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# MEHDI RAJABI

# Biography



On September 3, 1980, together with my mother, I spent the night in a hospital. I have not seen the world yet, all that I remember hearing was the sound of a popular song: “Sunsets that lights are turned on... Crows leave the school for home...” Mom laughs at me when she hears this again and remembers the memory she has already told me. The on September 3 night we went to the hospital with uncle’s car. As we passed the dusty road, the singer on the tape was singing: “Sunsets that lights are turned on...”

Mom says her memory of my birth has merged with this song. She says that when she was on the bed at the hospital, she felt her stomach and calmly read the song to me like a lullaby. But I really feel like I heard this song before the birthday, but no one believes me. Anyway, my memoirs of the night of my birthday were later included in *Switch Keeper Snakes* where the name of Mom Nasrin became Nana.

In brief, I was born on in a summer Wednesday morning, in Imam, or the former Lion and the Sun hospital in Khomein (a city in the central parts of Iran). Mom says I was a calm boy and did not cry too much. Probably because she had read the song “Crows” for me. Even now, when she is busy, she whispers the song to herself. We drove back home with the uncle’s car a man who has left us now. Our house was in the village of my father’s family. A village called Neishahr. A city full of Nei, straw. Neishahr was about fifteen kilometers from Khomein,

and we lived in a large village house with a large yard and garden. A rustic, hard-working village, without piped water and in the early years even without electricity. But everything did not look as bad as it seems. The situation became even worse. Eight days after my birth, the deadly war between Iran and Iraq break out. Saddam ordered to attack Iran and our country was surrounded by tears, sighs, blood, and smoke. Daddy had just completed her diploma and was supposed to be a formal teacher for the ministry of education, but as it was customary in those days, he was married very early and he had to leave us, Mom and Bibi the grandma, to go to compulsory military service. Daddy was a wireless operator and one year later in the west of Andimeshk (a city in southern Iran), a mortar was dropped one meter away from him and if there was no wireless radio on his back, he would have been killed. Dad was severely injured and returned home with a pile of shells and projectiles in the lungs and eyes and hands and feet. Many other young people did not return or if they returned they had lost a hand, a leg, or an eye on the battlefield. Throughout my childhood, me, my friends, my fathers, and mothers spent in war conditions for eighth years.

But life in the village had its good times also. The close relationship with the plants, animals, and nature was a wonderful experience that all the children did not have the chance to have. This definitely affects the nature and spirit of the child. We had a farm, and mountains and plains, and a whole lot of stories for listening that my grandmother told us. Stories about the demon, giants, and fairies. Magical birds and animals who talked. The heroes who defeated the demons and the angels who guarded the little children during the nights. Daddy finished military



service and become a teacher at our own village. Naturally, my first acquaintance with books should be with the books that Daddy brought home.

Sometimes I accompanied Daddy in the classroom and I have a vague memory of those days. I was getting older and passing the time and very often I saw many families who fled war and bombardment and to refuge in our village and home. But despite the bombardments and the threat of war, when I was six, I immigrated to Khomein. The city that is famous after the name of Ayatollah Khomeini (leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran) in the political literature of Iran and the world. At that time, of course, it was more special, and sometimes we thought that we are very important people, although no one anywhere in Iran knew a lot about our silent and vague city. Everyone thought that because of being a homeland of Ayatollah Khomeini, our situation must be great and with the best facilities. But we were experiencing the reality of living in this small and relatively poor city.

Our relationship with the village was the same as before and we spent the summers in the village. Fishing and swimming in the rivers are among my best memories, but in fact, my holidays meant working on the farm, and sometimes I really wanted to go the school all the time and I wish the school to be open for 12 months. We still have our farm, and sometimes I go back and lie underneath the cherry or walnut trees, and review our memories of planting with Daddy. We visit the place, where at the age of ten, I took Uncle's books and magazines and read them secretly, those published materials that Daddy has banned. I did not understand much of them at that time. Now, sometimes, I sit there and thinking about what happened that I choose this way: writing for children and teenagers.

Maybe everything goes back to the first year of primary school. I was the strangest student in the class. Years before, I had learned the letters of the alphabet with my father, so learned to read and write very much earlier than anyone else. But there was some sort of a disorder in my writing. It still looks incredible for myself, but I was the only child to write my homework in reverse. Whatever the cause, it made my teacher call me a dumb and stubborn person. Every day he reproached me and, on the day, when he was desperate, asked my dad to attend. As a teacher, Daddy tried to convince me not to write in reverse. I apparently obeyed, but in private I repeated this pleasure for myself and even pronounced the words in reverse. Later, this became a feature of the main character of *Canned Ghoul*. At that time, I was like a left-handed person who was to force to use the right hand. I wrote wherever I came, on the matchbox, on the wall, on the watermelon skin, on the soil, on the car windows. I was mad about writing, I liked to write words and put them together.

I became interested in theater since the second year of primary school, and I wrote and performed comedy and childish plays for myself. I do not remember much about those texts, but they are simple adaptations of films and TV shows I saw, partly accompanied by imitation of the voice of television and cartoon characters. For several years, I was invited to perform at different schools on the occasion of the 1979 Revolution celebrations. I became more professional and, in my plays, used the material I read on books and magazines. I behaved like a real comedian and had funny texts in my imagination. Until the second year of primary school that war ended, we had the experience of the bombardment of civil areas and there was the fear of war sirens and bombardment and the required readiness to escape to the shelters. Most of the destructive psychological effects of those experiences are still with me and my generation. However, in those days, the children

had so little drama and humor in their lives that they were laughing out loud at every movement and word that had the color of a show. It was the occasion to find the true magic of story and from the third grade, I found myself pursuing stories.

