



PRUE MASON

WHERE DID YOU GROW UP?

I grew up on a farm in southeastern Australia. It was lucky we lived out in the country because I'm the second of nine children and I liked my peace. I used to grab a book, get on my pony, and head to the bush to read.

WHAT WERE YOUR FAVORITE BOOKS TO READ AS A CHILD?

I devoured books from the time I could read. My happiest memories of childhood were when I was in one of many hideouts reading the Billabong Books series by Mary Grant-Bruce about a girl who lived on a big station in outback Australia. Picking an all-time favorite is really hard, but if I was pushed, it might have to be C. S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy*.

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP?

I wanted to be a writer from the time I was about four years old. It was actually my older sister's idea. She decided that we would write a series about a girl and her dog. I was enthusiastic, but we had one major problem: neither of us could write at the time. My sister lost interest in the plan, but I think the dream grew from there. Because I loved reading and being in another world, it wasn't much of a step to start creating my own worlds with my own characters and their own stories.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A WRITER?

I started writing professionally when we moved to the Middle East after my husband got a job as a private pilot for the Sheikh of Dubai. I found a job working for a weekly children's magazine that was distributed around the Gulf region. For ten years I was "Aunt Alice" and gave advice to teenagers. I also wrote feature articles, columns on astronomy and astrology, and a weekly read-aloud story. With all that experience behind me, I started to write my own stories.

DID YOU HAVE RESERVATIONS ABOUT MOVING TO THE MIDDLE EAST?

I was eager to move to Dubai. I knew it was an exciting place with people from different nationalities living and working there. I was keen to learn more about a place that was rapidly changing from a mud-brick town to a seriously glittering city.

WHAT WAS LIFE IN DUBAI CITY LIKE?

When we first arrived, I loved wandering through the narrow alleys of all the different *suqs* (marketplaces)—the fish and vegetable *suqs*, the silk and cotton *suqs*, the spice and perfume *suqs*, and the famous gold *sug*. I spent hours walking and taking in the smells and sights. The shops were small. Some were not much bigger than cupboards; yet they were filled with so many fabulous little trinkets. It was fun haggling with the shop owners because there wasn't a set price for anything.

I loved exploring the area where there were many old homes with traditional wind towers. The wind

served as clever and efficient air-conditioning systems. The houses were made of mud bricks. They had very few windows on the outside and usually only one main doorway. The huge, wooden doors had lovely carvings. The houses looked like fortresses, but they opened out to a courtyard with trees and flowers in the middle.

As Dubai has grown and transformed itself, many of these old houses and *sugs* have been torn down and replaced by beautiful buildings and wider streets. It makes me sad to think of all those memories bulldozed away, but Dubai is now an amazing city with some of the most interesting and innovative architecture in the world.

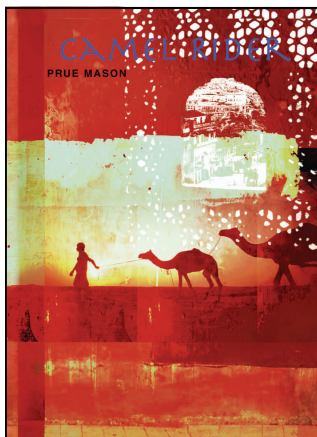
HOW DID LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST DIFFER FROM LIFE IN AUSTRALIA?

The most obvious difference was that I had to be careful about what I wore and how I acted so as not to offend anyone. If I was walking down the street with my husband, we were frowned upon if we held hands. But the nice thing was that if there was a queue at the post office or the bank, all the men would let me go in front of them because they respect women very much.

It was difficult to make friends with local people. There is a level of suspicion about Westerners and our way of life, which many Arab people feel is not respectful. However, Dubai is famous for its level of tolerance and respect for all people and is a real shining light in this time of hatred and racism. I have such excellent memories of my life in the Middle East and would definitely go back there to visit and stay awhile to catch up with our many friends.

DO YOU SPEAK ARABIC?

I speak a very small amount of Arabic. I took lessons when I first arrived, but as so many people wanted to speak in English, it was difficult to practice.



978-1-58089-314-5 HC

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO WRITE *CAMEL RIDER*?

The idea for writing *Camel Rider* started as a dream. My dream was about a boy who was lost in the desert after he ran away to rescue his dog. I dreamed he met someone who saved him and also taught him a lot about Middle Eastern culture. The problem was I didn't remember whom he met. A few weeks later, I read a newspaper article about a camel jockey who was dumped in the desert. As I read it, I looked out the window and saw the kids playing in the pool and kicking around a football. It was hard to believe that less than five miles away there were these terrible camps with children being kept as slaves to ride camels in races. It was as if there were two different worlds living side by side. I began to wonder what would happen if these two worlds met each other. I realized I had the second character in my story and a way to write about the plight of camel riders.

HAVE YOU EVER MET A CAMEL RIDER?

I've been to the camel races, but no one is actually allowed to meet and speak to the boys or take photos. The background for Walid's character came from the newspaper article and other sources, such as the [Anti-Slavery International Association](#).

WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WILL LEARN FROM *CAMEL RIDER*?

I hope readers realize that, while there are differences in the way we think about things, deep down there is a common, shared humanity. If we can learn to respect the differences between us, then we might finally learn how we can all survive in this world. I know it's a bit of a heavy message but I can't help but think that these are desperate times and the messages can no longer be so subtle.