domination of world literature by a select group of languages—English foremost among them—which is given greater social recognition and weight. The writings of the rest of humanity, particularly those of the poorer, underdeveloped nations, are held at bay, in many cases in total obscurity.

It is not a coincidence that so many authors and activists who have led the effort to uncover native literary traditions were avid readers and writers themselves. The love of literature sparks an interest in one's own literary ancestry. In our own experience, leaders of We Love Reading Libraries in dozens of countries have used the program as an opportunity to celebrate and revitalize their indigenous voices, languages, and authors.

These tasks are especially urgent in countries where literary traditions have come under threat. In the example of Turkey, the rapid substitution of Latin for Arabic script under Kemal Atatürk cut the youngest generations off from centuries of Turkish cultural production. The impact of that rupture with the past is profound. Today, teachers and scholars wishing to preserve national traditions are forced to overcome the effects of Latinization before the popular connection with Arabic script is fully severed.

Colonization tore millions of people from the rich literary pasts of their native lands. As writer Aatish Taseer eloquently describes, the hegemony of the English language in India has robbed countless Indian students of the opportunity to explore one of the most diverse and significant linguistic lineages in human history.¹²

The growing population of refugees across today's world faces similar experiences as

11 Bruce Hood, Developing a Sense of Self, February 6, 2015, <https://lectures.dar.cam.ac.uk/video/developing-a-sense-of-self>

12 Aatish Taseer, "What Sanskrit Has Meant to Me," Open Magazine, August 17, 2013.

millions of refugees try to develop their ability to read, write, speak, and think for themselves in hostile environments. Dr. Selma Porobić grew up as a refugee from the conflict in Bosnia after her family fled to Sweden. She was traumatized by the sudden change and her immersion in a totally new social and linguistic context. This trauma had a profound psychological impact. Porobić felt thoroughly silenced by the ordeal. Yet she was able to overcome this displacement, and went on to devote her life to studying refugee and migrant experiences. Today Porobić is the director of the Center for Refugee and IDP Studies at the University of Sarajevo. Her story gives us further insight into the threats posed to refugees and migrants by their sudden separation from their native languages and customs when they and their families are forced to flee zones of conflict.

13. How to become masters, rather than victims of the production of knowledge

The practice of reading and writing enables a culture to identify its past while envisioning its future. It fosters critical thinking and reflection, and empowers people to consider alternative ways of living and interacting. Society places a premium on the production and dissemination of knowledge. The ability to use texts in all their diverse forms is essential to growth and development, at both the personal and societal levels. Cultures which do not value reading and writing are at risk of becoming the victims rather than the masters of global knowledge production.

CHAPTER TWO

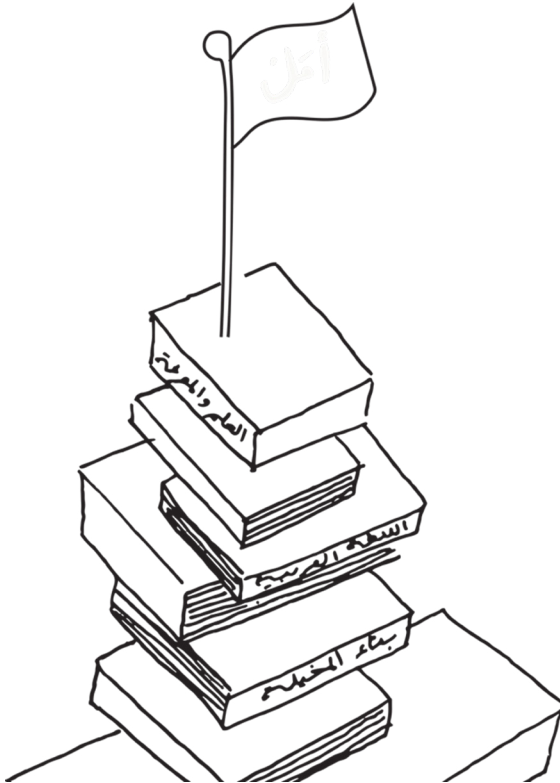
READING LEVELS REMAIN LOW

*It's a crime for a child not to fall in love with reading,
Not to discover her or his inner potential and the outer world.*

–Rana Dajani, 2017 UNESCO International Literacy Prize Acceptance Speech

*Without books, children are condemned to lead a life without answers. . . and before long without
questions too.*

–Daniel Pennac, The Rights of the Reader



Development challenges

Globally, primary school enrollment has seen a significant increase in recent years. Reading levels, however, remain low. A major international assessment, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), found that the average student in low-income countries performs at the same level of a student in the fifth percentile of student performance in middle-to-upper-income states. The study also notes that an estimated 35 million girls and 31 million boys worldwide remain out of school.¹³

UNESCO's 2015 Regional Overview of progress in the Arab States toward the Education for All (EFA) goals articulated at the Dakar World Economic Forum in 2000 reveals a picture of a region that continues to face immense challenges to universal literacy and education. The report shows that, despite the progress made in the last several decades, the Middle East and North Africa have some of the lowest literacy rates and reading levels in the world.¹⁴ According to UNESCO, an estimated 57 million adults in the region were classified as illiterate during the period between 1995–2004, over two-thirds of whom were women.

Although women in the so-called Arab states have made important advances in education, particularly at the college and university levels, gender disparities in adult literacy in this region are among the three highest in the world alongside those of Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia.¹⁵ A wide range of economic, political, and cultural obstacles stand in the way of women's empowerment in both Arab-majority countries and across the global system. While many programs address women's issues in an effort to resolve these imbalances, an area that has not been fully explored is how reading—and, most importantly, reading for pleasure—can impact women's lives.

The failure of contemporary societies to create an environment in which children learn to embrace and enjoy reading as a central part of their experience has far-reaching consequences. Developing a culture and routine of reading for pleasure is highly beneficial for a child's personality, imagination, and intellect. The lack of this opportunity in the lives of millions of young people, particularly those in the world's most impoverished communities, is an underestimated contributing factor in the perpetuation of poverty, injustice, and inequality.

13 Sheila Thompson and Stephen Provasnik, et. al., Highlights from PIRLS 2011: Reading Achievement of US Fourth Grade Students in an International Context (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics-Institute of Education Sciences-U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

14 UNESCO, Regional Overview: Arab States, 2015, <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/157267E.pdf>.

15 Ibid.

Finding solutions: reading aloud

There is a multitude of reasons why reading levels remain low. Even in the most literate societies, reading for pleasure is a stifled and uncommon practice when compared to other forms of entertainment and personal fulfillment. The rise of digital media, the widespread alienation among young and working people, and the disregard for individual creativity in educational systems are all significant parts of the problem. The bottom line is that most children do not enjoy reading, and this sets a precedent that shapes an individual's outlook long into adulthood. In order to increase reading levels, we must focus not only on increasing access to literature and literacy skills, but also on instilling a love of reading in children.

The case of the Jordan, where I live and work, is instructive. Jordan has one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East, but this achievement has not organically led to a culture of reading for pleasure among children and young people. The result is that even after advances in literacy, reading and its advantages are not widely enjoyed by Jordanians. Knowing how to read and loving to read are simply not the same skills. There's a term for this: aliteracy. Aliteracy refers to the inability to read for pleasure despite one's ability to read. Those of us committed to fostering the love of reading, especially in countries where the battle against illiteracy has been largely won, have to take the fight against aliteracy just as seriously.

Past projects have attempted to overcome this contradiction by promoting greater distribution of books to children. Providing literature to children is an admirable and useful initiative, but it has not brought about a substantial change in popular habits of reading in Jordan. As in other countries, the more fundamental challenge is to find an effective approach to inculcating a genuinely felt desire to read.

In many ways, the approach of our program mirrors basic marketing principles: one can only sell a product if there is a real desire and demand for that product. Only after the desire to read has been inculcated can we really hope to foster a widespread culture of reading among new generations.

The starting point of our program, We Love Reading, is based upon an approach to this challenge that is simple, elegant, and surprisingly productive: reading aloud to kids. A large body of research has shown that reading aloud to children helps instill a deeper investment and interest in literature—and, conversely, that the absence of reading aloud in a child's life is an important driver of detachment from literary activity throughout the child's later development. This insight will be intuitive to many parents and siblings who see firsthand the effects of reading aloud in their own families.

Reading aloud helps reveal to children how texts can come alive and open up new horizons and experiences which would otherwise be closed to them. It has also been linked to emergent literacy ability. Reading aloud teaches children how to associate the written and spoken word and to recognize sound patterns, stimulating both written and oral language skills.¹⁶

Based on this premise, We Love Reading seeks to organize a grassroots effort to develop a culture of reading aloud to children that is managed and controlled by the impacted communities themselves.

16 E. Duursma, M. Augustyn, and B. Zuckerman, "Reading Aloud to Children: The Evidence," *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 93, no. 7 (July 2008): 554-57.

This book is designed to introduce participants and observers to the process by which We Love Reading carries out its objectives, and the impact our methods have on the people who make this project a reality. But before making this introduction, it is worth reflecting in more detail on the underlying questions we are seeking to answer, particularly as they apply to the context of Jordan and other developing countries: why has reading for pleasure not taken root in modern societies even as literacy rates rise? And what can reading aloud to children do to bridge this gap?

CHAPTER THREE

WHY DON'T CHILDREN READ FOR PLEASURE?

*You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be—
I had a Mother who read to me.*

—Strickland Gillilan, “The Reading Mother”

*Read everywhere and anywhere!
I do not care: I read standing, I read on the moon,
On the earth, or in the sea!
Because reading will take you to the place
you always dreamed to be.
Read, because reading is limitless.*

—Fadia Enbeh (Amman, Jordan)



Many studies have exaggerated the low level of reading in the Middle East. The spurious claim that Arabs read for only six minutes each year received widespread media attention recently before it was exposed as a fabricated rumor mistakenly attributed to the Arab Thought Foundation.¹⁷ The most comprehensive survey of Arab reading patterns available to contemporary researchers is the Arab Reading Index published by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and the United Nations Development Program, which revealed a much more positive picture in line with the region's developmental state.¹⁸

Nonetheless, as in the rest of the contemporary world, reading time for both adults and children remains much lower than it should be given advancements in literacy and the well documented rewards of reading for pleasure. In Jordan, illiteracy has been nearly overcome, but this achievement has not inherently solved the problem of low rates of reading comprehension and engagement with literature.¹⁹

Many Arab children learn to read, memorize, and recite the Holy Qur'an from an early age, a practice which has clear benefits for the child's intellectual development. At We Love Reading, however, we call for a different kind of reading. We want children to read for pleasure, to intuitively see reading as an outlet for fun, relaxation, and stimulation. People often ask what "reading for pleasure" really means, to which I respond with a story: when my daughter was little, I used to drive her home from work with me at night, and at red lights she would turn to me and ask, "Mom, can you turn on the light so I can read?" When a child has that kind of investment in reading, they are reading for pleasure.

The reasons why reading for pleasure is marginal in today's society are multifactorial and complex. Children's experiences at school are too often characterized by stressful and narrow high-stakes testing and rote memorization, which burn students out and produce an aversion to reading, study, and literature. When young people become accustomed to thinking that their views and opinions matter little in determining their conditions in life, it comes as no surprise that they do not view reading as a worthwhile use of their time. Alternative means of entertainment like social media, television, and video games become the default avenues for enjoyment.

Many educational and reading programs attempt to bypass these underlying social problems by increasing the circulation of books. But this approach skips over a crucial and much more laborious step in the process. If children do not love reading, making books more widely available to them—although absolutely necessary—will not be sufficient to encourage them to read. The process of building a culture of reading for pleasure among children has three main steps:

1. Children must learn to read. This objective is termed literacy, and it is the most commonly understood and celebrated of the three steps.
2. Children must learn to love to read. This objective is the most overlooked part of the process, and the main focus of my work.

17 Khadija Hamouchi, "Arabs Don't Read: A Myth Made Real by the Internet?" Arab Weekly, January 21, 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com/arabs-dont-read-myth-made-real-internet>.

18 Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, Arab Reading Index 2016, December 2016.

19 US Agency for International Development-Jordan, Student Performance in Reading and Mathematics, Pedagogic Practice, and School Management in Jordan, August 2012.

3.Children must be provided with interesting and stimulating reading material.

The dominant trend in global reading initiatives is to dedicate the large bulk of their resources to steps one and three. But passing over that critical second step puts the entire journey in peril. In most cases, governments and program designers do not pay attention to this issue simply because there is a lack of general awareness and knowledge about how essential the love of reading is to human development. This is where the We Love Reading model comes in. We aim to close that gap by promoting and harboring a love of reading that goes beyond the sphere of formal education and into the everyday psychology and experience of children.