Our neighborhood in Khomein was not a prosperous neighborhood. The houses were crowded and dirty and full children of different sizes. While you could meet wondering salesmen and knife sellers easily in the city, the number of libraries and bookstores was less than three. I remember the summer of the year after the end of the war that we went to the village, in an old ruined house I saw *Keyhan for Kids* magazine which was rolled out of the soil, possibly that was a changing moment for my entire life. With fervor, I pulled out the magazine from the soil. I read all the contents of the magazine several times, but the only thing I can clearly recall is a story that was very sad and at the same time promising. The story of a boy living in the capital whose house-owner has forced them to leave. They were walking around the edge of the city, and have set up a tent with his mother's chador and other pieces fabrics. The mother of the family made a simple meal on picnic stow, and the boy was hungry, tired and sad, gazing from the hole of the tent at the beautiful stars of the sky, weaving dreams. It was as if the star was telling him to stay hopeful, and if he was strong with no fears, good things would happen.

I was not an ardent reader of school books and I preferred watching television and reading stories, at the same time, I was always the first at school and respected by classmates and teachers. The school was a good place, but my only nightmare was walking in the neighborhood, and facing the evil people detached from art and culture. In fact, they were victims of a harsh social situation themselves. Until the high school period, life was a real battlefield for me. Every day I was disappointed and sad, and Mom used to say every day that you would succeed ... you are to be an important and successful person. You should not be afraid of problems. But I did not know how to be strong and am still worried about problems. In the middle, there were only books and stories to take refuge.

Father, from the very beginning, wanted me to be an engineer or doctor, and because of that, he considered reading stories a futile work and this was among the masterpieces of my childhood system of education. The problem is still with the Iranian system of education. In brief, I had to read my favorite stories secretly. I discovered a phenomenon called cinema, and my problems were multiplied. For the first time in the third grade, we were taken to the only cinema in our city and I fell deeply in love with the magical cinematic curtain. I loved the movie theater crazily, and I thank God, Daddy was against the cinema too. Application for money for a cinema ticket was simply equal to one hour of advice! But I found another way, and the same year I went to the middle school or the sixth grade, I decided to do peddling. It was a greatly challenging experience for my age. With the little money from the sale of food and snacks in the parks, I bought a few novels a month and kept in secret. I read most of Jules Verne's novels at that time, and I became fascinated by his strong imagination. After that, there were Jack London's novels. I read *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* several times, and perhaps I was interested in these works because the background of my life was in nature, plains and mountains, and I was strongly interested in animals.



But after introduction to the cinema, I kept imagining about cinematic forms of stories, and it was there that I felt like writing a story, and adapt my stories into films in a day. From the age of twelve, everyone who asked what am I going to do when I grow up, I immediately answered, I am going to be a director. Although I read every single novel I saw and had been practicing writing, I did not have any image of myself to be a writer. I just wanted to become a director. We had two bookstores in the city with limited books, most of them abridged. With the little money I received on a weekly basis from my parents, I secretly bought cinema tickets. This happened once or twice in a month. In the small city's cinemas of that time, there was a process that kept my imagination alive and active and to write everything I heard. At that time they broadcasted the soundtrack of movies on the load speakers of public spaces of the city, possibly for advertisement. Most of the movies were about war and especially Iran-Iraq and they kept it on the screens for three months. I kept a notebook to write every dialogue I heard. This was a natural practice for writing. They were senseless materials but I kept adding and forming them by my imagination. Also, there were holes around the cinema, like the one





near the exit door where I could see the movies, to see some random images. This secret and illegal watching of the movies was sometimes the source of trouble as the guards caught me several times. After all, it was illegal to watch the movie through the holes!

Also, they were throwing away used 35mm films. I accidentally found this and enthusiastically collected and glued the parts as much as I could. I made a simple apparat system for myself. I made the room dark and projected the still images on the wall. Then I used the recorded sounds and created a small studio for myself. I remember scratching the gelatins and drawing the cartoons I knew such as Robin Hood or Tom and Jerry on the negatives, then made voices for them. The movies usually started the introduction of the director as Mehdi Rajabi. Unfortunately, none of those works remained.

Interestingly, the only library in our city was next to the same cinema, and I discovered the joy of being in a library and started to read some original novels and books. going to the library began to crawl through the legs of the library and the limited storybooks of the library. The librarian was a relative of our family and sometimes I helped him in the afternoon to order the shelves and putting the books in their location. At the same time, I met the works of some great Iranian fiction writers like Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadegh Choubak, and Sadegh Hedayat, as I read Gholam Hossein Sa'edi and Bahram Beyzaee's plays. Actually, I did not fully understand most of them but managed to read some of them secretly together with my mother. But the most important fantasy stories I accidentally found on those days was Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. Possibly it was the book that most powerfully affected my mind. Besides reading, going to the theatre, and participation in student theatre festivals was my greatest concerns. Some of our theatrical performances were awarded and it was a great encouragement. However, my father was against all these and he kept repeating that these works will lead nowhere.

But apparently, my destiny was tied to these kinds of affairs. Eventually, after completing my high school, and despite the desire of father, who wanted to see me as an engineer or doctor, I decided to continue my studies in art. But since I did not have any knowledge about the specific type of question, I failed in the first year. I failed and lost the opportunity to change my status. But my mother, like most other good mothers of the world, always encouraged me and kept repeating that I have talents and, in every way, I will find my way. Without informing my father, together with a friend, I went to Tehran to buy test preparation books. That one-day travel and seeing the crowded streets of the capital and busy bookshops of Enqelab square was a great adventure for me. I intensively studied for a few months and suddenly I got a strange illness that was a form of internal bleeding. Already I have lost an aunt because of the same disease, and now everyone in the friends and family was visiting me as if for the last time. I hated all those people and did not talk to anyone. At the same days, I had to travel to Tehran to do some medical examinations. In the end, doctors told me that my problem was just a simple food sensitivity, and unfortunately or fortunately I was not going to die that early. I regained energy and I studied with strength and belief, and the following year, my rank at the exam was a single digit.

I was accepted at the university entrance exam and started my studies at the faculty of Cinema Theatre. Yes! I was one step closer to the dream of becoming a director.

