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Booknotes:From the ashes, the Phoenix rises

Mike Selby

Two friends, Omar Hamad (pharmacist and poet) and Ibrahim Massir (teacher and poet) have achieved the impossible by opening a public library in the middle of hell on earth. The Phoenix Library opened its doors on April 26 of this year, located in an old apartment building on Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, Gaza City, Palestine. The first library opened under a genocide; it defies logic that it exists at all.

Omar began collecting books at a young age after realizing the Israeli occupation was denying him a proper education. By his teens he had acquired a good size collection, which helped him dream "of a world the occupation could never touch." He entered adulthood with a bedroom library of over 500 books.

On October 8 of 2023, Omar and his family were ordered out of their home. He packed what books he could carry, and carted them from displacement to displacement, mourning for his life which had been bombed into oblivion. He carried his books in blankets and bags, and once built a shelf for them in a tent he was staying in. He was eventually herded into a hospital where he "lived a hundred days of terror" before being herded back out. Wading through blood and dashing between tanks, he was forced to leave his books behind. He made his way back weeks later to find them still there.

During the ceasefire in January of 2025, Omar returned to his family home only to find his entire neighborhood gone. Guessing where his home and room may have been, be dug through the wreckage and painstakingly pulled out 300 of his own books.

He next made his way to the remains of the Edward Said Library (Palestine's only Englishlanguage library) and began to dig and retrieve what he could. He then ventured to the ruins of the Islamic University, and over two days pulled out 700 volumes. Here he was surrounded by others doing the same, except they were using the books for fuel to cook food. Although some books were extremely rare and hundreds of years old, he could hardly blame them.

He was soon in their shoes; days without food saw him willing to trade his entire collection "for one loaf of bread to feed my siblings." His books were his life but "hunger shows no mercy." He had no takers but fortunately food was available again.

Abrahim and Omar and children preparing to watch Pinocchio. (Courtesy Phoenix Library)
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Ibrahim's story follows much the same path as his friend's. He too was young when he realized education and knowledge was his "path to carry our voice to the world and to confront falsehood no matter how loudly it screams." Consumed with Hamlet and Harry Potter, it was Palestinian literature where he found himself. For Ibrahim, "books became a land … that no one could uproot." He became a popular teacher, but the "years of killing, burning, starvation, displacement, and destruction," put an end to his career.

He also tried to find his home during the ceasefire, only to find "a memory shattered across the ground." Standing on what us to be his childhood home, he felt "even the ruins seem to know us."

Through his tears he saw his own small bookshelf, somehow surviving the ruin around it. "Something inside me retuned to life," he stated. "A piece of me survived." They could bomb his home but not the meaning of it. It was here he knew he absolutely had to "build a library from the heart of destruction." He would reunite with his friend Omar, and

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together they could create “a library born of the ruins to declare that we are still here, still reading, still dreaming, and still shaping See BOOKNOTES, 5A BOOKNOTES:Continued from 4A.

the future they tried to erase.”

Building shelves for the Phoenix Library was another miracle as “every shelf, every nail, and every screw requires day long searches.” Besides food, Israel won’t permit building materials to enter Palestine. The small shelf Omar built for his tent was the first one installed at Phoenix. They had collected 6,000 books by the time the library opened its doors in April. The hours vary along with the electricity, which is a surprise to no one.

Omar and Abrahim see 50 visitors per hour, people of all ages coming either to read; borrow books; continue their education; and meet others. Users have called it a “psychological refuge” and “a pause from everything outside.”

Just three weeks ago the Library screened ‘Pinocchio’ to a group of children. “When all the children applauded,” Omar stated:“I felt something so beautiful—something I had never felt in my entire life.”

A child he had never met before told Omar that he loved him. “Perhaps he said it because he had been deprived of happiness for so long and felt truly happy inside the Phoenix Library.”

Through his own tears Omar said, “All I want is for our children to truly live their childhood, just like any other child in this world.”

As of this writing, 87 public libraries in Palestine have been partially or completely destroyed:a war crime according to the International Criminal Court. This number may be higher, but some areas remain inaccessible, so it is impossible to know for sure. For now, the Phoenix Library is living up to its namesake. Amid the daily killing, destruction, displacements, and the restriction of food and medicine, Phoenix provides a different kind of life.

“Life as it should be.” All my heartfelt thanks to Omar and Abrahim for sharing their story and images with me. They also give a nod to Cranbrook — sending all their “warmth to your little mountain town.” If you would like to help the most important library in the world, please contact myself at mselby@cranbrookpubliclibrary.ca Mike Selby, BA, MLIS, is Programs & Community Development Librarian at the Cranbrook Public Library

Figure:

Left:Abrahim and Omar rescuing books. Top right:Omar on opening day of Phoenix. Bottom right:Young girl inside Phoenix Library. (Courtesy Phoenix Library)

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