A growing body of research bears these conclusions out. As the British National Literacy Trust argued in 2006, “just because someone is able to read, does not mean he or she will choose to do so.”²⁰ In 2015, researchers at the Reading Agency wrote correctly that “children and young people must achieve enjoyment and gratification as outcomes from their reading in order to pursue autonomous reading.”²¹

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, makes a similar point, arguing that reading aloud is the most important measure we can take to instill the lifelong motivation to read in every new generation. “Much of the ‘work’ in school,” Trelease explains, “involves the decoding of text, the mechanics of reading. You might also call it the ‘how-to’ aspect of reading. The other half of reading is the ‘want-to,’ the motivational end. Without the ‘want-to’ all the ‘how-to’ drill work is not going to create lifetime reader.”²²

My program concentrates not only on the ability to read, but on the intrinsic value of reading for pleasure. Moreover, the method I have developed to pursue these aims is simple, cost-efficient, and driven by the impacted communities themselves. The approach of We Love Reading centers on building capacity, not on the provision of materials. The fundamental goal is to foster a deep love of reading through the practice of reading aloud to children.

This task is particularly urgent in the Middle East and other developing regions. Children in the developing world have fewer opportunities and spaces in which to interact with books and literature. Creating new environments where reading aloud and reading for pleasure are introduced into children’s lives is an essential service in this context.

By making reading an enjoyable experience rather than a chore associated with schoolwork, we are better positioned to train children to become lifelong readers. And if we are successful, these children will grow up and pass on the love of reading to the generation after them.

Part of our theory of change is that each discrete act of learning gives rise to a chain reaction that positively affects countless others. We Love Reading has a far-reaching vision. We believe that in order to initiate real change, we must begin at the grassroots level through one-on-one interactions and focus on experience and building human potential. No significant change can be achieved immediately without an extensive process underlying it. But once the kind of change we are seeking is realized, the rewards will be exponentially greater than we could have

20 Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold, *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview* (National Literacy Trust, 2006), 7.

21 The Reading Agency, *Literature Review: The Impact of Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment*, June 2015.

22 Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

hoped for at the outset.

Empirical studies have shown that by reading aloud to children beginning in their earliest years, as the child's brain develops and connections between neurons are made, we can create an unconscious association between feelings of security, love, and happiness and the practice of reading. I believe this connection can be nourished as early as in utero. This sentiment stays with the child into adulthood, leading them to turn to reading to fulfill these desires in their own lives.²³

The following are just some of the many benefits that are derived solely from reading to children:

- 1.It builds confidence, helping struggling readers find their voice and experience success and progress.
- 2.It creates a sense of community. Silent reading is a solitary act, while reading aloud generates a shared experience.
- 3.It connects the spoken and written word. Reading material out loud that a child has written shows the interconnections between writing, reading, and speaking.
- 4.It stimulates many senses simultaneously, which helps children to memorize and recognize words more effectively.
- 5.It encourages the reader to speak clearly and expressively, which deepens the comprehension of the reader and the listener.
- 6.It builds pathways in the child's brain that facilitate imaginative and creative thinking, form unique memories, boost self-esteem, nourish interpersonal relationships, and increase attention span.

When we acknowledge these immensely valuable outcomes, working to introduce a culture of reading aloud to our communities seems intuitive. The real challenge, of course, lies in implementing these ideas in a sustainable and meaningful way.

CHAPTER FOUR

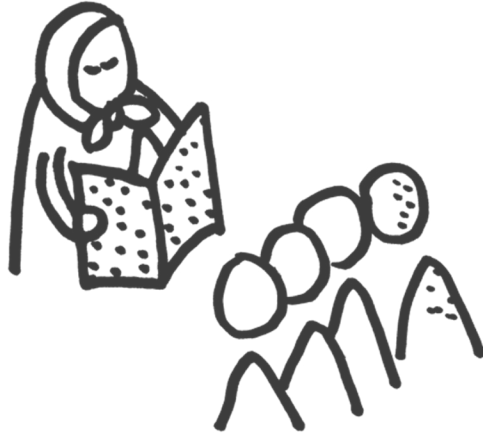
WE LOVE READING AS A SOLUTION

We Love Reading has that secret sauce we need to motivate both children and adults to pursue learning, not because they have to, but because they want to.

–Rana Dajani, 2019 UN Science, Technology and Innovation Award Acceptance Speech

You can't make someone read. Just as you can't make someone fall in love, or dream. . .

–Daniel Pennac, *The Rights of the Reader*



How do we encourage our children to read for pleasure?

As we have shown, numerous programs attempting to increase reading levels simply by providing books have fallen short of their goals. Developing a collective culture of reading aloud to children within our own communities is a key step in fostering a love of reading.

Many established international organizations have built distribution networks to try to resolve the physical lack of literature in countless communities. We Love Reading, while also distributing books on a smaller scale, focuses primarily on implanting the motivation to read. This focus derives from the conclusion that without the widespread desire to read, supplying books to underserved areas can only go so far.

Fundamentally, the ideal path to building a popular culture of reading runs through the home. If we could reach every parent in the world and convince them to read aloud to their children from birth, we would accomplish more than any community program ever could. Yet this is not practically feasible. The next best thing is precisely what We Love Reading has done: to organize community-run libraries in every neighborhood. Nonetheless, parents play a special role in We Love Reading, both as an essential part of our international community of ambassadors, and as the constituency with the most to gain from transforming their children's lives through reading for pleasure.

In 2006, after studying the latest research on the benefits of reading aloud, I designed a model initiative that offers a grassroots-led approach to fostering the love of reading. Crucially, the model I proposed does not exclusively focus on children, but rather views local women and adults more generally as essential to building a culture of reading in their own communities. I aimed to engage parents and ordinary people to become champions of reading in their neighborhoods, and to teach children to experience the joys of reading aloud.

We Love Reading trains local women, men, and youth how to read aloud to children and establish We Love Reading Libraries where they live and work. The volunteers who take our training are called "ambassadors." Out of this process, the We Love Reading Library emerges. The We Love Reading Library is not necessarily a physical space; most importantly, it's a social space where ambassadors regularly read aloud to local children.

Our program chooses and supplies books that are age-appropriate, attractive, politically and religiously neutral in content, and written in the child's native tongue. These books are then incorporated into a library controlled by a local ambassador.

In addition to promoting the experience of reading, the program empowers ordinary people to become leaders in their communities and build a sense of ownership over their work. In Jordan, where We Love Reading was first launched, the program helped normalize the presence of women as leaders in public space—a vital task not just in the Middle East but across the world.

The We Love Reading model can be replicated anywhere: it uses existing common spaces, like a local house of worship or community center; it requires no extensive or bulky library, only a smaller core of books for the ambassador to hand out to children directly; and it relies on ambassadors who do not need any advanced degree or extensive training, just basic reading ability and communication skills.

When ambassadors are trained they are asked to “pay it forward” by sharing what they’ve learned with other local residents to create a domino effect. The fact that ambassadors come from the impacted communities themselves helps to resolve the typical tensions between local life and externally run social programs. As We Love Reading Libraries grow, their organizers—often working and disadvantaged women and men—assert themselves as vital public leaders and agents of change. In many cases, residents begin to invest in their own libraries and assume full ownership and responsibility over their operations.

We Love Reading has been impactful on a scale which even I could not have imagined when we began our work, because it is a simple, effective initiative that depends on the ingenuity of those who run and benefit from it on the ground. We have reached hundreds of thousands of children in 55 countries around the world. The program is built up through a global network of ambassadors who collectively constitute a social movement to bring about change through reading. The underlying purpose of this work is to catalyze a long-term cultural transformation effected by the creative labor and leadership of grassroots ambassadors.

Author Charles Leadbeater has described social movements as collective actions that share a set of basic causes, values, and common objectives which bring people together and provide them with a sense of purpose.²⁴ For We Love Reading, the practice of reading aloud is a means, but our ultimate end is to help children learn how to think and act for themselves. We have attempted to model our program on the basis of movement principles. We Love Reading is thus highly contextual and responsive: each library is adaptive and determined by particular traditions and cultures while still maintaining the program’s essential structure. This contextual flexibility allows local ambassadors to control their own work and removes national and regional obstacles to the movement.

The rapid spread of We Love Reading reveals the potential of this program and others like it to rapidly transform a new generation of children into readers who love and respect books. The effects of such a change are immeasurable. The movement is carried by a network of locally maintained libraries at the neighborhood level.

Part of the power of a movement centered on reading is the raw magnetism of books themselves. In the words of novelist John Green, “Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book.”²⁵ My own wish is that every child finds that zeal, and the excitement, the pure joy of losing oneself in a book. I want everyone to be able to experience the horizons that open up to us through fiction and literature, and for our youth in particular to be empowered and inspired through reading. We Love Reading is about hope, the hope we find in discovering new worlds and possibilities through reading.

When we tap into that reservoir of hope, every ordinary person can move mountains. It is a crime not to allow children these opportunities. What new worlds are waiting to be discovered? What stories are waiting to be read that will make a difference in a child’s heart, help build their bonds with their community, or cause a change in their thinking? These are the questions We Love Reading asks of all of us and which motivate our labor.

24 Charles Leadbeater, *Innovation in Education: Lessons from Pioneers Around the World* (Doha: Bloomberg Qatar Foundation, 2012).

25 John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

Of course, none of these aspirations can be realized without the material effort which underpins the entire project. Our basic objective is to use the We Love Reading model to establish community-owned libraries in neighborhoods across the world led by ambassadors who reach and engage local children on a routine basis. This is the on-the-ground work which will develop a new generation of change-makers to reshape our relationship to reading, education, and the broader world.

The process for building the program in a community has eight main steps:

1. Recruit ambassadors from the area who are responsible, passionate, and dedicated, and enable them to set up and manage a library.
2. Train these ambassadors how to read aloud effectively and how to organize a local library.
3. The ambassadors reach out to community members and win as much support for the idea as possible.
4. They then find a central location that is safe and easily accessible by the community to host their read-aloud sessions, whether a place of worship, a community center, their own home, or even under a tree.
5. The ambassadors secure books for the library through donations from individuals or organizations—as few or as many books as one can easily store and assemble for each session.
6. They hold a read-aloud session every weekend.
7. They lend books to children to take home and read on their own.
8. The program organizes all the ambassadors in the area and develops a network to communicate, strategize, share ideas, and build support. This helps ensure the sustainability of the project.

These simple steps form the foundation of our program, and on that foundation thousands of We Love Reading Libraries have grown and become autonomous centers of community life. Through patient and deliberate organizing, ambassadors can make these steps happen in many different countries and social contexts.

The other essential component of the program is the art of reading aloud itself. Reading aloud, though commonly viewed as an unskilled or straightforward act, is in reality a great human art. Part of our training in We Love Reading is to impart strong methods of reading aloud to our ambassadors using lessons culled from years of experience.

CHAPTER FIVE HOW TO READ ALOUD

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.

–Richard Anderson, Elfrieda Hiebert, Judith Scott, Ian Wilkinson, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*

You're never too old, too wacky, too wild, to pick up a book and read to a child.

–Anita Merina, “Read Across America”

It's hard to say no when they want another story. But that's also why they come back!

–Asma (Zaatari Refugee Camp)



As we've established, reading aloud is key to childhood development and to becoming an empathetic and expressive adult. The act of reading aloud itself is both intuitive yet highly demanding, and the confidence of the reader can go a long way in reaching the imagination of the child.

After years of work implementing the We Love Reading model at a grassroots level, our organization has compiled a set of core methods for reading aloud that have proven most effective in capturing children's attention and fostering their love of reading.

Of course, our ability to reach children through reading aloud depends on the accessibility of appropriate literature. Finding and choosing the right books is an integral part of the process. We look for books that are well suited to the target age group, clear and engaging in their content—preferably with an underlying, progressive morale—and free of any ideological agenda. Finally, the text must be written in the native tongue of the children themselves. Acquiring books that meet these criteria often proves difficult. As I describe in greater detail later on, this difficulty has led We Love Reading to commission and distribute children's books of our own to meet popular demand.

Once you have the literature you need, the focus of the reader shifts to delivering the story as effectively as possible. Here are the core lessons We Love Reading has collected on how to read aloud. Some of these lessons are simple, straightforward guidelines, while others are more nuanced.

First, remember the “rights of the reader”! French novelist Daniel Pennac coined the concept in an essay in which he explores the stifling of the love of reading in contemporary societies.²⁶ Pennac lists ten rights which every reader must enjoy:

- 1.The right not to read.
- 2.The right to skip.
- 3.The right not finish a book.
- 4.The right to read it again.
- 5.The right to read anything.
- 6.The right to mistake a book for real life.
- 7.The right to read anywhere.
- 8.The right to dip in.
- 9.The right to read aloud.
- 10.The right to be quiet.

Pennac's message is that we must read for pleasure, not for any authority, assignment, or chore. The reader must feel liberated to read as they wish to.

²⁶ Daniel Pennac, The Rights of the Reader, https://www.hbook.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/pennac_poster.pdf.