Entering Tehran and introduction to artistic spaces that were limited to the capital at that time, was a turning point for me. Most importantly of all, there was the library of the University of Art. A great number of books and movies was accessible to me that I have always longed to read. From that moment on, with the review of important books in the world of literature, the passion for literature in me became even stronger than the desire for art. I still wanted to make a movie and to write a screenplay, but literature was more beautiful and more imaginative than anything. All those who have experienced living in the capital know that there are great opportunities but for the wealthy people. If you

do not have money, you will not go to the cinema neither you will have a chance to see a theatrical performance. This made me change my university after one semester and in spite of my desire and leave my friends and attend the University of IRIB, the national broadcasting agency, where I have heard they are giving special scholarships. I found better conditions there, now I had a secure monthly salary and I could buy more books and see more movies and theatrical performances. But time continued to show its cruelty and discordancy. This time a friend of mine was drowned while swimming in a dam. It had a very bitter effect as it was a direct encounter was the death of a loved one. I turned to the inner side of myself and wanted to write a serious story and publish it. I wrote the story but never published it. From that moment I found literature as a way to cure a wounded soul and decided to become a story writer. Another thing that helped me in writing stories was the introduction to the art of animation. A pure form of art that was a combination of illustration, cinema, and literature. Most important of all, you learned how to use your borderless imagination in storytelling. We could decide on the specific branches to continue. I was after filmmaking and some other students decided to follow animation. But we remained friends in the dormitory where I had the chance to write some good and successful animation scenarios for my friends. Years later, one of these animations, Labyrinth (a video on YouTube), achieved many global awards and to flourish in many of the festivals. In the second year I entered the university when I became more interested in the art of animation, I realized that before anything else I wanted to write stories. The first story I wrote and confidently asked some friends to read was about a boy with mental disabilities. Although the story was for adults,

perhaps it was very effective in showing me how much I am interested in children's and adolescent literature. With the same story, I participated in the national story writing festival for the students where my story was nominated. The next step was the Literary Award of Isfahan, which was the very first round. I sent two stories to the festival and both of them were nominated and published. This was my first publication and it was a great source of joy. Despite my very young age, the literary community was listening to me. At the same festival, I met a leading Iranian writer, Moniroo Ravanipour, whose husband was the owner of one of the most important Iranian publications, Ghesseh publications. Moniroo Ravanipour asked me if I had other stories to prepare for publication in a collection. A few months later this happened, and Mrs. Rouhanipour informed me that she liked the collection and just a couple of stories will not be published. I was the youngest writer at that time in Iran and this was a great achievement.

A publisher was supposed to publish my book that was the publisher of some great Iranian writers. It turned out that my first book for adults, *Neglectees of this Winter*, was published. One year passed and my book was the final candidate for the Yalda Prize of 2005. The book did not get the final award, but this nomination made me acquainted with many literary currents and communities. Those who have read the book said that the most important element of the stories was imagination and discovered powerful fantasies in children and adolescent's literature. Although I had a keen interest in the fantasy and children and adolescent's literature, those days I thought the author nobody care for a writer for children's and adolescents and in fact the reality was not far removed from this... I was, however, interested in knowing more and, as far as

adolescents. The same year, I received a very good grade and was accepted at the University of Tarbiat Modarres to study dramatic literature.

My sense told me that a writer should be familiar with drama and theater as much as possible. Stepping into dramatic literature, greatly affected my understanding of literature and opened many more windows to the subject. I read a lot of playwrights and researched on them, and especially a serious acquaintance with the theatre of the absurd and such figures as Ionesco, Beckett and Edward Albee, had a great impact on my use of language and form in the stories.

A form of obsession grew in me and I could not continue with that restless and fearless writing. Suddenly, the fear of white paper came to me. The event became more complicated by the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. My undergraduate studies were during the reform era which was accompanied by a relatively open space for art and culture and now I was terrified. The political atmosphere of the society and the closure the independent press together with widespread censorship was frightening for many writers and this poor and inexperienced creature thought that this is the end of the world and that there is no ray of hope. At the same year, I finished my university project to make a short movie. My professors after watching the film, told me that this is promising I should continue this way and I will surely be going to be one of the great future filmmakers. However, I was attracted to the world of literature and could not recognize which way to choose. I wrote a few long and short pieces for the screen, but I was still not satisfied. Finally, the literature for children and adolescent became that ray of hope. It was a space I could prove to be myself and could create the world I desired.

In those years, I was not satisfied with any writing until, finally, my first collaboration for the production of children and adolescents' literature with Scientific and Cultural Publications was formed. This publication organized the Youth Literary Prize and accidentally one of my stories, *The River-Floor Fishes* was nominated for the prize and this was the basis for more collaborations. The children's and adolescent unit invited me to collaborate for the publication of new books. At the same meetings, my acquaintance with young writers like Seyyed Navid Seyyed Ali Akbar made my way to literary communities of children's literature. This resulted in my membership in the Association of Writers for Children and Adolescents. I participated in the Association's reading meetings for about three years, on a biweekly basis. There were other meetings the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults and other publishing offices, but the literary meetings of Association were more appealing and elitist for me. In these meetings, I was introduced to the diversity and variety of literary styles and helped me to find my way. Although sometimes we disputed over ideological issues at the Association at the same time among the writers I found such friends as Dr. Mehdi Hejvani, Fereidoun Amoozadeh Khalili, Ali Asghar Seidabadi, Mohammad Reza Shams, and others who were good companions and encouragements for me in those years.

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My first experiences in publishing pictorial books were fascinating as I could implement many ideas I already had. The result was four books that



were gradually published after four years. The first book, *The Riddle of the Blue Headed Crazy*, was placed on *The White Crow* List of the Munich Library in 2009, which was a great success for me. My first pictorial book was of recognized by experts in children's literature.

Three other books appeared at various festivals, the latest one, *Do not Cry Like Spring Clouds*, in 2010 won the award for the book festival of the Center for Cultural Development of Children and Young Adults. This made children's literature society one of the most important and serious concerns for me.

