

Araboh.com: web review

Interview with Jinanne Tabra

In 2008 and at the age of 21, Jinanne Tabra, born in Iraq and raised in the UK, set out to launch Araboh.com while still a senior at the Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar.

What is Araboh.com?

It is an online community for educational books with an Arabic theme that allows future Arab generations to grow up reading, writing and thinking in their mother tongue. Books on the site are categorized based on age, topic and language and are shipped all over the world. Araboh.com is committed to its mission and organizes workshops, language lectures, student activities, and even donates a percentage of its annual profits to charities that aid children in the Arab world.

Recently Jinanne was voted to be one of Arabian Business's "30 under 30: The New Generation of Arab Leaders", so we caught up with her for a one-on-one chat.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I was born and raised in Scotland, which made it very difficult for me to learn Arabic because the resources available to families overseas have always been very limited. In an effort to weave more of the Arabic language, culture and traditions into our daily lives, my parents decided we would move to Qatar when I was in high school. I enjoyed my life in Qatar so much that I stayed there after graduating high school and attended Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar. Studying Business Administration exposed me to a whole lot of inspiring business cases from all over the world, and the class that I enjoyed most in college was Entrepreneurship. It was while taking that class that Araboh.com was born - our professor introduced us to a wealth of startup case studies, entrepreneurial autobiographies, interviews and even inspiration quotes - they were all success stories, and I decided during those classes that I would have a success story of my own.

What was the reason behind the creation of Araboh.com?

My Arabic is not as strong as my English, not nearly as strong as it should be, and that's the case with so many Arabs today. The idea for an online children's bookstore came from reflecting on my own experience learning the language, I realized that as a child I had never enjoyed Arabic. I dreaded the 'Arabic school' I would go to every weekend in Scotland, and although I loved reading English books as a kid, I couldn't remember ever being really

excited about an Arabic book or toy. The Arabic materials available to us overseas just couldn't compete with all the exciting and engaging English materials. Araboh.com is trying to change that, we're trying to get kids excited about the Arabic language, and we're providing quality educational materials that are just as good as those found in other languages around the world.

Halfway through your senior year at college you decided to setup Araboh.com by flying out to Dubai, why did you decide to open it then and there? Why not wait till you graduated?

Part of it was just excitement, I had an idea and I wanted to get to work on it. The other part was that I knew every day that went by, Arab families overseas were going through the same struggles I went through growing up, I didn't want to waste time in providing this service to our customers.

Why did you decide to open Araboh as a website and not a store?

There was never any question in my mind; it had to be an online business. The people I wanted to help were Arab families living in Europe, North America, all over the world. The website gives us that global reach, the majority of our orders currently come from the US, we also work with individuals and organizations in Australia, Greece, Norway, Canada, the UK and other countries - all of whom found us on the web.

What has been the best part of establishing Araboh.com?

The best part of this experience has been hearing from our customers. I have had letters written by young children telling me all about what their favorite book is, I've heard from adults in Europe and the US about how our beginners books are helping them learn a language they have always wanted to learn, soldiers serving in Iraq have ordered books from us, libraries in Australia, schools in the US, the reach has been outstanding.

Have you seen a surge of interest towards Arabic books since you've started?

Surprisingly, there is actually a great deal of demand for Arabic books within the Gulf states. It surprised me to learn that even families and schools in Arabic countries struggle



Jinanne Tabra in action. Araboh.com ©



to find Arabic language materials that can hold up against the huge amount of English materials in our market. As a result of this demand, we launched our Arabic Language Festivals, visiting local schools to run student activities, host workshops and language lectures, work with teachers and librarians and invite parents and family members into the school for the festival to promote family reading. The Arabic Language Festivals have been extremely well received and we'll be expanding our programs into more schools for the 2009-2010 academic year.

What is by far the best selling book at Araboh.com?

For the past few months, it has been a Learn the Alphabet set (textbook & exercise book) by Samir Editeur (a Lebanese publisher). However, a couple of months ago Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing released an Arabic-English version of "The Selfish Crocodile", it is a wonderful book that children of all ages enjoy and is quickly becoming one of our hottest titles.

There has always been gloomy statistics on the state of Arabic books; do you think websites such as Araboh.com could help change that?

I hope so. I have learned that there are a large number of Arabic publishers turning out hundreds of titles each year, they are just difficult to find and they rarely develop direct channels to the consumer. ARABOH.com is dedicated to providing titles from a range of publishers, we currently stock books from 13 publishers and that number will double in the next three months. Something else that I'm very excited about is the launch of our very own publishing house, we are gearing up to launch our very own brand of Arabic books and educational tools in the coming months - so I'm very proud that we have grown from our beginnings in retail to now making a real contribution to the Arabic publishing industry.

How do we redefine the state of the Arabic language in our society?

At the moment it's very simple; English is more fun. A great deal of English books, cartoons, computer games, and other educational tools are more sophisticated than their Arabic counterparts - they are so engaging and exciting to children that they feel more like fun than learning! I think there is a lot we can learn from some of these International resources. The Arab world is creating Arabic voice-overs for Barney the dinosaur and the Tellytubbies - but our kids are smart enough to know they're not getting the real thing, they would rather watch it in its original English version. Companies like AlJazeera Children's Channel and the Freej cartoon series understand this and are creating programs that are authentic, exciting and that validate the Arab culture and identity. We are finding ways to get people excited about Arabic again; we are on the right track. The excitement and dedication that oozes from Jinanne Tabra ensures that Araboh.com is not only a website but a movement that will teach us all to cherish the Arabic language.

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