With that in mind, here are some basic guidelines on reading aloud:

Do's and don'ts:

- Do read the book ahead of time. This will help you as the reader with pace, timing, pronunciation, and better prepare you to read the book aloud.
 - Do signal when you are about to begin. You can use phrases like “Once upon a time. . .” or simply sit in silence for a few moments to clear the space and encourage the children to focus.
 - Do read aloud the story’s title as well as the author’s and illustrator’s names before starting the book. Children will learn to ask for the books by name and to begin thinking about which authors, texts, and pictures they enjoy most.
 - Do show illustrations. Be sure to take time to allow every child in the room to see the book’s pictures. Here one has two choices: either to read the text first and then turn it around for the children, or to read with the illustrations facing your audience. Both methods allow the children to make connection between the images and words on the page.
 - Do use facial expressions to animate the text. If a character is happy, smile; if they are sad, frown. Though it may seem trivial, expressing oneself in this way helps to bring the emotions of the story into the room.
 - Do keep reading. If the children are noisy and impatient, especially at first, just keep reading. Don’t stop and ask them to settle down. This will only disrupt the flow of the story for those who are listening. After a few minutes, the children will start to focus on their own in most cases.
 - Do allow the children to take books home with them. It is important for children to have a chance to read on their own. This may be challenging when a library is just starting out and books are limited. Occasionally a book will be lost. But the occasional loss of a book is a small price to pay to establish trust and instill reading as a personal habit within the community.
 - Do leave the children wanting more. Always.
-
- Don’t add extra words or change the author’s language. It can be tempting to embellish or alter the text to suit one’s own rhythm and sensibilities. But sticking to the text as it is helps the children to follow along with you—and respects the author’s own choice of words.
 - Don’t memorize the text. We want to build a strong link in the children’s mind between the story and the act of reading.
 - Don’t read in a silly voice. The reader is not a cartoon character. Exaggerated or forced tones may just distract the children from connecting with the content of the story.
 - Don’t stop to explain words. Children will hear the word, remember it, look for clues, and discover its meaning on their own. Explaining its meaning just interrupts the development of the narrative and robs the children of that process of exploration.

- Don't use unnecessary technology. Our aim is to create a bond between the child and the printed story, not between them and a computer, laptop, or smartphone. Digital technology is a gift in so many ways. But in intimate spaces like We Love Reading Libraries it can stifle the interpersonal connections we rely on to communicate stories effectively.
- Don't add more layers of entertainment like drawing or dancing to your library. We want reading to be the center of attention. Furthermore, relying on all of these elements to sustain your library will result in burnout.
- Don't ask about the story afterward. This is playtime. The purpose of reading aloud is to help children find a passion for reading. We don't want to replicate the atmosphere of a classroom. No one stops us at the movie theater after a film ends to discuss the evening's lessons, nor should they when we finish reading a book aloud. Hopefully children will keep coming back because they're having fun, and the lessons of the reading will sink in over time.
- Don't read aloud books you don't like. Ever.

Building the right setting:

- Choose a cozy, comfortable place where children can gather around you in a semicircle. In a large room, move into the corner with the reader against the wall.
- Sit on a low chair, just slightly above the children. Think about how you and the book you're reading aloud appear in the children's eyes.
- Allow the older kids to sit on chairs at the back of the circle if they'd prefer.
- Consider using an object to maintain a center of focus. For example, one can hand around a "reading stone," or wear a "reading hat." Alternatively, encourage the children to bring their own "listening pillows" (or blankets) and "reading bears" to the sessions. These and other objects can help our young listeners feel comfortable and at ease, and make them more attentive.

Carrying the story:

- Before beginning, it is crucial to step back and re-orient oneself to the task at hand. Silently re-affirm your intention. Feel your feet against the floor. Take a long, deep, slow breath while making eye-contact with your listeners. In these moments, we are working to shut out everything else but the book, the children, and ourselves, their reader and guide.
- Read slowly. Know that the embodied voice—that is, the voice that is backed up with sincerity, belief, and commitment to the narrative—has the power to release the creative imaging of the listener’s mind. Allow time for those images to take shape in their thoughts.
- The first words of the text are critical. Read these with extra care and deliberation, enough that you can pause between phrases to look into your listeners’ eyes. Invite them to consider what you are saying, and to fully form their own impressions and feelings. Each word has its own set of meanings and colors in the mind of the listener, and all of these need time and space to come out for the experience to be as full and robust as possible.
- As the book progresses, work to embody the narrative in your voice, eyes, hands, and body. Your voice can be low and heavy, high and light, sustained or staccato. The range of possibilities is wide. Fast-paced, action-packed parts of the story can be read accordingly. Your loose hand can float, gesture, and clench as you please. Your feet can run, kick, or cower in fear. Your body can seem to explode with joy or collapse in exhaustion.
- Help the children produce sound and visual effects to go along with the story. They can use their fingers to imitate the pitter-patter of rain, or join in the repetition of certain key phrases or words.
- If you stumble while you read, simply go back and do it again. Model the strategies all people need to be readers, and live by the principle that everyone makes mistakes, and mistakes can be corrected. If you have to practice to get a name right, let the children practice with you until they can also pronounce it properly.
- The last sentences of the text, much like the first, often play an outsized role in carrying the story. Be sure to read these lines slowly and persuasively. You are culminating the experience of the listener, bidding farewell to your fellow travelers on this reading journey. Let them feel that they’ve reached the end of something, and that now something new will begin.

CHAPTER SIX

ESTABLISHING WE LOVE READING LIBRARIES

A living library is any place where books are shared and read aloud to children.

–Rana Dajani

We do not know how much our kids love reading until we read aloud to them.

–We Love Reading ambassador



The Oxford English Dictionary defines a library as “a building or room containing collections of books.”

On the surface of things, this definition is undeniably accurate. Libraries are, materially speaking, sites where literature is collected, maintained, and distributed. And they are among the most critically important infrastructures for any just and humane society.

The problem is that in so many places where humanity has succeeded in building plenty of libraries, they are neglected and under-utilized. Often their collections waste away, picking up dust.

A library should be alive with readers, a focal point of the community.

For the purposes of We Love Reading, we define a library not primarily as a physical space, but as a shared social environment where one generation reads aloud to the next, and where readers come to find the resources they need. We emphasize the human experience.

An essential part of our work at We Love Reading is to create libraries where these social interactions can take place, and where a grassroots culture of reading can be nourished.

It is all too easy to assume that libraries will naturally become vibrant spaces when the challenge of illiteracy is overcome. But this is simply not the case. In a country like Jordan, where We Love Reading was first launched, the struggle against illiteracy has largely been won, yet—as in many other parts of the world—this has not automatically generated a culture of reading for pleasure at a community level.

In Jordan’s capital, Amman, there are dozens of public libraries across the city, and many families keep a personal collection of books in the home. Nonetheless, when policymakers strategize how to increase reading levels, the default approach continues to focus on improving material access to books.

An unhealthy feedback loop grows out of this state of confusion: those of us living in Jordan (and other countries at similar stages of economic development) seek help from foreign experts to resolve our reading deficits; the experts prescribe more aid and funding to widen access to books; we then work hard to accomplish these goals, grow frustrated at the poor results, and return to seek further aid and funding, starting the cycle anew. Clearly, something is being lost in translation. It makes one wonder: what else in the relationship between the developed and developing worlds has been miscommunicated or mistranslated in similar ways?

Of course, we should all support efforts to expand access to literature. Every human being has an inalienable right to access and enjoy the world of books. But for many developing countries at a certain level of modernization, the immediate obstacle is not a lack of books or libraries, but a pervasive cultural alienation from the practice of reading for pleasure. In this regard, our challenges are actually more similar to those of developed countries than many observers believe, and the solutions we’ve begun to discover will be useful for developed societies, as well.

Essentially, our approach to bridging this gap has been to empower local ambassadors who believe in the necessity and beauty of reading for pleasure to foster a culture of reading through their own activism.

We Love Reading builds relationships with neighborhood ambassadors driven by our shared goals who receive training in how to read aloud from our program and become We Love Reading ambassadors in their area. In our own experience in Jordan, We Love Reading ambassadors have mostly been women. But there are no limitations on who can and cannot lead this work aside from a basic commitment to the project.

To establish We Love Reading Libraries locally, we encourage ambassadors to immediately involve their families, neighbors, and community members in the process of bringing the various elements of the library together.

The first steps in this direction are to speak with local family and friends about the importance of building a culture of reading and winning their support; to find the right location to begin organizing a We Love Reading Library; and to gather a team of parents excited about sending their children to read-aloud sessions.

One cannot emphasize enough the importance of sitting down and discussing this work with family and friends at the outset. When the immediate family and social networks of the ambassador spearheading this project grasp the underlying ideas, they can help sustain and advance the work in significant ways. Beginning with these conversations also cuts against the danger that local libraries will be viewed by some as a suspicious, abnormal activity.

Sometimes analysts pose the question: how do we ensure bad people don't take advantage of We Love Reading? In other words, how do we prevent someone from becoming a We Love Reading ambassador who doesn't have good intentions toward the community? While we have never received reports of malicious intent to date, it is crucial to guard against such threats. The most important measure to prevent this kind of manipulation is to insist on building strong connections between the ambassador and local parents from the very beginning. Community members should know every We Love Reading ambassador and understand what the program aims to accomplish and why.

On a related note, ambassadors have to ensure that the space they use for their library is safe and familiar. The location of the library can really be anywhere where all the parties involved—the ambassador, the children, and local families—feel comfortable and at ease. It could be an already existing library, a school, a home, a house of worship, or a park. What matters is that everyone participating feels welcomed and at ease where the children gather for readings. In Jordan, one We Love Reading ambassador conducted her reading sessions in the stairwell of an apartment building! But the sessions were still effective because the community felt safe and content there.

Likewise, there is no single or most effective method for local outreach. Some ambassadors distribute flyers and make announcements after evening prayers, others rely on word of mouth or making individual phone calls. The best approach to outreach will depend on the distinct features of every neighborhood.

As an organization, We Love Reading provides training in reading aloud, and helps find, commission, and supply culturally sensitive, age-appropriate reading material.

However, we believe that development of local libraries must occur at a pace set by ambassadors themselves. As ambassadors hosts their first sessions and begins to develop a stable routine, they learn which methods work for them and which do not. At the same time, we offer a support system,

based both in person and through online applications, for the ambassador to track their progress and communicate with other ambassadors about their common work. An online application called the Global Ambassadors Network gives We Love Reading ambassadors a means of communication to track their performance; share insights; and receive important feedback, reports, and information. Fundamentally, the experience of launching a community library has to rely on the agency of local ambassadors. They participate in We Love Reading because it benefits them, not the other way around.

Often, observers are surprised by the festive and lighthearted atmosphere of We Love Reading Libraries. It is crucial not to replicate the often-pressurized environment of school, especially at this young age, in order to foster the love of reading that we are after. When reading circles take on a feeling of fun and excitement, space opens up for children to learn in non-traditional ways, and the lessons of the stories being read aloud become more intuitive to the listener.

The ambassador then encourages each child to take a book home and find that same enjoyment on their own and with their family. This seems like such a simple act, but it's critical to the success of local libraries. When the children take books home with them, the passion they feel for books inside the We Love Reading Library is transmitted to dozens of individual households throughout the neighborhood.

We have received hundreds of reports of children who take part in We Love Reading coming home and demanding to be read to by their parents and reading aloud to siblings and friends. The more the child takes the initiative in this way, the more successful the program becomes. The child must lead the effort. We have flipped the script on traditional approaches to reading aloud. The child is at the center, rather than the parent or teacher.

Once these reading sessions have become regular, routine events; once dozens of children see these spaces as an expected, and stimulating part of their normal lives; and once a collection of books has been built, the process will gradually culminate in the formation of a library. The library need not be a designated building used exclusively as a library space, though in many cases, ambassadors have taken the initiative to construct or organize libraries in the traditional sense. But as long as the community has a location where these readings can happen, and where their books can be safely kept and distributed, then the core social functions of the library will be fulfilled. From our perspective, that's what really matters.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STUDYING WE LOVE READING'S IMPACT

*We Love Reading developed organically kind of like natural evolution,
and therefore it has impacted people of all walks of life.
Today they call this human-centered design.*

–Rana Dajani



Over the course of our work thus far, we've had the opportunity to begin observing the effects of the We Love Reading model on children who participate in local libraries.

Beyond the regular evaluations that are typical of most educational and social programs, We Love Reading insists on constant and rigorous academic research of its own activities. Standard monitoring practices have never been satisfying to us, because these do not capture the whole impact on the adults and children involved in the program. We have always sought to go deeper and to better understand how We Love Reading works and how it can be improved.

We Love Reading has a holistic impact on the individual that cannot be measured using traditional methodologies. It's kind of like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. In order to really grasp the outcomes of We Love Reading, we need to change the tools we use to make observations. We believe that the best way to do this is by using deeper, qualitative analyses of the stories and responses of We Love Reading participants.