While I was publishing my first books for children and adolescents, I attended numerous literary meetings at different cultural and educational institutions. This was an opportunity to meet my real audiences, that is children and young adults, and I read parts of my books for them. These meetings were very valuable to me and they are still are. I found the children as the most clever and frank critics, and they made me realize the weaknesses and strengths of my work and find better themes and motivations for the next books. During these years, with the aim of promotion of children's literature, I organized story writing workshops for children and adolescents. Also, I started a collaboration with main publication outlets such as *Bicycle*, *Baraan*, and *Hello Kids*, where I published my stories and independent reviews. Actually, my main priority has always been on publishing books but I published some of my stories in journals and newspapers.

The unstable atmosphere of Iranian politics in 2009 was full of new incidents. The political events of that period around the presidential election created a bipolar atmosphere full of bitter tensions. As usual, most of the pressures were on the middle class and the cultural elites, creating new forms and high levels of censorship for books and magazines. The majority of the people and the cultural elites were disappointed, but as I had the experience of the 2004 election, I was more prepared for such an incident and did not surrender to griefs and sorrows. I was more active than ever.

For the first time in 2010, I passed the experience of being a teacher for adolescents and directly started my work as the story writing coach at the cinema school of national broadcasting organization. The experience of meeting a group of 60 students, most of them about 17 years old, was one of the most dramatic and influential experiences for me. They were adolescents with hormonal changes and severe physical transformations; movable warehouses. They would explode with the smallest spark. They became violent for no reason and laughed for no reason, they fell in love and forget everything. But despite the difficulty of dealing with them, I managed to communicate and listen to their specific point of view. They talked about their dreams and aspirations, the kind of words nobody listened, but because of my age, they were more comfortable with me.

These talks later helped me to write *Canned Ghoul*, as they provided useful materials for *Dark Sisters*, a novel with the main theme of puberty. Most of those students were after animation and filmmaking, and one of them is a story writer.

After getting closer to the adolescent world, more incidents happened. I usually did not like to judge in the festivals, but I do not know what happened that for two consecutive periods I accepted to judge in Youth Fiction Festival of The Foundation for Art. This experience provided a good knowledge of the status of literature in the younger generation and I became more familiar with their intellectual and literary concerns. At the same time, I dedicated all my energies



to writing a novel for adolescents. *Lulus does not Cry at Nights* was a novel that rose from the cares and concerns of the younger generation. A man with a sick dog enters a strange and unknown city and claims that his dog can swallow children's nightmares, but later, they do not see any dreams; instead, many mysteries about the city authorities are revealed. At that time, the literary writer's income was so limited that I had to write a movie script. The result was several television films that have been repeatedly broadcasted on TV. However, I do not talk about them often as I want to introduce myself as a literary writer for children and adolescent.

After publication of *Lulus does not Cry at Nights*, I received a few offers for making cinematic animations from the book, which, of course, was never funded. After this novel, I felt my deep interest in writing novels for teenagers. Like all teenagers of the world, Iranian teenagers are lovers of the novelistic genre. But in Iran, unlike other parts of the world, the number of published novels for teens is very limited.

This time, with the experienced I had and a better understanding I achieved on children and adolescents' audience, I was more prepared to investigate and practice on the form and language aspects of the novel. This made me leave script writing, despite its better income, and focus more intensely on novel writing. Years ago I wrote a one-page story about a boy who, instead of a magic lamp, finds a can, after boiling it, a giant exits from it. This story was nominated for Fiction Festival of the Association of Writers for Children and Adolescents. I found the idea as very suitable for a novel. I closed all the doors to myself for two years and started researching and writing. I wanted to write a different novel with different characters. I rewrote the novel about ten times to find a suitable

form. This is how Tuka was born. A strange little boy, who, like myself at the first grade, spoke in reverse and wanted to be a criminal, but getting acquainted with the Ghoul in the can and mathematics changed his life. *Canned Ghoul* was published and received many awards such as Silver Badge of Flying Turtle, nominated book of the Munich Library in 2015, nominated book of The National Best Book Festival, nominated book of Children's Book Council, and the final candidate of the Fiction Festival of the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. In brief, the book found many reprints in a short period of time and found its special place in the literary domain of children and teenagers. Many notes were published about it in different journals and newspapers, and it became the subject of investigation in many scholarly papers and dissertations. I also received many offers for film adaptations and that both I and the publisher rejected them on the basis of limited fundings and technical weakness of the filmmakers. Anyway, *Canned Ghoul* was a great success, and this was due to deep discussions with the children and adolescents at various meetings and reading sessions. Knowing the spirits and emotions of children and adolescents showed its wonderful effect.

The following year, I had yet another experience with pictorial books and for the first time wrote a story for children under the age of seven. *Tail Weaver Haired Sandwich Maker* was an extraordinary experience, and in 2016 it was introduced in the list of Munich Library and was honored at the National Best Book Festival. My journey to schools and libraries began with *Sandwich Maker* and I was astonished by the warm welcome of the audience. Now the book is supposed to be translated into Swedish by the Zeitun Publications and will be available to Swedish children in 2019.

One of my interesting experiences in children and adolescents' literature was in cooperation with Technical Publishing Company Technical Publications. With a focus on the environment, this publication had a plan to familiarize children and young people with environmental issues and the approaches to preserve and support it. This time my old and unlimited interest in animals came to my aid. I wrote *Balabaan's Greif*, a story about a hunter bird called Balabaan that was illegally smuggled from Iran. The story won the Golden Statue of Sepidar Festival and was later published by Technical Publications. The following year, I wrote another book called *Bear of the Moon* on Black Asian Bear, that again won the statue. Altogether, I have written five books for Technical Publications, with the hope that they will affect children's understanding of environmental issues. During the third festival, I was selected as a referee and judged the writings of young Iranian writers. Now I am one of the active proponents of writing for environmental issues and am going to publish more books on this theme.

