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'A book can change your life'

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Asma al Shamsy's first gift to her husband-to-be was a book: the bestseller *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin S Sharma.

Her husband, Saeed Ghanim, says: "I read it front cover to back cover. It was so easy to read and was filled with such inspirational words." The still-newlyweds (they married in February 2008) sit on adjacent couches in their elegant Al Maha villa, exchanging smiles and nods. Upstairs, four-month-old Shamma naps.

Al Shamsy and Ghanim are both fans of Sharma's fable of a man who gives up everything to gain everything. Along the way are lessons on how to live and how to organise life, explains Ghanim. "Instead of saying: 'Exercise an hour a day', his premise is that we all have 168 hours in a week, so why not spend five of those 168 exercising? He also says that when starting anything new, do it for 21 days. Then it will become a habit."

Ghanim, who has worked in banking and real estate and was educated in the US, has been applying Sharma's teachings to his life with satisfying results. "I never thought I'd be doing a master's degree, but here I am starting a programme in public administration at Zayed University in July. The reason for it all is that Asma gave me this book."

Al Shamsy explains that a friend had given her the same book before the couple got engaged. "This book is going to change your life,' she told me. At that point of my life I was a bit down. This book made me see life in a different way."

While *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* has had a life-altering effect on them both, it's hardly the only book that's kept them reading late into the night. Al Shamsy, who has an MBA and worked most recently for the Emirates Foundation, is a member of two book clubs that read at least two books a month. One group, called Book Trotters, is made up of a dozen school friends who started meeting last December. "We chose the name because we go from house to house for our meetings. We're only locals and we read only in English."

Al Shamsy admits to feeling "a little regret about the fact that I'm more comfortable reading in English. For my own children" – she looks up towards the second floor where her newborn daughter sleeps – "I would like it be more equal English and Arabic. My mother is now encouraging my 11-year-old sister to read more in Arabic."

Her mother-in-law, Asma Seddiq, the founder of Al Multaqa, one of Abu Dhabi's most respected Arabic book clubs, invited al Shamsy to join her long-running group a couple of years ago. "She encouraged me, saying: 'It's our language. You must read in Arabic.'"

But after reading five books in three months, al Shamsy found it too challenging. Nowadays she's happy to be keeping up with the reading lists of her two younger English book clubs. Their recent list is long and varied: *Mother Without a Mask*, about a US-born woman who became close with members of Al Ain's royal family in the 1970s ("A bit too detailed for me," says al Shamsy); *PS I Love You*, about an Irish woman who loses her husband but gains wisdom and strength from the letters he leaves to her; *The Winner Stands Alone* by Paulo Coelho, and *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert.

"Most of the girls hated that book," al Shamsy laughs. "We found the author so self-absorbed, though I did like the part in Italy with all those descriptions of food. *Eat Pray Love* was an Oprah book, and no offence to Oprah, but we've made a decision: No more Oprah books! So many of her picks are depressing."

There's nothing depressing about the meetings, however. "We never agree on books, but that makes it more exciting. The good thing is that we listen to each other."

Hearing baby sounds from upstairs, al Shamsy excuses herself. "Reading is such a necessity," Ghanim continues. "Many men say that they don't have the time to read but one can always make the time."

Sometimes, he admits, he finds himself flipping through the TV channels in the evening. "And I wonder: What am I doing?"

Ghanim has nothing to feel guilty about. He's read both of Barack Obama's books recently, plus a biography of the new US



Asma al Shamsy and Saeed Ghanim say they try to make time each day to read a book. [Sammy Dallal / The National](#)

president. "His life story is inspiring, truly amazing," Ghanim says. "Especially after those eight years of chaos."

Al Shamsy returns, a beautiful baby girl in her arms. "It's harder to find time to read with a baby," she says, but she and her husband continue to encourage each other, sometimes even reading together. "We have a small library upstairs," says Ghanim, and he grins. "Sometimes it's a library and sometimes it's a laundry room."

The serene room on the topmost floor is lined with pale wood shelves and filled with light. It is a place where one could forget the rest of the world, which is one of the points of reading, after all. Ghanim points out some of his favourite books, including the Robin Sharma and the Obama biography. Then he quotes one of Nelson Mandela's speeches: "After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are more hills to climb."

Before I leave, Al Shamsy slips me her copy of *Mother Without a Mask*. She must have sensed my interest when we'd talked about it earlier and she wants me to leave with a book in hand.

Al Shamsy and Ghanim's picks

The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari by Robin S Sharma

The Winner Stands Alone by Paulo Coelho

PS I Love You by Cecelia Ahern

A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose by Eckhart Tolle

Mother Without a Mask by Patricia Holton

Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia by Jean Sasson

Dreams From My Father by Barack Obama

The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama

* Denise Roig

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