

INTRODUCTION

Why Did the River Stop Talking? by Zakaria Tamer is a collection of fifty-two very short children's stories – flash fiction or vignettes – published in 1973. A number of the stories are published here. The stories are composed of concise and straightforward language, and they tend to have plots of one or two events. The fable is evoked, and often the world is highly imaginary or set in a bygone age of kings and kingdoms. A number of themes cycle through the collection, including: injustice, war, the idiot or evil despot, growing up, oppression, the police, *ma li* (personal interests), violence, and occupation of land. The stories, as anyone familiar with Tamer can see, are strongly linked to his adult fiction in both style and content.

Despite the number of stories Tamer wrote for children, and despite the depth and power of some of them, little to no focus has been paid to Tamer's works for children, and translations are almost nonexistent. References to Tamer might include a sentence saying, "[He] is the foremost author of children's stories in Arabic," without any concrete reference to the works or their importance. It is intriguing to me that a man who wrote so clinically about the brutality of humankind would spend so much creative energy directed toward children, only sometimes writing stories with heroes.

It is moving that a man would send such hard messages. Tamer attempts to deal with hard realities in a way accessible to children, as if he is trying to tell a five-year-old that people will not always like you, they have *ma li* and will only appreciate you when you serve those interests. This is an incredible feat, and these stories are important and moving because of this transaction between writer and child.

Yet, it is as if Tamer was conscious of a secondary reader as well, as if, while writing, he realized adults would engage with these stories. Thus, he created parables rich with layers of meaning, some accessible to children and some much darker layers directed towards adults. If at first the secondary readers were parents, now they are readers of Banipal. And this is my invitation to you, to engage with these stories at each layer of meaning and see the importance of a man deeply concerned about injustice.

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