After *Tail Weaver Haired Sandwich Maker*, I wrote three further novels for teens; among them, *Horse Nightmare* was adapted from the ancient literature of Iran. The experience of writing *Dark Sisters* which is very close to the horror genre, was very different for me because I wrote about an old concern on adolescence and maturity crisis. The novel faced an awesome welcome by the audience and it received a variety of reviews and comments. However, in next year, it was listed among the five finalists of Fiction Festival of the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. With *Dark Sisters*, it became clear to me that there was a great vacuum in the Iranian literature for books about the horror and maturity crisis as Iranian writers have not worked on these issues. This knowledge made me write a five-volume collection of pictorials for teens,



*Bizarre Stories for Strange Kids*, this time with a different approach to language and narrative, a collection that found several reprints in short time. This collection was awarded by the national fantasy fiction festival, Festival of Legends, and was also featured in the Flying Turtle List, which is organized annually by a group of experts on children's literature and prepares a list of best-published books available to the families.

Those who have followed my work are familiar with the dominance of fantasy in the structure and narrative. While the Iranian children are often fascinated by fantasy works, no considerable literature is produced in this genre. Therefore, since 2013, I decided to dedicate my time to write a collection of fantasy stories for children. This is the task I have already started with *Canned Ghoul*. Tuka was a boy who had lost her father and was involved with her mother's depression. From that time, I decided to focus more particularly on children, and this was the basis of writing *Bardiya and Golakhs* a collection of novels that lasted about four years. *Bardiya*, a boy with stuttering tongue and low self-confidence, finds out that stuttering is just a feature, and he has some extraordinary powers as Harry Potter. In a short time, the collection received a great welcome from children. The novel is currently nominated for Noufeh Literary Prize that is the first literary prize for fantasy and science fiction. But the most awful reception was by a teenager who had read the book and had a stuttering tongue. The impact of the book was clear enough. As if he had discovered himself in the book, and when he was talking to me he was not ashamed of stuttering.

In fact, since 2013, writing for children with special problems become one of my concerns and I started to communicate and collaborate with various associations and NGOs, including the



UNICEF Office in Iran and the Center for Autism Down Syndrome. Collaboration with volunteers at the Center for Down Syndrome was the cause for writing another book for children with down syndrome, *Mrs. Swan's House*.

To date, I have published about 30 books for children and adolescents, and I have two adult books in my résumé.

Also, as a writer for children and adolescent author, attending in professional reading and reviewing of children's book and writing reviews on important books for children's and adolescent literature for different magazines and websites was a routine task. I've written reviews on such books as the *Dead End*, *Marine*, and *Call Me Beautiful*, as many other books that are available in print and online formats. The only thing I know is that writing for children and teens is now my full-time job and it is a pleasure I will never leave. Possibly all this passion for imagination and storytelling is rooted in that song I heard from my mother before I was born. She has put her hand on her stomach singing, "Mom had laid his hand on her belly and read to me: "Sunsets that lights are turned on...".

I still wonder how the crows attend school and leave for home? Sure they attend schools. It is a creative imagination that can embed a children's song into a love song for adults.

## Resume

Member of the Association of Writers for Children and Adolescents, from 2008 to 2018.

The Writer of *Labyrinth* script, 2007.

The writer of *Pink Cloud* script, 2008.

The writer of *Lost Waves* script, 2003.

The write of *Eternal Delusions* script, 2003.

The write of *The Night of the Sheep* script, 2011.

The writer of *Award for Losers* script, 2013.

The writer of *Butterfly Man* script, 2013.

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*Do not Cry Like Spring Clouds* awarded by Association of Writers, 2009

*Do not Cry Like Spring Clouds* Awarded in Fourteenth Festival of Book for Children and Adolescents, such as Cloud Bahar, 2010.

*Canned Ghoul* Listed in White Crow Munich Library, 2016.

*Canned Ghoul* Listed in Flying Turtle and received the silver badge, 2015.

*Canned Ghoul* awarded in Excellent Books Festival, 2015.

*Canned Ghoul* awarded by Council on Children's Book, 2015

*Tail Weaver Haired Sandwich Maker* listed on White Crow, Munich Library, 2016

*Tail Weaver Haired Sandwich Maker*, Awarded by Association of Publishers, 2017.

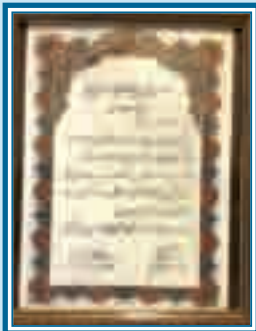
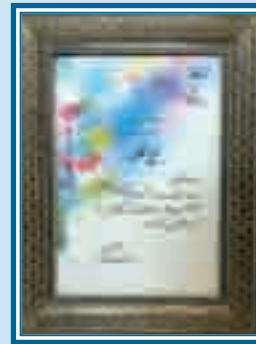
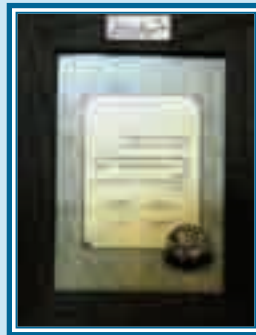
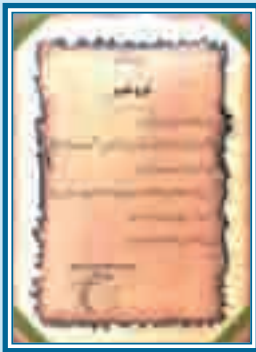
*Dark Sisters* Nominated by Fiction Festival of the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, 2016.

*Balabaan's Greif* received Golden Statue of the First Sepidar Literary Prize, 2015.

*Bear of the Moon* received the Golden Statue of the Second Sepidar Literary Prize, 2016.

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## Overview of Work

Mehdi Rajabi is a creative expressionist; a writer who works on the structure of the genre and has been able to break the ethical concept of teenage literature in Iran and open up new spaces for writing. He can be described as the most progressive and most innovative writer in the field, who knows his audience, he does not underestimate the audience. This is the missing point in Persian teen literature and it was Mehdi Rajabi who found; a fact that led critics and audiences to read his works.