Given that the program is run by volunteers, we cannot impose monitoring and data collection on our ambassadors. Doing so could ruin the delicate balance of empowerment, agency, and ownership that we build with We Love Reading ambassadors. That poses a problem, however, because we rely on close study of our work to make progress. The solution we developed is to support constant scientific research into We Love Reading, research that takes a wider and more rigorous scope than orthodox program evaluations.

We Love Reading has a threefold impact: on the child, the adult, and the community. Here, we assess the impact on the child.

A growing body of empirical studies of this project reinforces what many scholars have long theorized about reading aloud in a social context: it nourishes empathy, intellectual curiosity, and a sense of civic responsibility. Research into the outcomes of We Love Reading is ongoing at many universities in the Middle East, the United States, and Europe.

In 2018, UNICEF funded an evaluation of We Love Reading's work in Jordan conducted by Qatari and Jordanian scholars that helped us measure the impact we've made in the country thus far. Using our own field data, researchers established that we had distributed over 300,000 books and held nearly 150,000 reading sessions since the program began in 2006.²⁷

The same study reported the results of a survey of families whose children had taken part in a We Love Reading Library. The results revealed a significant change in attitudes and practices toward reading. They showed an increase of 34% in the reading time of the children, with the greatest increases made by children ages 4-5, after attending a We Love Reading Library for several sessions.²⁸ The evaluation also demonstrated an increase in the number of times children asked to read aloud in the home, and the number of books kept in the family's personal library.

A Brown University study tracked the results of the program at a public school in the small Jordanian city of Salt.²⁹ Led by Dima Amso, director of Brown's Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory, the inquiry followed a group of children ages six through eight over a period of three months, as their teachers implemented the We Love Reading model in the

27 UNICEF, Evaluation of the We Love Reading Programme in Jordan, 2018.

28 Ibid.

29 Dajani, Al Sager, Placido, & Amso, 2019, Proceedings of MIT LINC Conference

classroom.

The assessment focused on a series of measures of both emotional regulation and executive functions (terms which refer to a wide range of practical, cognitive, and empathetic control-processes in the brain), taken before and after the six-month period of the study.

Parents played an important role in this research, using a Child Behavior Checklist tool to gauge levels of anxiety and depression in the children. Those with children who exhibited higher than average measures of internalizing symptoms, like depression and anxiety, voluntarily read aloud in the home in addition to the intervention at school. According to the parents' responses, the number of children who viewed reading as a hobby increased significantly during the period of Amso's study. The results revealed a significant improvement in the children's executive functions after the duration of the We Love Reading initiative. Many parents also noted decreases in the children's anxiety and asocial behavior. Spontaneous changes in reading patterns at home were associated with these improvements.³⁰

A further research project conducted by University of Chicago scholars Jean Decety and Jason Cowell analyzed the impact of reading aloud texts about human emotions on the generosity and empathy of children.³¹ The analysis showed a definite increase in levels of prosocial behavior. Interestingly, the specific form of empathy which was heightened through reading aloud was empathetic concern for others. Psychologists distinguish between empathetic concern and standard emotional empathy: the latter entails feeling or identifying with the emotions of others, whereas empathetic concern is defined by the desire to help and ensure the wellbeing of others.

This is significant because it points to one of the most underappreciated benefits of reading, and particularly reading aloud, which is the potential that reading holds for developing a child's social and emotional maturity. The care and concern that can be fostered through collective practices of reading aloud also extends to broader and larger objects, like the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, and the environment.

In 2013, researchers investigated the impact of We Love Reading on environmental consciousness with two scientists from Qatar University, Randa Ali Mahasneh and Michael H. Romanowski, for a study in the *Journal of Environmental Education*.³² Using children's books commissioned by We Love Reading, our ambassadors organized libraries in Amman, Jordan which focused on the theme of the environment. As people across the world have become increasingly aware, modern societies are not designed to instill values of tending to and identifying with the environment. What our study demonstrated is that reading stories about the environment aloud to children is one simple, but effective way to counteract this dominant culture.

Children who took part in these reading circles displayed dramatically transformed ideas

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Reading about people's feelings increases empathetic concern and generosity in children," Research and Studies, We Love Reading, accessed December 25, 2018, <https://d3gxp3iknbs7bs.cloudfront.net/attachments/55b6f77d-27d8-43b6-aad8-63c2f75ae7a6.pdf>.

³² Randa Ali Mahasneh, Michael H. Romanowski, and Rana Dajani, "Reading Social Stories in the Community: A Promising Intervention for Promoting Children's Environmental Knowledge and Behavior in Jordan," *Journal of Environmental Education* 48, no. 5 (June 2017): 334-346, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00958964.2017.1319789>.

about ecological responsibility. And not just ideas. We found that in several cases, children began applying their new environmental views by engaging in simple acts like removing litter from their local streets. One of our ambassadors, an elderly cancer patient and grandmother named Nabeel, was recognized by the Municipality of Amman for the impact she made in transforming her neighborhood.

In 2014, Yale University undergraduate researcher Sarah Yazji conducted a detailed study under the supervision of Professor Catherine Panter-Brick of We Love Reading Libraries in the Zaatari Refugee Camp, the world's largest camp for Syrian refugees. Yazji used a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to gauge the effect of We Love Reading sessions on the psychological wellbeing of 82 children ages 2-17.³³

The SDQ quantifies an individual's state of health on a scale of 1-10 along five different axes: emotional distress, behavioral conduct problems, hyperactivity, difficulty getting along with others, and kind or helpful behavior. At the outset, the children participating in the study exhibited higher than average of very high levels in the four negative categories, and below average levels in the fifth, positive column. This was not surprising given the extreme hardship the children had faced living through war and exile.

The children's SDQ results after the assessment changed quite dramatically. Measures for emotional distress dropped from 4.6 to 2.7; those for conduct problems decreased from 4.1 to 1.9; hyperactivity levels declined from 5.0 to 2.8; difficulty getting along with others fell from 5.1 to 3.9; and kind or helpful behavior rose from 5.0 to 7.1.³⁴ These results placed the participating refugee children in a measurement categories not far from global averages, despite their fraught material and social conditions. It's quite possible that the empathetic and stimulating experience of We Love Reading sessions had a greater impact for refugee children because of the acutely distressing lived reality of their daily routines.

There are many ongoing research projects that continue to deepen our understanding of the effects of We Love Reading. Dr. Isabelle Mareschal, a senior lecturer in psychology at Queen Mary University of London, is exploring the impact of We Love Reading on refugee children in Jordan traumatized by the experiences of war and displacement. Mareschal is analyzing how children whose visual perception has been damaged by the effects of trauma respond to We Love Reading, and what impact We Love Reading libraries has on reducing this damage. Antje Von Suchodeletz, Professor of Psychology at New York University–Abu Dhabi, is studying the way that reading aloud transforms the interactions between parents and children. The parent-child relationship is, of course, one of the most impactful and central human connections in our world. Our understanding of how reading aloud can shape and re-shape that relationship has to be explored in greater depth.

In 2017, USAID sponsored an extensive independent evaluation of We Love Reading by the socio-economic consulting firm Integrated, which once again validated the model the We Love Reading program has developed and implemented on an ever-expanding scale. The authors surveyed hundreds of We Love Reading ambassadors, and found that the program achieved a 92% success rate in training volunteers to organize their own We Love Reading

33 Sarah Yazji, "Final Report: The Impact of the We Love Reading Pilot Program on the Psychosocial Health of Participating Children in Zaatari Refugee Camp," (New Haven: Yale University, 2014).

34 Ibid.

Libraries.³⁵ In addition, 75% of the We Love Reading ambassadors surveyed indicated that they had noticed marked changes in behavioral patterns of the children attending their reading sessions, changes including “decreased shyness and fear” and “patience.”³⁶ Parents told the researchers that the most impactful change in their children’s behavior through the program was their newfound love of reading. “Children are really interacting with the story, getting the meaning from the story and delving into stories and asking for more,” reported one mother from the city of Irbid.³⁷

The possible rewards of building a culture of collective reading aloud are immense. The relatively small number of studies which have observed We Love Reading reveal a clear connection between reading aloud and children’s social and emotional fulfillment. The outcomes we experienced with our study of environmental education, for example, can conceivably be replicated in any number of other spheres, like healthcare and human rights.

The belief in the inner potential of this work motivates our desire to expand the We Love Reading to as many communities as possible, and to support kindred projects globally.

35 USAID, Evaluation: Impact Assessment of We Love Reading, February 2017, 21.

36 Ibid., 21.

37 Ibid., 21.

PART TWO: OUR EXPERIENCE

Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing.

—Muhammad Ali

CHAPTER EIGHT

WE LOVE READING: A SHORT HISTORY

The people crazy enough to believe they can change the world are the ones who do.

–Steve Jobs

We Love Reading is a family, a tribe, a way of life.

–Rana Dajani

Do not belittle any good deed.

–The Prophet Muhammad



Today, We Love Reading is one of the world's leading international programs in the fields of childhood development, reading ability, and community leadership. According to our latest surveys, we currently have approximately 4,000 We Love Reading ambassadors across 55 countries who reach around 400,000 children. But things weren't always this way. When We Love Reading began, we had no aspirations of becoming a large-scale organization. We Love Reading evolved, both gradually and in leaps, from a simple neighborhood initiative into a global movement.

The story begins with a small library I organized myself in the Tabarbour neighborhood of northern Amman. As researchers Melodena Stephens Balakrishnan and Sadaf Khurshid have written in their article on the origins of We Love Reading, the motivation behind the program was simply to provide a space where my own children and the children of my community could discover and sustain the love of reading.³⁸

Raising my children in Amman, I longed for a culture of reading in the community which I felt was sorely lacking. So I decided to do something about it. I thought about how I could establish a reading circle in my neighborhood that would become part of the local social fabric. There was certainly no lack of desire or interest. But the first challenge was to find a space comfortable and familiar enough to serve as a community library. I settled on our community mosque, which was known to virtually the entire neighborhood and considered a safe and natural environment. My husband spoke with the Imam, and he was more than happy to allow us to use the space for a bi-weekly reading circle.

The imam made an announcement at the Friday prayer about the first reading session the next morning, and the response was immediate. That Saturday, twenty-five children attended our first reading circle. Initially, they had to be dragged to the mosque by their parents. But as I had suspected, the next time the kids came on their own accord. The library was a great success. I tried to animate every story as best I could, and guide the children through every word.

From the outset, I devised a two-part model that informs We Love Reading's strategy to this day. First, I read aloud to the kids in the mosque and attempted to win their hearts to every story. Second, I made sure that the children brought a book back home with them to read on their own and with their parents. With both of these elements at play, each child was more likely to develop a deep and enduring love of reading.

Of course, at the time this was an entirely unofficial and self-organized initiative. I relied on donations and discounts from local families and book-sellers to create and sustain a collection of books that could be kept in the mosque and loaned out to the children. But from 2006 to 2008, we managed to sustain a thriving community library. We called our reading circle, "I read."

Gradually, the success of this small initiative and the eagerness of the children began to make me think about the potential for something larger. I knew that the enthusiasm for reading existed beyond my corner of Amman, and I started to wonder what was possible. I spoke with friends and co-workers about the idea of turning "I read" into a program. But few

38 Melodena Stephens Balakrishnan and Sadaf Khurshid, "We Love Reading: Reading for Pleasure," in *Social Entrepreneurs, Volume 5: Actions and Insights—Middle East North Africa* (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2016), 411-428.

people took the notion seriously.

I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. I decided to go for it. My children and relatives helped me design a logo and a website in my living room. "I read" turned into "We Love Reading." I applied for the Synergos Arab World Innovation Award to find funding to lift the project off the ground.

My proposition was fairly simple: reading aloud to children is an effective way to foster the love of reading and transform the lives of young people. In the process, the lives of adults and entire communities could be transformed, too. All that was needed was to take the initiative, to train willing community members to become ambassadors, and to create, as I put it at the time, "a library in every neighborhood." I had already shown that this model could work in Tabarbour. Now I wanted to show that it could take off more broadly.

In early 2009, I won a grant from Synergos for \$34,000 to launch my initiative. I got right to work, hiring a small staff to join me in training our first ambassadors, acquiring appropriate literature, and organizing libraries in Amman and across Jordan. The results were quick. In 2009 alone, we established dozens of We Love Reading Libraries. Many local residents were excited about taking our training and becoming ambassadors. In the communities where We Love Reading first spread, certainly there were challenges: some parents were suspicious of a new initiative run by volunteers taking root in the neighborhood. Surely there must have been a catch or a hidden agenda behind our work? But as local families realized our simple intentions, and children came away from their first sessions excited about reading, new libraries began to crop up in dozens of neighborhoods.

By 2010, I knew that We Love Reading could become a sustainable and large-scale project. I registered We Love Reading in my name as a trademark. My team and I then created the organization Taghyeer—Arabic for "change"—as a nonprofit organization to coordinate We Love Reading's many components and activities. We continued to expand. Dozens and then hundreds of ambassadors trained with us and went into their communities to establish their own libraries. We gave them a method to read aloud, gain the trust of local families, and run libraries of their own. And we helped them procure the literature they needed. In the process, we witnessed how a new generation of young people, predominantly young women, positioned themselves as leaders in their communities, in most cases for the first time.

