

Marijean Moran Boueri and Mona Trad Debaji count to ten in 'Lebanon 1-2-3'

New book teaches children (and their parents) about Lebanese culture and heritage in three languages

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BEIRUT: When Marijean Moran Boueri first moved to Lebanon with her family in 1997, she felt something was missing. She remembered the stories her grandfather used to tell her about life in a small Mediterranean territory (Boueri's ancestors left Lebanon for New England in 1896) but she couldn't find any traces of those tales.

Then one day she picked up a copy of the biweekly listings guide, *L'Agenda culturel*. There was a painting by artist Mona Trad Dabaji on the cover.

Boueri, who was not yet confidently driving in Beirut at the time, got in the car and gunned it to Galerie Epreuve d'Artiste, where she could see more of Trad's work.

"This was the Lebanon I knew from my grandfather," Boueri says of her energetic response to these paintings.

"I have the same nostalgia as Marijean," adds Trad, who also left and returned to Lebanon, but within a much tighter timeframe. She earned her degree in fine art from the American University of Beirut and then moved to Cameroon. She came back to Beirut in the early 1990s. Her colorful oil paintings capture the daily details

and quotidian routines of rural life in Lebanese villages, whether they are in the mountains, along the sea or in the Bekaa Valley.

Having found each other through this desire to keep the

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rituals of a rich yet dying way of life alive, Boueri and Trad are now sitting in the high-ceilinged rooms of Trad's Achrafieh studio, a suitably crumbling old Lebanese house

near Monnot Street converted into a vibrant artist's atelier, replete with a cat name Pouf. They are working out the final details on a children's book they produced together called "Lebanon 1-2-3." Boueri wrote the text, which is presented in Arabic, English and French and teaches young children from pre-school to second grade to count in three languages and two number systems at once. Trad provided the illustrations (including a few references to the cat), which teach young children to do so while learning about different aspects of Lebanese culture and heritage.

Published late last week, "Lebanon 1-2-3" describes a day in the life of an extended Lebanese family who meet for a marathon meal in the mountains. There is the requisite old house with a red-tiled roof, "three kisses for every face / three graceful arches to frame each embrace." There are card-playing uncles and chatty aunts draped on francophone furniture. There are street peddlers selling vegetables (catching baskets slung down from high balcony railings) and women beating the dust from carpets hanging in the sun. There are backgammon games, rambunctious cousins and an influx of neighbors. The book closes with the line: "Ten cups of coffee on a tray - and so ends this lovely Lebanese day."

Boueri and Trad's book is the first of its kind in three languages. Boueri hopes local schools in Lebanon will pick it up and add it to their libraries and programs of study. She also hopes it will appeal to schools in North America, as a way to keep links between diaspora communities and the homeland active, and to show a more positive, human face for Lebanon and the Arab world.

Before settling in Beirut,

Boueri and her family lived in Minneapolis, Amsterdam and Brussels. She has an acute appreciation for multicultural education and children's literature - she ran a weekly story hour in Belgium and developed a program called "Around the World Reading" for the Broummana School. And like Trad, Boueri has three children of her own.

With "Lebanon 1-2-3," Boueri and Trad essentially set out to capture the pluralistic dream that is Lebanon. Trad, for her part, insisted on keeping it as accurate as possible. She did research, took pictures and tried to keep her artistic imagination at bay. Boueri had to struggle with keeping a 20-line text both concise and poetic in three languages. So focused on containing a multiplicity of things (a fez, an icon to ward off the evil eye, water jugs, prayer beads, three generations' worth of culture-specific clothing), they managed to create a book that is completely devoid of religious reference.

When asked if this was deliberate or if it was ever a concern, both Boueri and Trad draw blanks.

"It never came up at all," says Boueri.

The book, explains Trad, "is something for the future, to give a fresh and different image of Lebanon."

"And to tell the story of Lebanon," says Boueri. "It's nice for a book to tell a story on two sides of the world."

"Lebanon 1-2-3" is available in bookstores throughout Lebanon. For more information, go to www.marijean-boueri.com or www.jntownsendpublishing.com. In November, Boueri will publish a second children's book, this one focusing on the alphabet, entitled "Lebanon A-Z: A Middle Eastern Mosaic" (with Jill Boutros, Joanne Sayed, and illustrations by Tatiana Sabbagh).



Lebanon 1-2-3
A COUNTING BOOK IN THREE LANGUAGES



Count to 10

A new book by Marijean Moran Boueri and Mona Trad teaches children and their parents about Lebanese culture and heritage in three languages. **Page 12**