He is one of the few Iranian writers who use new narrative elements to create a modern fantasy and has so far been successful and has added new spaces for the literature of children and adolescents. Rajabi chooses adolescents' real-life challenges and presents his narrative in hyper-realistically. Avoiding direct telling, which is the way most of the other writers do, and avoiding the frameworks of the didactic literature is key to his success.

Rajabi has new words. His attempt is to provide a platform to show the great struggles of children and adolescents and is not indifferent to the frustrations, loneliness, and concerns of this generation.

The fictional world of Mehdi Rajabi is full of mystery, fear, and horror. He creates unreal and mysterious spaces in the real world. This is so fascinating that draws the audience and allows the author to create a special atmosphere for his fictional world. An approach that helped Rajabi provide a suitable platform for turning his fictional characters into active subjects. Every story he writes is the logical continuation of the mysterious spaces he had created before. He does not avoid creating enigmatic spaces full of shadows, especially using the geographical context and reality of Iran. Rajabi attempts to create new structures and publish

works under the title of adolescent literature that is not limited to a specific age range.

Character and characterization are among the most reflective features in Mehdi Rajabi's novels. This is the feature that makes most of his work turn into character-centered stories. Rajabi masterfully demonstrates the concerns and anxieties of teenagers who are affected by the crisis and by successfully processing his fictional characters, is trying to influence the audience. The detailed illustrations of characters, as well as attention to specific details, have helped the author to create distinctive heroes. This is more significant in a time when the most serious problem of children's and adolescent literature of Iran is lack of vivid, tangible, and realistic characters that detaches the audience from fictions. He lets up protagonists who are neglected in real life to discover and express their identity.

In most of his works, Rajabi empowers the central character with imagination to create a fantasy second environment and characters to find refuge and solve the problems of the real world. Most of the characters in his stories do not have special abilities and are ordinary and even weak persons who in the process of the story reach intellectual capabilities. Rajabi recognizes the individual differences and requirements of children and adolescents and allows them to enjoy within their own world.

Despite the fact that hesitation, fantasy, and uncertainty play an important role in the formation of Rajabi's stories, his general theme is based on active rationality and consciousness. He always encourages the audiences to think and find answers to questions they may have. Also, his psychological approach to his

fictional narratives has made the message not superficial and not easily transmitted. Audiences can hear different voices and judge and decide by considering different aspects of an event of their own. An approach that is a form of rebellion against traditional patterns of children and adolescent literature in Iran.

Mehdi Rajabi is a young, daring and exploring writer who has the making of a great writer. Great writers read a lot of books, they are not afraid of experiencing, are not frustrated, accept criticism, are indefatigable, and confidently work hard on their works. With the introduction of new or taboo subjects, that few writers embrace, he risks but could challenge the old ideals and conventional beliefs of children and adolescent literature.

Violence, bad parenting, and injustice are issues that do not usually find artistic articulations for children and young people to avoid pessimism and disappointment. However, Mehdi Rajabi, through storytelling, by choosing the right tone, and by manipulating the imaginative capacities, talks about the banned aspects of children's literature, thus creating a world that is neither tragic nor desperate but propagates real hopes and optimism.

He activated the isolated and perplexed characters in order to overcome their frustrations and discover their capacities. He helps to free themselves from wondering and absurdity and fulfill their full personality.

Rajabi is among the few Iranian writers who have experience in writing multi-volume fantasy novels. His Novels have a solid and coherent structure that is faithful to the rules of credible imagination and are in line with fantasy logic. He knows what he does and in every single work seeks to

create new worlds and different relations. He plays with wizards and criminals and at the same time avoids the usual rules of horror literature. This the reason why his works are not usually categorized as horror literature. Rajabi uses traditional techniques of fiction waiting in his own unique way and is always searching for a new language and fictional forms.

It is evident that Mehdi Rajabi's good knowledge of contemporary literature and Iranian mythology has been effective in shaping such practices. Reflection on outstanding literary works and recognition of their special features enabled him to find a different artistic articulation that has an affinity with the most important narrative prose in Persian and world literature; stories that in terms of diversity and novelty of the subject and style are innovative and creative. This is the topic that has attracted the attention of literary critics and scholars has led to the production and presentation of numerous articles at the different professional and academic institutions in Iran.

Many Iranian children and adolescents also enjoy reading Mehdi Rajabi's stories, and these works have been effective in expanding reading habit.

## Introducing Books

### Bizarre Stories for Strange Kids

*Sana Kakavand*



*Bizarre Stories for Strange Kids* collection includes five stories. The “Lasts” as the first story, “Dog Tree”, “The Bean Man Report”, “Switch Keeper of the Snakes”, and “The Frozen Bird” as the other books, are the titles of different stories. These stories are narrated in a dreamy, dark and full of horror setting.

The world in which the tales of this collection are occurring are both blurred and fantasy and full of horror images that are depicted in plain and straightforward

language. The prose is devoid of poetic language and without linguistic twists the reader can feel this pure horror.

Falling from twenty-fifth floor, a crow-headed old woman, noise of snakes, corpse of the fishes, a bird with white eyes, sharks that will eat humans if they do not find dogs,

the presence of several children who bury corpses

alone, and a knife that is constantly sharpening itself, are forms of this horror that are attracting attention rather than frightening adolescents. This is the way to put the audience in situations to overcome their constant fears. It could be said that with the acceptance of death as an inevitable phenomenon, eternal struggle between good and evil, and the effort to keep hope in a world full of cruelties and fears, a world more real than this one is portrayed for children and adolescent and can enable them with better logical and imaginative skills to find solutions for their problems.

Mehdi Rajabi masters fantasy and his books are far beyond collections of symbols and fictitious elements. He sensibly arranges all imaginative elements and creates a secondary world in which the characters live, and everything that happens is true and is compatible with the real world laws, characters as the child who barks, or the dead bird that moves. It is a reality that is neither revealed nor analyzed but is expressed so objectively and indifferently that makes the reader believe that there is such a world with such birds that eat nails and such beans that grow up to the sky, as well as green, yellow and black snakes, which roam over the mustache of the railroad switch keeper.

