

Exploring Worlds with Gerald Drißner

A Multifaceted Journey through Journalism, Economics, and Arabic Studies

Gerald Drißner, journalist and author, shares insights on journalism, Arabic culture, and misconceptions about Islam, weaving personal experiences into a rich tapestry of understanding.

Gerald Drißner's journey from the serene Austrian village of Wald am Arlberg to the bustling streets of Berlin is nothing short of a worldly adventure. With a degree in economics and a deep-rooted passion for Arabic studies cultivated during his time in Egypt, Drißner embodies a multifaceted approach to life and learning. His immersion in journalism, honed at the prestigious Henri Nannen School of Journalism in Hamburg, Germany, underscores his commitment to understanding and interpreting the complexities of our world.

In an exclusive interview with Reader's House Magazine, Drißner offers a glimpse into his eclectic career path and the pivotal experiences that have shaped his understanding of language, culture, and economics. Reflecting on his early foray into journalism as a teenager capturing the essence of local events, he highlights the fundamental role journalists play as societal watchdogs, elucidating the nuances of power dynamics and global affairs.

Drißner's immersion in the Arab world during the tumultuous period of the Arab Spring provided profound insights into the intricacies of Arabic language and culture. Recounting moments of solidarity and resilience amidst upheaval, he delves into the profound significance of familial bonds and community cohesion in Arab societies, offering a nuanced perspective often overlooked in Western narratives.

As a prolific writer traversing the realms of travel literature, economics, and Arabic studies, Drißner seamlessly intertwines personal anecdotes with profound cultural insights. His acclaimed work, "Islam for Nerds," emerges as a testament to his inquisitive spirit and dedication to bridging cultural divides through education and dialogue. By unraveling common misconceptions surrounding Islam prevalent in Western societies, Drißner endeavors to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Islamic cultures.

In an era marked by unprecedented global connectivity, Drißner's multifaceted approach to storytelling serves as a beacon of enlightenment and empathy. Through his unwavering commitment to uncovering untold stories and challenging prevailing narratives, he invites readers on a transformative journey of discovery and understanding.

What inspired you to delve into journalism, especially considering your background in economics

and Arab studies?

You learn journalism by doing it. For me, journalism is all I've ever done. When I was 15, I started making money by taking pictures and writing articles for the local paper. I covered things like car accidents and community meetings. Journalists are like watchdogs for the public - they keep an eye on those in power and help people understand what's going on in the world. Knowing a lot helps you be a good journalist. Knowing both Arabic and economics is a rare and valuable combination.

Can you share a pivotal experience from your time in the Arab world that significantly shaped your understanding of Arabic language and culture?

In many Western societies, people often think about what's best for them as individuals. In contrast, in Arab cultures, the family unit is very important and comes before the individual. There's a popular saying that captures this idea: "Me and my brother against my cousin; me and my cousin against a stranger. This basically means that family ties are stronger than any other.

There are many words for family in Arabic, and family can also mean people who share certain beliefs or characteristics. Who belongs to a kind of extended "family" (not related by blood) is determined by personal relationships and mutual trust. In January 2011, during the so-called Arab Spring, the Egyptian regime opened prisons all over the country. Thieves, rapists, and murderers were supposed to scare the people and induce chaos because then, so the regime's plan, Egyptians would literally beg for the police they had just sent

to hell to come back. Neighbors would form groups and stand guard in the streets at night. I lived in Alexandria at the time. The bawwab, a kind of caretaker of a building, patrolled in front of my house and reassured me with a butcher knife in his hand: "Don't be afraid! We'll protect you! You're part of the family!" That meant a lot to me, and I felt really safe, because at that time the situation was really deteriorating and frightening.

How do you navigate between your roles as a journalist, economist, and author, considering they cover diverse areas such as travel writing, economics, and Arabic studies?

Writing a good story often comes down to two main skills. Either you have a natural talent with words that makes even the simplest things seem fascinating, which I do not have, or you know how to pick topics that are so interesting that they'll keep people engaged. Ideally, a writer would be able to do both, but it's pretty rare to find someone who can.

In my case, I cannot separate all my different roles because I use the same approach as a journalist, an economist, and an Arabist. When I'm explaining

Arabic or the gross domestic product, I try to make it as exciting as possible - that's what writing is all about for me. In that sense, you can't really separate the roles; they merge.

What prompted you to write "Islam for Nerds," and what do you hope readers will take away from it?

During the time I spent in Egypt between 2007 and 2012, religion was a very common topic of discussion everywhere you went. So, I ended up learning a lot about Islam just by talking to people, whether on the street, in taxis, or at my school. To make sure what I learned was correct, I compared my notes with the official texts of Islam, the Holy Quran and the Hadiths, the sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. I organized this information into a question-and-answer format. My goal wasn't to write a religious book, but rather to create something that was both educational and enjoyable to read.

Could you elaborate on your approach to writing travel literature, particularly how you blend personal experiences with broader cultural insights?

I share things that you can't find online or that even ChatGPT doesn't have answers for. When I first came to Egypt in 2006, some drivers didn't use their headlights at night. There's no science behind it, but I was curious, so I asked around to find out why they did it. There were many different answers: some wanted to trick surveillance satellites they thought were watching Egypt, others just wanted to conserve their batteries. Mostly, though, I got into deep conversations that told me a lot about the culture and mentality that I reflected in the book. I still try to maintain that approach in my research and writing.

In your opinion, what are some of the most common misconceptions about Islam in Western societies, and how does your book address these misconceptions?

I would say that we could avoid a lot of misunderstandings and misconceptions if we reported more on the positive things in Islamic cultures that we can learn from. For example, I was very impressed by the way older people are treated in Arab countries because we in the West today often see older people as a burden - even if we don't say so, of course. The same goes for dealing with death, which we in the West often tend to suppress.

PHOTO: Gerald Drißner's diverse expertise illuminates untold stories, fostering understanding across cultures and challenging misconceptions with his insightful writing.

Photo Credit: Gerald Drißner