The demand for our fledgling program was immense. In 2010, we won membership to the Clinton Global Initiative. In the same year, We Love Reading began to cross borders and become an international phenomenon. The Mother Child Education Foundation in Turkey implemented We Love Reading as part of their campaign against illiteracy in the least developed parts of the country.

In 2011, We Love Reading spread to Germany, Thailand, and Azerbaijan, all due to the initiative of individual ambassadors. In Germany, one Arab grandmother who had learned about our program took our training and implemented We Love Reading within the local immigrant community. In Thailand, a retired nurse organized a library with the collaboration of her children after reading about our work and feeling inspired to take action. In Azerbaijan, a student I had met at a conference in Dubai on women in global leadership started her own library based on the We Love Reading model.

In every case, an individual took inspiration from the We Love Reading model and chose to apply it and take ownership over it in their own context. That is how the program spread first to a handful, and then to dozens of other countries.

During the same year, We Love Reading took the important step of commissioning its own Arabic-language children's books. Arab writers do not receive the institutional support they need to develop and disseminate their work. And there is a lack of children's literature with the kind of socially progressive and positive messages which we wanted to convey through our We Love Reading Libraries.

We applied for further grants to play our own part in remedying this situation, winning prizes to create a series of books on themes of environmentalism, disability, refugee rights, gender justice and non-violence, and social cohesion. We Love Reading curated writing workshops for local authors, and then sponsored competitions to generate the best stories possible. To date, we have been able to self-publish 32 books by 15 young Arab authors from Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. This has also allowed We Love Reading to give our reading ambassadors a starting kit of literature commissioned and printed by the organization itself, with progressive, forward-thinking content.

We Love Reading continued to evolve and transform in ways I could not have imagined. In 2012, indigenous activists in Mexico built reading circles inspired by our program to help preserve knowledge of their native language among children. In Uganda, ambassadors began a We Love Reading initiative using Luganda-language literature to expose children to the wonders of reading.

By 2014, We Love Reading had spread to 20 countries. That year, our organization won the prestigious World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) award and the King Hussein Medal of Honor, while also being designated a UNESCO Effective Literacy Program. Most importantly, in 2014 We Love Reading took another crucial step by establishing libraries in refugee camps in Jordan. At the Zaatari, Azraq, and Emirati-Jordanian camps, we trained over 400 ambassadors within the Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities who organized libraries that reached thousands of children. Refugees themselves took the initiative and made We Love Reading their own project. As Corey Binns wrote in her field report for The Stanford Social Innovation Review, refugees at Zaatari felt empowered by the program. As one camp resident remarked of We Love Reading, "it shows me that I'm not simply an idle refugee waiting for help."³⁹

In 2015, we won both the Stars Award and IDEO Award in Refugee Education. Two years later, in 2016, we partnered with the United Nations and Plan International to establish We Love Reading within the South Sudanese refugee community at the sprawling Kule Refugee Camp in Gambella, Ethiopia. A team led by refugees trained 35 new We Love Reading ambassadors who went on to establish We Love Reading libraries across the Kule Camp, reading to children in Nuer and English.

By that year, we had reached 33 countries across the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Scholars from Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, and Qatar University were producing studies about the impact of We Love Reading on child development.

39 Corey Binns, "We Love Reading Brings Imaginative Reading Circles to Children Across the Middle East and around the World," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Fall 2017).

In 2017, we began to develop an application that allows We Love Reading ambassadors across the world to communicate with one another and to monitor their progress in establishing local libraries. With this tool, we hope to lend more coherence to the movement and to further explore its global character.

During the same year, I was awarded the prestigious UNESCO International Literacy Prize. I was especially moved to be awarded this prize because of my passion for promoting indigenous languages and literature. The UNESCO Literacy Prize is awarded to two individuals or organizations each year. The prize has its origins in the efforts of the South Korean monarch Sejong the Great, who sought to develop his country's own literary tradition by creating a distinctly Korean alphabet, Hangeul. Continuing the legacy, today the prize is dedicated to "the development and use of mother-tongue literacy education and training."

In 2018, the We Love Reading organization received the Oxford World Literacy Award, and I was recognized with the Klaus Jacobs Award for Social Entrepreneurship, as well as the Ashoka "Everyone a Changemaker" fellowship the following year.

Of course, to me this was all dizzying. From a small neighborhood initiative to read aloud to children, We Love Reading had set off a process of organizing and community-building that had now evolved into an international phenomenon. Ultimately, it was the passion and creativity of each and every individual who had taken up We Love Reading in their communities that drove this expansion.

This point is borne out by the example of Vietnam. Beginning in 2017, Vietnamese educators and scholars built an entire We Love Reading operation of their own, training hundreds of ambassadors and attempting to lay the basis for a long-term project on a mass scale. They now have their own public profile within Vietnamese civil society and show no signs of slowing down.

We Love Reading has blossomed into a global movement, but we have only seen the beginning of what this movement can accomplish. We hope to bring the We Love Reading model to many more countries across the world, and to touch the lives of millions of children.

CHAPTER NINE

WE LOVE READING AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

We Love Reading ambassadors become leaders in their community, discovering their voices both literally and figuratively through their ownership and agency over the program.

–Rana Dajani

We Love Reading is a basic framework founded on shared, universal human values that allow it to scale all over the world while at the same time being flexible and adaptable to any culture or context.

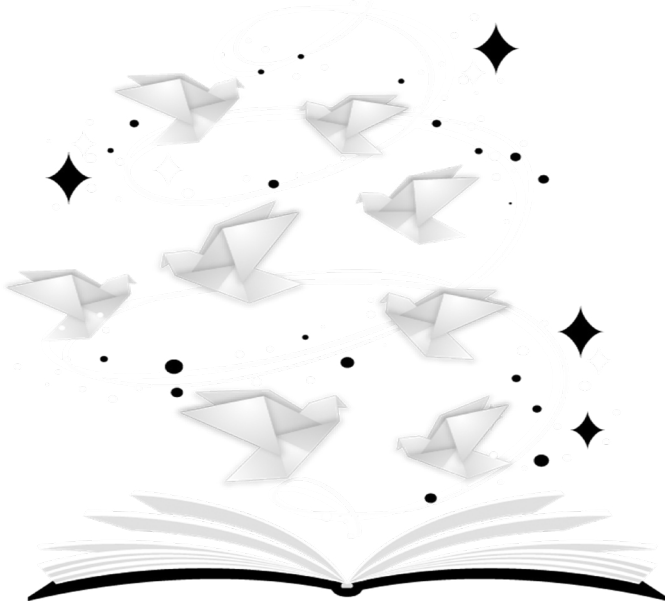
–Rana Dajani

Everyone is a guardian.

–Prophet Muhammad

When I read to the kids, I feel like I am the child, not them!

–Shawq Alshahadat, We Love Reading ambassador



As our program has expanded to dozens of countries across the world, the foundation of this success has been the self-initiative of We Love Reading ambassadors. The work that we do would not be possible without the dedication of thousands of grassroots organizers and volunteers, who identify with the vision we all share and are committed to realizing it in practice.

The process of establishing We Love Reading libraries creates a synergy between readers and listeners, in which both are transformed. The hope of We Love Reading is that the children who participate in local libraries become avid readers themselves, and develop their confidence and consciousness to become agents of change. But equally as important is the impact of this initiative on We Love Reading ambassadors themselves.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of attending the World Innovation Summit in Education (WISE) in Qatar. There I met Arne Carlsen, then the Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, and we spoke about the work of We Love Reading. I began, as I tend to do, by explaining the impact of the program on children, until something dawned on Carlsen: “It sounds like it’s empowering adults!” he told me. I had already understood this on some level, but Carlsen’s comment helped me grasp the point more fully.

As we have experienced first-hand, there are thousands of working and ordinary people of all backgrounds who are motivated to bring a culture of reading into their communities. When an individual who feels this commitment takes the initiative to found a library of their own, a dynamic process begins which opens up new opportunities for leadership, empowerment, and self-realization. I have been through this process myself as a leader of reading circles in Jordan, and countless others have attested to the same fact.

Leading a We Love Reading Library, as we have described, requires constructing positive and trusting relationships with local families, children, and—in many cases—organizations and institutions (schools, houses of worship, youth centers, and others). We Love Reading ambassadors have to find ways to command the attention and confidence of the children, and to establish and maintain their budding libraries.

These are challenging tasks, but they are also intuitive. And, crucially, there are always potential organizers in every community waiting for opportunities like these to assert themselves socially. Going through these steps allows We Love Reading ambassadors to explore and develop their leadership capacities, and to take on new roles in their own cities, towns, and villages.

The tools and techniques that We Love Reading ambassadors develop range from communication methods, team management, creative problem-solving, and public speaking.

The experience of this kind of self-empowerment is particularly impactful for women and girls, who throughout the world tend to be shut out of positions of leadership. The same can be said for members of many other especially oppressed or marginalized groups. But in reality, there are immense benefits to this work for everyone who chooses to become a We Love Reading ambassador in their community, no matter their age, gender, race, or ethnicity.

In the long term, we aim to contribute to the growth of a new generation of confident and capable grassroots leaders who will go on to independently advocate for the interests of their communities. By putting women at the center of our work, we are advancing a global paradigm

shift that redefines the social roles of women toward ownership, respect, and independence. In the context of a rapidly changing, international economy, this shift has never been more urgent.

Colleagues have often asked me about the concept of volunteerism and its place in social initiatives like We Love Reading. It's important to note that our concept of volunteering is different from the typical understanding of the term. Ordinarily, an individual volunteers for an organization. But our purpose is to enable and support individuals to volunteer for themselves and their community.

The fact that We Love Reading is based on a volunteer model means that our ambassadors retain their freedom of choice. From the moment they begin their training with us, no ambassador has any obligations toward the program and can leave at any time. This freedom helps create relationships of trust and collaboration within the We Love Reading organization. In one case, a We Love Reading trainee received their certificate and seed library in the mail, but decided they no longer had the time to organize read-aloud sessions. Despite the fact that they had very little money to their name, they shipped all of the books back to the We Love Reading office at their own expense. This is the kind of peer-to-peer horizontal exchange we are trying to build through our program.

We shift the focus from the organization to the individual and the community that they inhabit. We Love Reading ambassadors find and connect with us if we can be of use to them, their neighbors, and their loved ones. That is why, half a decade or more after we train We Love Reading ambassadors, they continue to hold reading sessions in their neighborhoods.

We Love Reading deploys a community-centered model. We want to ensure that all of our ambassadors understand why they are performing this service and how it benefits their communities. It's that kind of social understanding that generates the most self-motivated and innovative projects.

In every aspect of its work, We Love Reading seeks to harness modern technology in a way that gives ambassadors more agency and insight. In We Love Reading Libraries, the connections between the ambassador, the book, and the children must be direct and unmediated by digital devices. That human-to-human interaction is essential for our survival as a species of social animals. But we have harnessed technology in an effort to bring all of our ambassadors together in one digital platform, the Global Ambassadors Network. This virtual community encourages all ambassadors to get to know one another, and it builds We Love Reading's capacity to collect data, share best practices, and document our progress. "I can talk to a We Love Reading ambassador in Argentina!" exclaimed one ambassador in Jordan, Asma, as she described the network. The network provides every ambassador with information and feedback to assist in performance improvement, sustainability, monitoring, and evaluation.

Our program has spread around the world because it is based on people's own agency. It is successful in penetrating different geographies and cultures because it taps into that universal human feeling: "I can," the feeling of empowerment, confidence, and capacity that it is latent in all of us, which we can all access when placed in the right position. This is what has allowed our extremely ambitious program, essentially a volunteer-driven project to spread the love of reading in communities, to flourish. As University of Massachusetts Professor Rajini Srikanth put it recently when describing We Love Reading, "what could have been seen as an

outrageously impractical idea, is now a highly influential reading program for young children in all types of communities—refugee, immigrant, impoverished, urban—in many parts of the world.”⁴⁰

I view We Love Reading’s work as part of an overall philosophy of social entrepreneurship. Essentially, this worldview states that human beings are already analysts and problem-solvers in their own right, and that this inner potential can be harnessed to confront the most pressing challenges of our time. We shouldn’t wait for states and international actors to remedy our problems for us. We have entrepreneurial capacities to understand and overcome the problems we care most about.

The reason We Love Reading has grown exponentially over the last half decade is because, fundamentally, it is a social movement. British author Charles Leadbeater described our work as constitutive of a social movement in his book, *Innovation in Education: Lessons from Pioneers around the World*. Like any other dynamic movement, Leadbeater insists, We Love Reading is carried by a collective of activists at the grassroots level, whose members share a set of common values and aspirations.

Once a movement collective begins to grow and takes on a life of its own, it acquires a newfound social potential beyond what its first participants could have envisioned. This has certainly been borne out in the relatively short time span that We Love Reading has been operating. Every month, our team learns of further stories and testimonies of the impact that ambassadors who join us are having both on their communities and themselves.

