

Questions on Living Books answered by Shirin Feiruz

Q: Can you please define good books?

Well... I love how living books are defined:

- They are beautifully written and illustrated – this is why I love children's and young adult literature. There is a whole craft to it because the writer has only so many pages and he has to say it in a way that touches children... without talking down to them or being overly preachy. It's a tough balance and it's a true art!
- They are usually narrative in style (that is, a story rather than a straight facts approach). I think everyone loves a story... I mentioned in my slides why stories are so essential (and natural!) to us! Stories make lessons exciting – we feel emotionally invested and connected to the characters. Stories make lessons come alive... they make lessons stick.
- Good books transform and transport you – they really touch your soul and you can imagine the story in your mind.
- They contain ideas – these are lofty ideas that feed your mind and heart and shape character and bigger ideas

A good book is enjoyable for all ages... I'm an (old) adult and I love kids' books when they are well written – I can appreciate the artistry and the beautiful lessons imparted. I'm not the only one, am I?

One last bit: I am not saying textbooks and reference books are useless!

Q: I have a fear of English books written by Non Muslims en-culturing my children before they have read, understood and identified with our Islamic culture...

This is a natural fear. As I had said in my presentation, I think it's important to introduce our kids to the beautiful stories from our deen first. I read my kids Ibn Kathir's Stories of the Prophets, stories from the Quran (a big favourite is The Boy and The King!), the Seerah as well as lovely stories from the Hadeeth and of illustrious Muslims. Of course, it is important to instil faith and a strong Muslim identity – this will be the lens through which they will see. There are many Islamic living books and living books about Muslims as well.

I think (this is just me, feel free to disagree) it is important to learn about other cultures/people as well as things that have taken place in history and this will include stories of non-Muslims invariably. It is not necessarily dangerous – we have learnt many precious lessons from these books.

My advice?

- Educate yourself – find out which authors and stories are appealing and acceptable.
- Read with your children – this way you can judge whether they are ready for what the book deals with.

- Have meaningful discussions – it is natural to want to screen our kids from negative influences. The thing is sometimes they see these things not in books, but in real life. Sometimes books help us prepare them or help them cope – we can have discussions with them as to what is right and wrong, navigate shades of gray.
- Remember that not all books written by and about non-Muslims are bad. But you do have to do your research to find the good ones.

Q: I would appreciate if you could share a list of book shops in and around Islamabad.

I patronize these stores:

- The Literary Junction Bookstore – this is an online store run by the hardworking and delightful Aminah who clearly adores books. She tries very hard to bring in good books and always tries to be in the know as to what the best reads are out there. Do get to know her! <https://tljbookstore.com/>
- The Old Book Shop run by Nadeem Sahib at F10 (below Miniso, near D'Watson) – he used to be in the airline profession but is a true book worm and he's made it his work now ☺ He brings in many many books and will keep you updated when new shipments come in. He is a wonderful supporter of good causes and was so very helpful when we ran our first curriculum fair, even showing up to strengthen our morale!
- Old Bookshop at F7 next to Miniso. This bookstore is run by Kamran Sahib and he is an easygoing fellow who always looks overwhelmed by the mess in the store 😊 It is a tight squeeze but if you are patient and have the tenacity to weed through the precarious piles of books, you will unearth gems in shaa Allah. Kamran Sahib can help source for books – if you want something, he will search the warehouse where they store their supply and let you know if he has it.
- Saeed Book Bank – this store has the potential to do so much better ... but that is another story for another day. There are lots of current titles ... not all are very good reads but if you check in regularly, you can find some nice gems.
- There are a few online sellers on IG. I think they tend to stock a disproportionate number of trashy fantasy books but you might try asking them to make orders for you. One is @brand_tejoori and another is @bookattic.online.

Q: Can you recommend some math living books?

There are many lovely series out there ... There is a HUGE list at this site: Living Math ... <https://www.livingmath.net/reader-index>

I find Math quite tiresome but maybe it was because my teachers only did drills. I think I would have been more excited about Math and drills (because you can't do without practice for Math!) had we had some living books to spice lessons up.

Q: Same here I live in a non reading family and Shirin's session just validated me and book love affair. Hopefully will be able to pass this love to my children.

