

# Spreading the word

The three Emirati writers on the longlist for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award talk to Saeed Saeed about their work

The ninth edition of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award is about to enter its most competitive phase.

Over the course of the next month, the shortlists for most of the major categories will be announced.

The winners will be revealed in April, with an award ceremony to follow at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre on May 11 as part of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair.

The winners of each category will receive Dh750,000, and there is also a Dh1 million prize for the Cultural Personality of the Year.

Out of almost 100 regional authors who made the longlist announced last year, three writers are from the UAE. They told us they were honoured to be considered for an award that is associated with the father of the nation.

## Kareem Matouq

Book title: *Qastara*

Category: Literature

The Emirati poet's inclusion on the longlist of one of the Arab world's most esteemed prizes comes of no surprise to lovers of regional literature.

After winning the inaugural season of the television talent show *Prince of Poets* in 2007, Matouq went on to become a full-time writer and has contributed to newspapers and magazines, including *Zahrat Al Khaleej* (published by Abu Dhabi Media, which also owns *The National*). Despite an interest in opinion pieces and articles, Matouq says poetry is his first love.

"There is such depth to it that it allows me many ways to say what I want to express," he says.

"It is my real passion and something that I am continuously trying to improve on. The work really never ends."



The three Emiratis nominated in various categories of Sheikh Zayed Book Award, from left, Kareem Matouq, Amira Al Marzouqi and Muhra bint Ahmad. Courtesy Kareem Matouq; Amira Al Marzouqi; Muhra Bint Ahmad

The Abu Dhabi resident has been refining his craft for more than a decade - his nominated work, *Qastara*, is his 16th book. The compilation contains new works in addition to previously published poetry.

Matouq says the new material is a continuation of his renowned blend of poetry, the subjects of which range from domestic to patriotic issues.

While pleased simply to make the longlist, he says he hopes *Qastara* wins the award as it would help him to achieve his goal of reaching a wider audience.

"At the end of the day, this is all a writer really wants," he says. "Right now, with the longlist, I

## the facts

The main categories at the Sheikh Zayed Book Award include Literature, Young Author, Children's Literature, Publishing and Distribution, Arab Culture in Other Languages, Translation and Contribution to the Development of Nations.

\* Saeed Saeed

am acknowledged by my peers but the general public are mostly interested in winners. That's when they are interested in reading your work."

## Amira Al Marzouqi

Book title: *Waraqet al Hayat*

Category: Children's Literature  
As an editor with the National Archive in Abu Dhabi, Amira Al Marzouqi says education has always been at the heart of her work.

However, it was her debut children's book *Waraqet al Hayat (The Leaf of Life)*, that earned her a nomination for a Sheikh Zayed Book Award, in the Children's Literature category.

"I am extremely pleased with the nomination, particularly because it has the name of Sheikh Zayed," she says. "For the past few years, no Emirati has been nominated in this category, so this is a proud moment for me and also, generally, very important."

Al Marzouqi puts the dearth of Emirati children's authors down to a lack of role models in the industry. Unlike the poetry genre and the burgeoning adult-fiction field, there are no big regional children's authors from the UAE, although that may soon change with the growing success of the author Maitha Al Khayat.

"I would describe our children's-literature field as shal-

low," says Al Marzouqi. "But that is generally down to a lack of direction as opposed to talent, because that is definitely there."

*Waraqet al Hayat* tells the story of a young girl who finds a leaf that fell from a tree and places it on her bookshelf, where it grows miraculously and becomes a tree in the garden, under which the community gathers to read together.

"The book is really about encouraging people to read," Al Marzouqi says. "The message is about how through reading you will always be reinvigorated."

## Muhra bint Ahmad

Book title: *Krakato*

Category: Young Author

The idea for Muhra bint Ahmad's acclaimed debut novel began with a question: who has the healthiest mind?

The result was *Krakato*, a Paulo Coelho-esque tale that features the main character coming to terms with his inner demons.

Ahmad - who is involved in humanitarian work in her native Ras Al Khaimah and is a voluntary writing instructor - says she has always been in love with the written world. "If life is like an ocean where we are in fear of drowning, writing has always been the vessel that kept me afloat," she says. "If it wasn't for that I would feel suffocated."

As part of a new generation of Emirati writers, Ahmad says the award is more than just a competition. "Sheikh Zayed has also become more than a name for us," she says. "It is something we live with and feel deep inside. For us, Zayed is a philosophy, an example and hope."

● Visit [www.zayedaward.ae](http://www.zayedaward.ae) for more information

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