The most basic and perhaps the most fundamental function of fantasy is to entertain children and adolescents. That the audience could read the book and enjoy it without making his or her mind to focus on anything other than the story. A story that has something new for the reader, something unpredictable and surprising. Mehdi Rajabi in his tales has shown that he is very well aware of these functions and of his own task that is to entertain the audience in the first step. He has successfully created a new world for his audience to immerse in, a world in which real and unreal elements are in a dreamy, magic and nightmarish settings, with strange kids whose parents are usually lost in an accident or because of a disease and

are struggling to find a solution to their problems. These challenges activate the imagination of the audience to participate in the problem-solving process. He does not involve the mind of the teenager with boring and repetitive concepts, and intelligently defamiliarizes the already experienced concepts. The canned bean in the neighboring man in “The Bean Man” story very like Jack’s bean, grows but the boy instead of selling his cow, decides



to sell his father's badge of courage, or in "Dog Tree," a storm moves the house of the seed very like Dorothy's house in the Wizard of Oz, or a train that makes noises like a snake and the passengers are seen as pieces of stuff that are swallowed in a stomach. Mehdi Rajabi takes the children seriously and respects their complex world and tries to create fictional worlds that could improve the literary taste of adolescents and provide enjoyable and wonderful readings for adults.

Excerpts from Kakavand, Sana (2017), "Mehdi Rajabi; The phenomenon of Iranian teenage literature", Sazandeghi Daily, March 1.

## Canned Ghoul

*Children and adolescent literature research Magazine*



Tuka is a thin boy with spectacles who lives with his mother. Tuka's mother is depressed after her husband's death and is obese and ill. Tuka is fainthearted and hates school. He does not have a friend and is often beaten by his classmates. He reads and speaks with difficulty and is often dreaming to become like criminals; rough, fearless and rich. What sustains this wish in Tuka's mind is a book he finds and reads which is about the memories a famous

criminal called Parviz. In fact, in this book, two parallel stories are narrated; Tuka's story, the main narrator, and Parvez's story, which is read and reflected by Tuka.

One day an old woman sells Tuka a book, giving her a can of food and claims that there is a ghoul in the can. Tuka starts reading the book and gets in love with the giant inside the can, On even days, the ghoul exits the can. The giant causes Tuka, who hates both school and math, to find confidence and gradually



overcome fear and by memorizing the first numbers to become a math genius. Strong and memorable characterization of the novel has made the isolated and enigmatic hero of the story so interesting and appealing to the audience. The tone that the author chooses for Tukka, makes him both similar with many of today's teenagers, and different from many others; a teenager who whenever gets angry, talks in reverse and does not follow rules and conventions and often swims against the flow.

Finding a ghoul inside a can will change Tuka's life in a way, but not as we expect from the magic lamp giant! This ghoul does not do anything for Tuka, even he does not properly talk with Tuka. He only loves numbers and to count. That the giant does nothing, is an important aspect of the book. No one even the ghoul can do anything for Tuka and save him from the muddle. Tuka must come to himself and try to improve his situation! The giant's interest in mathematics helps Tuka to find a way to change the situation. With his astonishing skills in mathematics, he attracted everyone's attention which in turn makes Tuka and his mother hopeful toward life and future.

## Lulu Cries at Nights

*Fereshteh Esmail-Beigi*

Mr. Khalkhali is a botanist who arrived in a strange city on the evening of a spring day. A city that is not geographically mapped. Mr. Khalkhali, who was an outsider and had large spots on his big belly, arrived in the town with his slimy and sick dog. People did not want to permit him to the city, but when they saw Mr. Khalkhali was a simple botanist who does not make troubles and probably would not stay in the town, they allowed him to walk in the plains and hills around the cherry garden, under the bulk of blue clouds and study different plants. But one day, when Mr. Khalkhali went to a remote house outside the city to investigate there for a few days, there was a strange accident. They included such events as sudden floods of rain and mass



movement of strange birds! Some nights a sad and frightening sound was heard from far away. The cries of someone who walked around Mr. Khalkhali's house as if with the intention of telling him something... All these fascinating and exciting adventures happen in one story. It is clear that the writer has worked hard on this book and has dreamed extensively. The story is full of fresh images, mental images of this book are many, some of the readers talk about the dreams they see with the same images. Reading a book with a fresh and fantasy images is a great experience. *Lulu is crying at nights* is such a book. An easy to read that introduces you to a city you have never seen before. You need to find a shelter in the bed on a night that the moon shines, then start reading the book, and when you are afraid or excited, stick to your blanket and let excitement grow gradually!

Excerpts from: Esmail-Beigi, Fereshteh (2012), "The story of a man without umbrellas under the rain," *Hamshahri newspaper, Bicycle Appendix*, February 23, No. 689, p. 9.

## A Criminal Confesses

*Mehdi Ebrahimi Lamee*

The main character of the novel begins the story inside a well that he has fallen because of disobedience from Sphilis. He is a young expert whose work is to test different edible oils and plants and we never know his name to the end. The story starts when the narrator in his workplace changes the chemical structure of an ice-cream essence, adds a strange taste to it and gives it to the dogs. Unaware that a few days later, the dogs become blind and find wild behavior.

The narrator, who, as if has awakened his own dark soul with this experiment, in the next



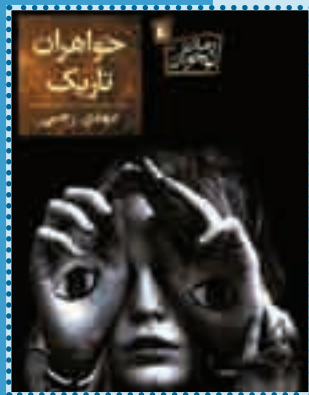
step tries this strange and dangerous taste on humans, leading to paralysis or insanity of some. Then, the narrator spends some time on finding a powerful spell called “black magic”, and becomes frustrated after not finding it. At this time, some unknown person knocks at his door and secretly gives him “The Domain of Darkness”, a book with the description of acquiring black magic. Nevertheless, the narrator does not take it seriously and does not follow its instructions until finally he becomes acquainted with Sphillis, who owns the black magic and lord of the land of darkness, and with his help acquires a satanic power, through which he can read the thoughts of the people and make them do evil deeds. After a few terrible crimes, the narrator eventually regrets and asks Sphillis to bring him back to normal. Sphillis agrees and takes away the power of the black magic from the narrator and because of this disobedience, he abandons the narrator in a deep and dark well forever. Now, the narrator writes his memories in a small booklet, with the hope that someone will find it and break the spell of Sphillis through written instructions and save him from the well.