I am sure you will. Just keep reading – because really, kids emulate what they see. It is hard of course because there is competition – screen, TV or others who don't value reading. My son whom I am homeschooling is allowed screen time (don't hang me!) because that is how he stays in touch with his buddies in Singapore. They play games and talk (and fight! Haha) and I think this is OK because this is how the world is now. We've had to cope with Covid and being indoors so we make some compromises. But the MAINSTAY should still be books and family time. One thing that has been a major factor in our homeschooling is readalouds. I'm sure you do this already... keep it up. I read to my kids throughout their childhood. My son is 10 and I still read to him. We pick longer books that will last us a long time and will give us lots to talk about. We'd read over breakfast, tea time and at bedtime. Our longest books were JRR Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings... we had so many conversations and fun activities over these and other good books.

Q: We Karachites should get together to make a small library. If somebody have space where we can keep our books, it would be great to swap and keep having new material every week.

I think if Karachi wasn't so crowded and huge, I'd love to live there 😊 I am an island girl and miss the beach. Karachi is also wonderfully diverse and not as stodgy as the rest of Pakistan!

Anyway, I think this is a lovely idea. It is natural to feel possessive about books – a friend who had kept my books for longer than expected apologized when she returned them to me and asked if I'd forgotten that she had them. I told her that that was far from the truth and that my books are (almost) like my children and I miss them when they are gone 😊 Still, think of the children... you would want your kids to do well and to be treated well, so do the same for others' children.

You don't even need a physical place to store the books. Just gather a group of likeminded people and log a database of books that you own. I believe there are apps available? My friends and I used boocshare. Just key in the titles of all the books you own/are willing to share. You still keep your own books in your home – you just loan them out when someone makes a request. You can set a due date for returning. This allows all of you to track where a book is.

Don't overthink it. Just do it. (OK, maybe wrap your books up in protective covers first!)

Q: I loved loved loved shirin's session. Loved how you said you are a haphazard homeschoolers. Totally relatable. I loved reading growing up but it wasn't a passion supported by my family. I'd often be caught reading under covers or in the middle of the night or during my class lectures and would have you bear severe consequences.

Hearing you felt lovely. So uplifting to know that I can choose to make better choices with and for my kids Alhumdulillah

I really appreciate the feedback. Reading is not always appreciated – it is sometimes seen as a idleness (why are you just lying about doing nothing?) or a waste of time (shouldn't you be studying? Or cleaning?), so I completely understand what you went through. I think people under-estimate the value and power of good books. A good book is not a waste of time – it doesn't take you away from being a better student (person!) and in fact, it can make you a better student. You don't learn to write well

through drills – you learn to be creative and articulate and eloquent by seeing/reading how language is used and used well. We all need imagination, empathy, character and above all, faith. You can't drill these things in – you need to touch a child inside. I think books along with creative teaching can go a long way to instil these qualities.

Q: Really enjoyed the books talk! Fellow book collector here and I totally second everything you said mashallah. Heartwarming to listen about living books bcz I've often been told just textbooks are enough - don't waste money.

I was concerned about talking too much yesterday (I think I did anyway... sorry!), so I am not sure if I made my point completely and explicitly clear. I'll try to address my shortcomings, in shaa Allah, as I respond to the feedback and questions post-talk.

I said in one of my slides: We know the intrinsic value of reading... That should be enough to make it a priority in our curriculum, but our system is such that it still assigns it a lower priority. We ourselves feel quite harried and harassed and we end up resorting to drills because we really don't want our kids to suffer.

Of course, textbooks and reference books are important and of course, getting good grades is important too. But why deprive a child of the depth and breadth of knowledge that he could EASILY gain and gain with so much joy and pleasure? A child ploughs through a textbook, notes and drills... yes, they are important, but we all know that it becomes exhausting and inertia often sets in. Imagine if we first ignited and then sustain his interest with living books and other activities. How much more excited and motivated would he be? And... I'm not an expert, but it has occurred to me that living books can cater to many different learners!

So, thank you ever so much for your lovely comment. I am so pleased to 'meet' a fellow book collector. I will just end off with a quote from my husband, "Money spent on knowledge is never wasted."