In Jordan, where we began, libraries have cropped up in neighborhoods across the country, each with their own fascinating narrative. The example of one elderly ambassador, Nabeela—who received praise from the Municipality of Amman—was mentioned in the previous chapter. Now recovered, Nabeela was a cancer patient when she found We Love Reading, who—despite little formal education or prior activist experience—helped reshape her community. When she learned about We Love Reading, she seized upon the opportunity and dedicated herself to starting a local library. Nabeela would practice reading aloud at home to her husband, who gave her feedback on her delivery. After first trying to work out of her local mosque, she eventually settled on reading to children in her own home. Simply by talking with her neighbors about her project, she built a reading circle of up to forty children.

She was so popular with the children that local parents urged her to read in other neighborhoods, as well, even in other towns. Nabeela began her own library collection, and opened up her bedroom for children to browse and borrow books. The library turned into a hub of conversation and reflection within the community. Nabeela’s neighbors would visit and discuss ideas and strategies regarding various problems in their area, especially environmental concerns. They put forward a proposal to begin making organic compost to sell and recycle locally. What began as a simple initiative to read aloud to children catalyzed a wider set of changes brought about by community members themselves.

In Aqaba, an ancient Jordanian port city by the Red Sea, I met a woman who asked if We Love Reading could build a library for community use. I explained to her that we didn’t

40 Rajini Srikanth, “Refugee Camps and the (Educational) Rights of the Child,” in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Rights: History, Politics, Practice*, ed. Rajini Srikanth and Elora Halim Chowdhury (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

organize libraries ourselves, but that if she wanted to create one she could volunteer with our organization and do so herself. She took the initiative, completed our training, and began holding reading circles out of a local mosque. Before long, her library had outgrown the space. A neighborhood contractor offered his services to build a stand-alone library, and dozens of residents came together to purchase supplies for the project. What began as a concept in one local woman's mind quickly turned into an initiative of the whole community, and today the library still stands as a testament to their collective effort.

Another elderly woman, Najwa from northern Jordan felt excited to attend our training session but admitted with us that she did not know how to read. We felt badly and wanted to help her in any way we could, but there was no way for her to begin the training without that skill. Several months later, we were stunned to learn that Najwa had, at the age of 70, felt so motivated to continue her training that she enrolled in a literacy course and learned how to read. She returned to the We Love Reading training, completed the course and began her own library. Her story is one of the most inspiring examples of self-transformation that we've witnessed during our work. One of We Love Reading's most significant accomplishments is to create space for elderly citizens to become ambassadors and assert themselves as continuing, active agents in their communities.

In the Jordanian capital, Amman, a young woman named Faten teamed up with her sister to take the We Love Reading training and start their own library after they found a flyer at a neighborhood kindergarten where they worked as volunteers. They were already passionate readers, and knew how to engage with children. They started a library with the books provided by We Love Reading, and held their first read aloud sessions in the Syrian children's club at the kindergarten.

Faten described the results in a contribution to one of our magazines in 2017:

We read every Thursday. The kids were thrilled and excited about the Thursdays. During summer vacation we could not read at the kindergarten, so we opened a library inside our building. We invited the children of the building and the children of the neighborhood. What was really amazing about these reading sessions is that it joined the Jordanian and Syrian kids in one activity together. They now think of their similarities instead of thinking of the differences! Now I have been reading for more than a year and what kept me reading is the hope of building a better future with a conscious generation who loves to read.⁴¹

We Love Reading gave Faten and her sister the resources and impetus they needed to harness their talent and motivation to help children. And in the course of their work they overcame the stigma and division that affects the Syrian refugee and immigrant population.

In Aljoun, in the country's North, a mother of three deaf daughters named Hanan Erakat used We Love Reading as a way to bolster her children's confidence to communicate with others. Hanan's youngest daughter has the ability to speak but is normally too nervous to

41 We Love Reading, *Lifelong Reading: Stories of Lifelong Reading from WLR Ambassadors in Jordan*, 2017, http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/Issue3_2017_Lifelong_Reading.pdf

communicate except through sign language. Hanan set up a We Love Reading library where she read stories aloud and made sure her daughters could follow along visually. She saw how the experience boosted her youngest daughter's confidence:

After a few sessions, I noticed how my youngest kid had changed. She stopped using sign language to communicate with everyone, and no longer refused to talk. She expresses herself clearly and sometimes creates her own stories.

Also in Aljoun, an eighteen-year-old named Rama started a library at the Church of Saint George. In the city of Ma'an in southern Jordan, the principle of a Qur'an center took our training course and opened her doors to form a new library, drawing over 50 children. In Karak, Ahmad, a retiree, became a We Love Reading ambassador along with some of his family members, and started a library out of his living room. And in Jerash, an ambassador named Mariam began a local library, where she helped her son who suffers from poor hearing overcome his insecurities by reading stories celebrating difference and diversity.

Stories like these dot the map of Jordan, and have long spread to other countries and regions since We Love Reading began to take on the character of a movement.

A 22-year-old ambassador from Madaba explained to us how she convinced many of her friends and peers to start their own local libraries through social media and word of mouth. After she started as an ambassador in her neighborhood mosque, the series of interactions she initiated reached across the western border into Palestine, where her friends organized libraries of their own.

Even under conditions of occupation and blockade, Nadia Madhoun started a We Love Reading library in Gaza, Palestine, where she found an audience of children eager to participate.

In 2016, our office in Amman received a letter from Omar, an activist based in Algeria who expressed interest in implementing We Love Reading through his own organization. We gave Omar a We Love Reading training via Skype, and he went right to work. He helped build a network of reading circles in Algeria which continues operating to this day.

Raoudha Mahjoub is a school teacher in Tunisia who is known for her dedication to her students and the energy she devotes to her classroom, despite struggling for the last thirty years with Parkinson's disease. She learned about We Love Reading through her sister, and immediately knew that she had to get involved. Raoudha used her library both to instill a love of reading in the children, and also to keep traditional Tunisian customs and culture alive in her community. "I always try to inspire my pupils," Raoudha, and "and I encourage them to read as much as they can to improve their imagination." Raoudha holds two reading sessions a week, and a third to coordinate the exchange and lending of books.⁴²

One of the most important target audiences for We Love Reading is people with disabilities. Far from being "burdens to society," people with disabilities make vital and necessary contributions to our world every day, and many are passionate about spreading the love of reading in their communities.

42 We Love Reading, We Love Reading All over the World, November, 2015, [http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/3rd%20issue%2C%202015%20\(En%20WLR%20around%20the%20world\).pdf](http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/3rd%20issue%2C%202015%20(En%20WLR%20around%20the%20world).pdf)

One We Love Reading ambassador, Abdullah Humaidan, has been an avid reader and promoter of reading since soon after he was shot in the spine and lost his ability to walk. After reading a book about disability, Abdullah decided he had to become a librarian and a teacher. He sought to instill the love of reading in his students as much as possible. Abdullah found out about We Love Reading in a local newspaper, and immediately reached out to hear about our model. Since then, he has been implementing We Love Reading in his own school library.

Another We Love Reading ambassador in Jordan has cerebral palsy, and was brought to our training by his mother and uncle to see if the program was right for him. He quickly embraced the idea of establishing library in his community, and became an ambassador, even training his siblings and relatives, as well.

A visually impaired We Love Reading ambassador first came to our training with his wife and asked about how he could contribute to the program. He and his wife completed the training and experimented with different methods to collaborate in creating a library in their neighborhood. Our team responded confidently and supportively, and the couple went on to establish a successful library of their own.

All of these examples and many more show that people with disabilities must be treated not as victims or recipients of help, but as equal agents and decision-makers in humanitarian and educational projects like We Love Reading. This is a core part of what it means to us to conceive of We Love Reading as a social movement.

Our project often finds ambassadors who have themselves been thinking about implementing similar strategies where they live and work. In certain respects, We Love Reading has provided a common organization and framework for people who already believe in the spirit of this project to join forces together and carry it out.

This was certainly the case with Mohammed Amin Hassen, an ambassador based in Adama, Ethiopia who had attempted to launch a likeminded initiative before finding We Love Reading. Our program helped give Mohammed Amin the resources, community, and strategies to realize his vision. Because of his leadership, five local libraries were opened in rural areas of Ethiopia. It has been challenging at times to supply these libraries with a steady stream of books. But there is a widespread desire for the libraries to continue and expand. As Mohammed Amin explains, “the most important aspect of the initiative is the joy and craving from children to attend and listen to storytellers and the questions and comments they give after each session. It is an honor to provide inspiration for the children.”⁴³

We Love Reading has also been implemented in rural Iran. Children’s book publisher Farzaneh Shahrtash and activist Esmaeel Azari began implementing the We Love Reading model in southwestern Iran after establishing contact with our organization through a mutual acquaintance. Shartash and Azari lamented the lack of opportunities for children in the countryside to read aloud, and decided to try establish a We Love Reading library. As in so many other cases, they found that local children were immensely enthusiastic about literature. Today they continue to develop We Love Reading through their library in the small city of Dehdasht in the same region.

In May 2018, a group of students from the University of Pennsylvania came to visit our

43 Ibid.

program during a trip abroad in Jordan. One student, Andreas—from Skopje, Macedonia—drew such inspiration that he decided he had to try to realize the same project in his native country. He described how his mother had read aloud to him as a child, and how formative the experience had been in his personal development. Andreas wrote a grant application to the University of Pennsylvania, and today he’s attempting to lay the basis for building a network of libraries in Macedonia.

Just a month earlier, in April 2018, I gave a guest lecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After the lecture I took part in an interfaith dialogue about communication, during which an African American woman named Dawn introduced herself to me and asked if I was indeed the founder of We Love Reading. I told her I was, and she explained to me that she had learned about We Love Reading two years earlier, and had implemented the same model in her nearby church. I was so surprised and overjoyed to hear this news. I felt like I was meeting a celebrity. Dawn made me wonder how many other We Love Reading Libraries exist out there that I have never heard about. That was one of the moments in which the character of We Love Reading as a movement, carried by thousands of individuals taking their own initiative, crystalized most clearly in my mind.

A second such moment came during my visit to We Love Reading Libraries in Uganda. We Love Reading in Uganda began when I met Matovu Abdallah Twaha, a Ugandan social activist, at an international forum in Malaysia in 2012, where we quickly realized our many shared perspectives on reading and literacy. Matovu connected with the prolific Luganda author, poet, and playwright Walabyeki Magoba and set out to establish We Love Reading Libraries in underserved communities. The initiative started in Matovu’s hometown, Mirembe, a village in the Bukomansimbi District of Central Uganda. Under the direction of Amina Nannono, Matovu’s sister, a library has since flourished and attracted a regular, excited audience of around thirty children.

Of course, quite few of the four thousand ambassadors who have joined We Love Reading thus far were met through international conferences. Often times the connections are established through much more straightforward channels. Marcela Sánchez, an ambassador from Buenos Aires, Argentina, heard about our program from one of her friends and made contact with us via Facebook. Marcela is a retired teacher, and had thought long and hard about strategies for communicating the love of reading among young people and children. She started her own library and saw quick success, evidenced by the new reading habits which the children showed individually.

In Vietnam, We Love Reading has been taken up by a dedicated group of activists which has major ambitions for the program in their country. A team of Vietnamese educators and psychologists working in France and led by Huong Dang reached out to We Love Reading in 2017 to inquire about applying the same model in Vietnam. Dang reached out to her colleagues at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi, and assembled a core of organizers to create an independent We Love Reading organization. Since that time, this new nonprofit has trained more than seven hundred ambassadors and reached thousands of children. They aim to expand the program to a massive scale and train a target number of 20,000 We Love Reading ambassadors.

These and so many examples like them show the individual, local initiative behind the

spread of We Love Reading libraries in a growing array of locations across the planet. We Love Reading has provided a structure, methods and training, and an expanding number of socially progressive children's books that tie this community of ambassadors together, and allow us to make an impact larger than the sum of our parts. This collective has blossomed into a global community that has reached hundreds of thousands of children. But with the deep-rooted demand among millions for reading to play a greater role in everyday life, we know that we have only scratched the surface of what we can accomplish.

CHAPTER TEN

WE LOVE READING IN REFUGEE CAMPS

We read for ourselves, our children, our community, and our future.

–We Love Reading ambassador

We Love Reading is an organic, grassroots program that offers a sustainable solution for a global challenge because it addresses the very essence of that makes us human.

–Rana Dajani



Some of our most successful libraries have been established in refugee camps, led by refugees themselves. Through this work we've come to learn several important lessons. Most importantly, we've learned not to treat refugees as passive recipients of aid, but as active agents of change and decision-makers in their own lives. We have also seen, and proven through these projects, that refugee populations are not concerned purely with matters of material survival. Refugees, like all human beings, have spiritual, and intellectual needs that must also be met.