*A Criminal Confesses* is a novel in horror genre and the writer uses the special devices of the genre to persuade the reader to continue reading. Due to its definitions and constructive elements, horror genre always seeks to create terrifying events and characters in an appalling setting. Some of these elements, such as alien and creepy characters, dark spaces, and alien beings are used in the story that is described through the language of the first-person narrator. The narrator is a young man who has written a series of shocking confessions in a small notebook and presents it as a story to his imaginary audience. In addition to the main narrator of the novel who carries the main task of the narrative, there is another sub-narrator who narrates as

a power against the main narrator. The narrative of both narrators has elaborated on the structure of the narrative through such features as, fear, mystery, ambiguity, denial, and threat. The narrative time is past, and in some cases, the narrator returns to farther past time to make the audience acquainted with more aspects of the negative characters.

Excerpts from Ebrahimi Lamee, Mehdi. (2016). "A House on Water; A Critique *A Criminal Confesses*". *Journal of Criticism of Children and Adolescents Book*, Year 3, No 12, pp. 1527-.

### Dark Sisters



Mehdi Rajabi is a creative expressionist. *Dark Sisters* is the logical continuation of the sad and mysterious spaces that exist in *Canned Ghoul* and *Lulu Cries at Night*. This novel shows that he does not avoid making imaginative worlds full of shadows, especially spaces that are based on reality and the real geographical locations in Iran. In fact, the works published by Mehdi Rajabi as adolescent literature do not have a specific age range. In *Dark Sisters*, again we encounter with special and global adventures under the skin of the city, which is cruel to the characters and objects. Rajabi is a writer who works within the structure of the genre and has been able to break the ethical concept of teenage literature in Iran and open new points of views. *Dark Sisters* is a novel in horror genre and has a psychological approach. The author focuses on the most important feature of the genre, which is the creation of unity of sense; every single sign in the story is at the service of conveying the sense of fear. *Dark Sisters* does not underestimate

the reader, neither for the creation of horror it uses magical and supernatural forces. The narrator's fears and the atmosphere of the book is close to everyday life in Iran and the problems of adolescence are addressed through the story. Moreover, the novel is multi-layered, which provides space for the audience to test their truth-seeking intelligence according to existing signs.

Nima, the main character of the story, suffers from schizotypal personality disorder and is constantly wondering between reality and imagination. He is lonely and often attributes his strange behavior to others. Through attractive and unbelievable images, the author has been able to introduce the audience with a dark world of illusions of a person with this psychological disorder. He wants the audience to have a strong imagination to imagine how to recognize himself and gradually learn to be different from his father, mother and the world around him. So, in *Dark Sisters*, through special attention to the details of life and provision of minute descriptions, the narrative gives the audience the chance to see ugliness, experience the differences, and behave in a normal way, despite the feeling of disgust, hatred or any other feeling... Mehdi Rajabi knows that teenagers are on the edge of the blade; they should both develop a critical outlook, and at the same time they should communicate with the world around themselves and enjoy it. Consequently, at the end of the story, Nima is confronted with the reality of his father's departure and return and no longer wants to think about him with hatred. Therefore, he boldly questions his father about the reason for his departure: "Why did you leave

us? ... Why did you go? I will not tell Mom ... tell me ... talk to me...". The unpleasant feeling of Nima toward his father and in fact, hating him, is a behavioral feature that shows that the main character suffers from Oedipus complex. Nima is at the beginning of puberty. He feels a form of reluctance toward Tara and therefore feels nervous and anxious. This is the characteristics feeling of those who have not been able to pass the Oedipus complex stage.

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### **Bardiya and Golakhs**

*Bardiya and Golakhs* collection is the first experience of multi-volume novels in the fantasy genre in Iran, which has a solid and coherent structure. Fantasy makes the free imagination more credible and the creation of a fantasy world requires specific rules that are set by the author. The rules that the author established in the *Bardiya and*



*Golakhs* collection, and the universe has created is entirely in line with the requirements of the fantasy genre. In this collection, a fictional world is created and some characters with specific relations are introduced and as we move further through different volumes, more characters with more complicated relations are introduced. The author perfectly well knows what he is doing and seeks to create different situations and relations. Bardiya, the main character of the story, is weak and suffers from stuttering, a fact that makes others to mock him. This is a character who, through the narrative process, can make his weaknesses into opportunities and his obstacles into tools, to travel into new spaces and to fight and grow as a hero.

The main theme of the story in this series on the importance of conscious thinking and awareness. The book consists of three volumes addressing the idea of salvation. In the first volume, Bardiya is looking for his hamster. In the second volume, he wants to save the twins sisters and in the third volume, he seeks to rescue the sisters or to save the words. Archetypes have three dimensions: the hero, the victim, and the villain. In this triangle, the victim is of the least importance, a character who is not usually developed. The hero usually travels to the domain of the villain to save the victim. This part is covered very well in the first volume of the story. In the second volume, the people of the two lands confront each other and there are physical conflicts between them, but in the third volume, the concept of salvation becomes more unclear and uncertain. *Golakhs* are symbols of ignorance and that Bardiya is able to stop books to fade away, shows that the main theme of the story on supporting wisdom and consciousness. The author shows the child who is physically weak that she or he is a prince and can do great tasks. Additionally, many positive concepts are elegantly included within the story, these include such ideas as protection of animal life, recognition of others and importance of communications with others, and also it teaches how to communicate with people who suffer from a speech disorder.

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