The traumas that refugee children carry require special care and attention, making the psychosocial support that reading aloud provides—especially in collective settings—all the more crucial. As journalist Rachel Cernansky described in a *New York Times* feature on We Love Reading, the program has given refugee children a space for human connection, healing, reflection, and individual development, all of which has helped reduce trauma and improve mental health.⁴⁴ Rasha Al-Masry, a Syrian refugee and We Love Reading ambassador cited in Cernansky's article, talked about how reading stories aloud that were catered toward the children's experiences created an environment for them to confront and overcome their fears. "The children, they can't speak about their fears, they can't share these fears with others," Rasha explained, but "after the stories, they start to share their fears."

When our team at We Love Reading first considered establishing libraries inside refugee camps in Jordan, most people we consulted told us that we were unlikely to succeed given the dire situation among much of the camp population—primarily refugees from the conflict in Syria. This doubtful outlook seemed logical. Conditions for Syrian refugees in Jordan are extremely harsh, and families in camps like Zaatari, Baqaa, Azraq, and Emirati-Jordanian Camp (EJC) face daily struggles simply to make ends meet. But it was precisely this experience of hardship and exile that led so many residents of the refugee camps to get involved with We Love Reading.

Since we began working with refugee communities in Jordan in 2014, we have trained over four hundred ambassadors and reached thousands of children. The self-initiative and leadership of the individuals who chose to lead this effort in the camps have been inspiring and infectious. Our success in Jordan caught the attention of United Nations, which decided to implement We Love Reading at the Kule Refugee Camp in Gambella, Ethiopia. In 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Plan International spearheaded the implementation of We Love Reading at Gambella, where 35 ambassadors created and ran their own libraries serving the South Sudanese refugee community.⁴⁵

We hope to continue to spread We Love Reading in refugee camps throughout the world, and to show that the growing refugee population of today is a source of innovation and leadership. The stories and testimonies of our time working with refugee communities are a testament to this potential.

The first refugee camp we started working in was Zaatari—one of the largest in the world with 80,000 residents (down from 150,000 at its height)—which has housed refugees since 2012 along Jordan's northern border with Syria.⁴⁶

44 Rachel Cernansky, "For Refugee Children, Reading Helps Heal Trauma," *New York Times*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/opinion/syria-refugee-children.html>.

45 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ethiopia: We Love Reading, <https://www.unhcr.org/ethiopia-we-love-reading.html>.

46 Joi Lee, "Syria's War: Teenagers Share Stories from Zaatari Refugee Camp," *Al Jazeera*, March 15,

One of the first refugees that we met at Zaatari was Asma Arrashed, originally from Daraa, Syria, who quickly took to organizing her own We Love Reading library with local children after learning about the program in an advertisement. As was to be expected, she found it difficult at first to find a group of children to come to read-aloud sessions consistently, but once she began to read them stories, she described finding “happiness in their eyes.”

Asma built a vibrant and enduring library that allowed her to express her passion for reading and writing. She recounted her story for a We Love Reading magazine in 2015:

During my first year as a Syrian refugee I completely lost all hope as I had no sense of identity or homeland anymore, and could only hope that one day I would return home. I had left Syria carrying only one bag and my daughters—one of whom was 25-days old—not thinking about where we were going or for how long, only of protecting my family. After one year, I began to try and work out how I could possibly help to save the next Syrian generation, and then my life restarted when I heard about the We Love Reading initiative and attended the training. Nobody advised me to go to the training, particularly as I had just lost a baby and so mentally and physically I was not at my best, but I insisted as I did not want to lose the chance. I have loved reading and writing since I was young, despite not being able to complete my studies at school and continue writing. Initially, it was not easy gathering children as it was difficult to tempt them away from their jobs (like working a trolley or sifting sand to earn money for their family), or playing with the rubbish, to listen to a story. It was also hard to persuade children who thought that stories could have no value in their life. I managed to collect an initial group and after I had finished the story, I saw happiness in their eyes. Despite this, I was still worried they would not come back, but I persevered and they returned the next day with their friends, something I will never forget as I was able to inspire more happiness in more children.⁴⁷

Asma observed the growth and emotional transformation of the children that participated in her library. She would ask the children to draw the reactions and reflections in response to each story, and noticed that, over time, their illustrations shifted from images of war and exile to ones of life and community. Asma called her library “Children Stories,” and together she and the children would do different activities together in the camp, including a community clean-up which they called “Give Sanitation Workers a Break Day.”

Asma used We Love Reading to discover her capacities as a writer, as well. We encouraged Asma to compose her own stories incorporating the names of the children who came to her library. Asma published these stories once a month in a local magazine, *Al Tareek*. Through this work, she found a job at a local school, and enrolled in a journalism course.

Another We Love Reading ambassador in the camp, Mohammad Khalaf, founded a We Love Reading Library of around a dozen children who to came listen to stories once a week. Just

2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/syria-war-teenagers-share-stories-zaatari-refugee-camp-180314111330488.html>.

47 We Love Reading, We Love Reading: Zaatari Edition, November 2015, [http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/2nd%20issue%2C%202015%20\(WLR%20in%20Zaatari\).pdf](http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/2nd%20issue%2C%202015%20(WLR%20in%20Zaatari).pdf)

before arriving at his reading session one day, Mohammad forgot his bag of books in a cab. He and his friend couldn't just leave the children waiting, so they found pen and paper, and began to write a story of their own! They managed to piece together a small story with illustrations about the children and their life in the camp, and their audience loved it.

As many movement organizers know, often one devoted activist under the right conditions can help bring a project to life. Yassin Jameel Abu Samra, an electrical engineer in his twenties, rapidly went through his We Love Reading training and built a thriving library. He then led the development of a new training model in the refugee camp, and proceeded to train 35 new ambassadors in Zaatari in just the month of October 2015 alone. Yassin's actions likely resulted in the establishment of a dozen or more new libraries in the refugee camp.

Through the course of We Love Reading's work in Zaatari, we were told by several ambassadors that word of the program had also spread into Syria itself, and that some local organizers had begun to implement the same model in their communities. The experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, and elsewhere are relevant to millions still within Syria who also live as internally displaced persons throughout the country.

The youngest We Love Reading ambassador at Zaatari was, doubtless, Noor Al-Huda Abu Jeish, age twelve. Noor Al-Huda came to the program through Asma, as she describes in her testimony:

My name is Noor Al-Huda. I am the youngest reading ambassador in Zaatari camp. I am 12 years old and I usually read in the backyard of my caravan. 20 children attend my session between 4 and 12-years old. I did not attend a We Love Reading training but Asma, a We Love Reading ambassador, has trained me. At the beginning, I was scared to stand up and read in front of children, but this did not stop me from trying and becoming better at what I am doing. Children's favorite story is "Why Electricity Has Escaped," because electricity always goes off in the camp for hours. They thought that power goes off due to overuse, so they started reducing power consumption in their caravans.⁴⁸

Stories like this abound from our time working in Jordan's refugee camps. Ghassan, a refugee in Baqaa camp—a community of 119,000 Palestinian refugees just outside Amman first created in 1968—took his mother to a We Love Reading training, set up a library in his community, and was offered a rooftop space to host his lively, weekly sessions.

At the Azraq camp, which has housed around 36,000 Syrian refugees since the start of the conflict, We Love Reading has also taken off. Photojournalist Saskia Bory Keeley visited We Love Reading Libraries at Azraq, and her moving account of what she witnessed was published in the Fletcher Forum of World Affairs.⁴⁹ Keeley accompanied four Syrian refugees—Majd Qasham, Sara Shahin, Sukayna Anbtawi, and Ismail Yasin al Thaher—as they led their read-

48 We Love Reading, *We Love Reading: Inside Refugee Camps*, February 2017, <http://www.weloveread.org/sites/default/files/files/1st%20issue%2C%202017%2C%20English%20refugee%20magazine.pdf>.

49 Saskia Bory Keeley, "Creating Brighter Lives for Syria Refugee Children," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, December 15, 2018, <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2018/1/6/we-love-reading-creating-brighter-lives-for-syrian-refugee-children>.

aloud sessions in the camp. In one passage, Keeley beautifully describes the atmosphere of the We Love Reading libraries:

I was deeply impressed by the way the sessions are structured and planned out, how they have become such an important part of any day's activities. Many of the books are read over and over, but the children still love hearing about Jude or Amal or Samir, the protagonists in some of the stories. They interject and laugh, they wait eagerly for specific moments in the narrative. This visit to Azraq was all the more special: two new books were just published and printed by WLR and we brought them with us. They depict the refugees' plight. These beautifully illustrated stories show Syrian families leading happy lives in their country. Then the war comes and they need to flee to survive. The bright and colorful pictures turn dark and grey, capturing the fear and anguish. The palette remains somber with the arrival in refugee camps and the hardship of adjusting to unfamiliar, restricted dwellings. The end of the story is hopeful, speaking of new beginnings and fresh possibilities in an environment that at first felt foreign and distant. Children paid close attention, a sort of quiet observation, to this new story. I sensed it is a narrative they know all too well.

Majd Qasham, one of the four ambassadors Keeley visited at Azraq, teamed up with her partner Ahmed Al Abdullah to found their own library and developed it into a dynamic, weekly reading circle that attracted dozens of children. Majd told her father, still living on the Syrian border with Turkey, about her experience, and he was so inspired that he sent her a poem to celebrate her work:

Read, read.
 I like that you are a bookworm
 So that the bad things will go away,
 And your thinking will be clear.
 The book is the road for people who love life,
 Who will be a good friend
 And will not leave you or disappear.
 Books are the way to achieving glory
 That show you the best path.

Another ambassador at the Azraq camp, Saleh Said Alkhello, organized read-aloud sessions regularly attended by twenty-five children. He explained how the children gradually learned to let their imaginations carry them through the story and immerse themselves in the narrative. Saleh Said put the experience movingly in his own words:

Once I take a book, they sit-down waiting for the adventure to begin. Every time I read, the children pay attention to every single detail in the story. They encourage me to continue reading. They also read to each other. Sometimes after the reading session, visually impaired children ask me unusual questions that I cannot answer: for example, “what is the color of water?” I try not to answer them and to let them use their imagination, but by reading, I can make them imagine the world as if they can see it.⁵⁰

At the Emirate-Jordanian Camp (EJC), a worker named Issa Mohammad who distributes water and bread to residents of the camp started his own We Love Reading library. After he finished his rounds, he would gather over a dozen children and read them stories. Issa was determined to continue the library no matter how harsh conditions became. “I will never stop reading stories whatever the circumstances may be,” Issa insisted.⁵¹

Based on the success of We Love Reading in refugee camps throughout Jordan, we joined forces with UNHCR and Plan International to organize a network of libraries at the Kule Refugee Camp in Gambella, Ethiopia. Kule serves around 300,000 South Sudanese refugees who have fled civil war and conflict in the youngest country in the world.

Our work in Kule Camp has helped establish dozens of libraries and reach thousands of children, often extremely eager to find an outlet for their imagination and creativity. Conditions at Kule are precarious, and we faced similar concerns about feasibility. Even in these conditions, we found ample space, opportunity, and desire to organize We Love Reading libraries. Nyakeata, a South Sudanese refugee who lives in the camp says that she was so fearful about her family’s circumstances that telling stories to their eight-year-old daughter Babur was the last thing on her mind.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

“We’re living through a war,” she says. “How can we even think about telling folktales now? We’re worrying about how to be safe from the fighting and feed our children and ourselves. Babur attends reading sessions led by John Majak, himself a South Sudanese refugee and father of three. Majak described the passion of Kule children for reading in an interview with Plan International:

When children see me from a distance with my story books, they run to the reading place and sit on the ground. When I begin reading, they go quiet instantly and pay attention. Most of them are now so interested in stories. The number of children who attend my sessions has doubled in three months.⁵²

A team of We Love Reading ambassadors in Kule Camp works to translate books provided from Jordan into English and Nuer. These are then distributed to ambassadors throughout the camp who use them in their libraries, and loan books out to children for them to take home and read with their parents. In many cases the rate of growth is dramatic and exponential. We Love Reading ambassador Peter Gok explained that “this We Love Reading program started with only two children, and it has grown to up to 300 children in each center.”⁵³

Even under the most extreme circumstances, the desire for creative and intellectual fulfillment will express itself. The walls of refugee camps have not stopped the spread of We Love Reading. There is clearly a massive and enthusiastic audience for initiatives of this kind among refugee populations across the world. It is essential that activists and policy-makers recognize this opportunity to put refugees themselves in positions of leadership over the education and development of their communities.

52 Ibid.

53 We Love Reading, We Love Reading in Kule Refugee Camp, June 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nICgSgLmIt8>.

CONCLUSION

I boast that We Love Reading is everywhere. I was told that this was in my imagination. . .

It turns out that imagination is pretty strong and that dreams do come true.

I believe that We Love Reading is in more places than we know.

We Love Reading is a social movement. We Love Reading is everywhere!

–Rana Dajani



Welcome to We Love Reading. Now that you know about us and the work we do, you are part of the We Love Reading family forever. Whether or not you choose to become a We Love Reading ambassador, you have become a part of our project, because you understand what we're aiming to accomplish and, hopefully, you agree with our goals and ideas. Please, pay it forward: spread this awareness to your friends, coworkers, and colleagues.

Every human being is special and unique. Each person has a unique DNA sequence that no one else has had or ever will have. Even identical twins are different, both at the level of small genetic variations, and at the level of epigenetics—changes in gene expression caused by one's environment and experience.

Because you are special, you have something special to give to the world. You owe it to the world and yourself. Remember the butterfly effect: when a butterfly flutters its wings in China, there may be a hurricane in the Atlantic. Even a small action you take could have real effects that manifest themselves in a different time and place. You may be the force behind a hurricane of positive change.

As Dr. Seuss wrote in *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* “And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.) KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!”

Life is a journey, and the spice of that journey is finding one's purpose and pursuing it as far as one can. The biggest purpose is to make others happy. It is a crime that most children are not given the opportunity to love to read, because through reading one can find immense wonder, happiness, and potential, both in oneself and in the outside world. Together, we can reach every child in every neighborhood in the world.

We Love Reading is about creating a new generation of readers. Every person we reach is important. Each person counts. If every one of us does one little thing, change will happen. It is the collective effort that constitutes true change. What matters is that we try, that we make the effort. These are values that I learned growing up from my faith, from Islam, and they have stayed with me and inspired me throughout my life. I believe they are universal, human values that all of us share regardless of our particular religion, nationality, or background.

Through We Love Reading, we have been able to create a paradigm shift in common approaches to fostering a culture of reading. We have flipped the equation to place the focus squarely on the child, where it was once placed on the parent, teacher, or adult. While most international organizations have viewed their target audience as passive, aid recipients, we understand We Love Reading ambassadors as agents, owners, and decision-makers in our common project. Both of these shifts are part of the mentality we are trying to project, a mentality of “I can.” I can create a difference. I can be part of the transformation I want to see.

At We Love Reading, we do things because we want to, not because we have to. We do things because we have a passion for them and we feel a sense of agency and ownership over our project. This is why We Love Reading creates lasting change-makers everywhere it goes. What every ambassador does, they do because they want to contribute to the betterment of their community and themselves, not because it is a duty or chore. It is their agency, their goal, and the journey they want to take. We Love Reading is not and has never been about grades and scores; it is not a competition. It is about changing a mindset, about creating an environment that fosters a passion for reading, a passion for social entrepreneurship, and—

ultimately—a passion for human freedom.

We Love Reading has laid the basis for a successful program because it understands the importance of local, country-specific organizing. Local organizers will always have insights into how to organize in their communities which international programmers can never attain. The model We Love Reading has put forward is also based on rigorous empirical research and constant feedback. It is a grassroots initiative that is simple, cost-effective, flexible, and sustainable.

The common trajectory of ideas and organizations today is West to East. We Love Reading is an example of an East-West flow. We Love Reading, established in Jordan, has spread to Germany, Mexico, and the United States. It has also been implemented in Uganda, Malaysia, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

Today, more than ever, we are in need of home-grown role models to boost the confidence and preserve the identity of our youth—to aid them in defining who they are in a world that is becoming one global village. We have to create an awareness that we can learn from others while maintaining our pride in our culture and heritage. Not all solutions are applicable across cultures, and every culture has something to offer to the world as a whole.

We Love Reading is sustainable because it is predicated on the creativity of the individual. That is why it has established a presence in a growing number of refugee camps. Even in conditions as harsh as in these camps, the creativity and initiative of We Love Reading ambassadors is able to carry the program forward.

There is a thin line between conceiving of We Love Reading as an aid package, and understanding it as the project of real, individual agents; between seeing the We Love Reading ambassador as a student, or as a peer; as an employee, or as a social entrepreneur. We insist on treating all of our ambassadors as decision-makers, powerholders, and activists. Our program is about trusting people so that they can deliver their best.

We Love Reading empowers people of every gender and age: women finding a purpose within the chaos of their lives; young men pursuing their dreams and finding a path to achieve them; children discovering exploring their social world for the first time.

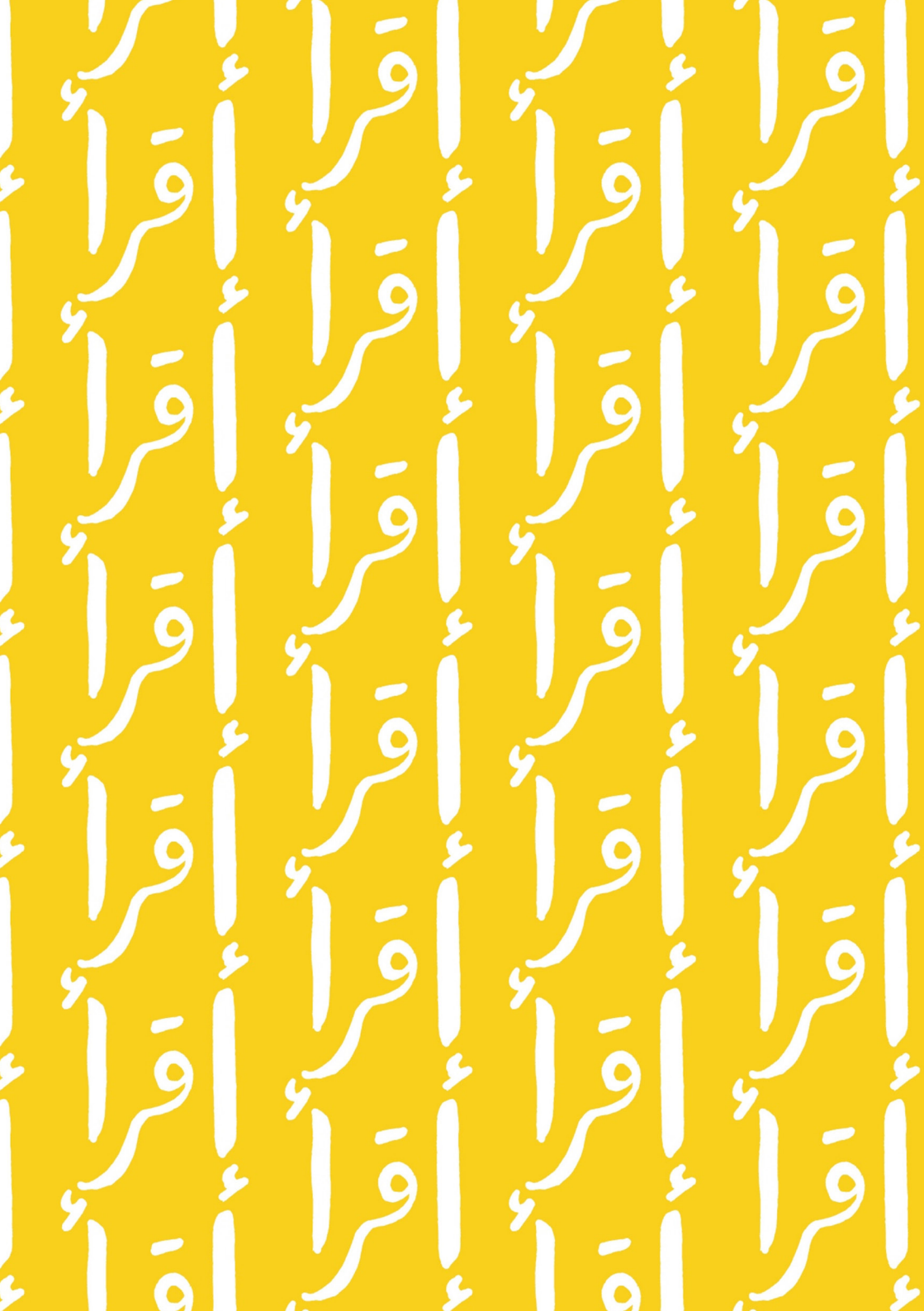
Even before this program became an international phenomenon, I used to boast that We Love Reading is everywhere. I was told this was just in my imagination. It turns out that my imagination was pretty strong, and that dreams really can come true. I believe that We Love Reading is in more places than we know. Dawn from Urbana, Illinois, confirmed that for me when she surprised me with the news that she had organized her own We Love Reading library without having ever been in contact. We Love Reading is a social movement. We Love Reading is everywhere!

I leave my readers with some brief words which I offered to my audience at the 2017 UNESCO Literacy Award ceremony, which capture the spirit of what I've attempted to accomplish through this work:

Read! The first word revealed to humanity in the Quran is "Read!" Why? Because reading is the most important action we can take as human beings, and the most important help, advice, and guide we can give to others. Reading provides fuel for

the mind to contemplate, to produce knowledge, to build on the work of others, and expand our horizons. Reading is the centerpiece of that continuous cycle by which we build on the knowledge of our predecessors so that others can build on ours in their own time. Reading is the chain of continuity between generations of human beings without which we cannot grow or evolve. Read!

Dr. Rana Dajani holds a PhD in Molecular Cell Biology from the University of Iowa. She is an Associate Professor of Biology at the Hashemite University of Jordan, and has served as a visiting professor at Yale University and the University of Cambridge. Dr. Dajani is a Fulbright scholar, a Harvard Radcliff fellow, an Eisenhower fellow, and an Ashoka fellow. She is the world expert on the genetics of Circassian and Chechen populations in Jordan, and former codirector of an epigenetic research project sponsored by Yale University to study Jordan-based refugees. Dajani was the lead researcher on the committee for the Stem Cell Research and Therapy Law in Jordan, the first of its kind in the region. She is a longtime advocate of the compatibility between evolutionary biology and Islam, and has written and spoken widely on this field at academic institutions East and West. Dajani is a contributor to *Science and Nature* and an expert in higher-education reform. She is the founder of the Three Circles of Aلمات, a mentoring network for women scientists in the Arab world sponsored by Partnerships for Enhanced Engagements in Research (PEER), and organizer of the first Gender Summit for the Arab World in 2017. Dajani is a member of the UN Women Advisory Council for Jordan, and a Higher Education Reform Expert for the European Union–Tempus office in Amman. She is regularly voted among the most influential women leaders in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and she was inducted into the Women in Science Hall of Fame in 2015. Dr. Dajani is a recipient of the 2018 Jacobs Social Entrepreneurship Award; the Fulbright Program’s Institute of International Education (IIE) Global Changemaker Awards in 2016; the Star of Science of His Majesty King Abdullah II in 2017; and the King Hussein Cancer Center and Biotechnology Institute Award in 2009. She is the author of *Five Scarves: Doing the Impossible—If We Can Reverse Cell Fate, Why Can’t We Redefine Success?* released by Nova Science Publishers in 2018.



“Dajani, a molecular biologist, started We Love Reading in 2006 in her neighborhood in Amman, Jordan, with the goal of fostering a love of reading in children. The program has since been adopted more widely, and it demonstrates the links between education and psychosocial health, and between supportive, loving relationships and resilience in children.”

Rachel Cernansky

“For Refugee Children, Reading Helps Heal Trauma,” New York Times, April 17, 2019

“We should believe that nothing is impossible,” writes Rana Dajani, who has made a life and a career out of proving that everything is and can be possible. The story of her journey in building We Love Reading is profoundly inspirational, for it is the story of a woman’s heart and a woman’s leadership. It is the story of what reading can do to change lives and especially what reading to children can do for one child and for the entire community. Professor Dajani shows us that one act of love—the act of reading aloud—can create dynamic change in the lives and minds of young people and in the entire community that surrounds them. Professor Dajani lays out a unique and replicable blueprint for nurturing and empowering societal change, story by story, and child by child.”

Pam Allyn

Founder, LitWorld

Author of What to Read When: The Books and Stories to Read with Your Child—and All the Best Times to Read Them

“This inspiring book serves as a manifesto for social entrepreneurship. It is a passionate story about the power of acting with a social conscience and bringing the joy of reading to children all over the globe. The We Love Reading program is powerful in its simplicity and fits with the basic principles of early child development: creative and imaginative play; bonding with caregivers over age-appropriate activities; and mulling new and creative ways of thinking about friendship, animals, family, friends, and the planet.”

Dr. Dima Amso

Associate Professor of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences, Brown University
Director of the Development Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory

We Love Reading (WLR) is a global program which aims to change mindsets through reading to create change-makers that can reshape their world. WLR is a leading international organization in the fields of community and women’s empowerment, grassroots advocacy and activism, and children’s education.

Awards and Recognition for We Love Reading:

Schwab WEF (2022)

WISE Award (2014)

UN Science, Technology and Innovation Award (2019)

King Hussein Medal of Honor (2014)

Ashoka Fellowship (2019)

Library of Congress Literacy Award—Best Practice (2013)

UNESCO Literacy Prize (2017)

Clinton Global Initiative (2010)

IDEO.org Refugee Education Award (2015)

Synergos Social Innovator Award (2009)