

The Librarian of Basra

近江兄弟社中学校 3年 若杉 萌

Hero is a word that we often hear these days. Who does it make you think of? Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Astroboy, Doraemon, Anpanman? Someone with incredible super powers, performing impossible feats? Well, the story you are about to hear tells about a different kind of superhero. I'm going to tell you about some true events in the life of a real person. She shows us that it's not necessary to see through walls or fly or fight crime. The hero that I want to talk about today is a woman. Her name is Alia. Alia Muhammad Baker. She is the head librarian of the Basra City Library. Basra is a port city, in the sand swept country of Iraq. Under Alia's leadership, the library was a place where doctors, lawyers, professors, students and artists met each afternoon. It wasn't a quiet place, but a place to talk about the stories in the books. They talked about all sorts of things: the world, politics, their families, and how the books they read helped them to understand all of these things. But suddenly, in 2003, all of this changed. They could hear gunfire and explosions in the distance. The war was coming. The distant gunfire and planes in the sky gradually became missiles screaming overhead and flames falling from the sky, and then the city began to burn. Alia worried that the fires of war would burn down her library, and destroy all the books in it. The books were so precious to her. In the Koran, the first thing that God said to Muhammad was, 'Read.' Alia knew that she had to keep the books in her library safe. The books were in many languages: Arabic, Ancient Persian, French, German, Spanish, Greek, and Latin. They held the knowledge of many generations, from many different countries. The oldest book was 700 years old, a Spanish translation of the Koran. It represented so much about faith and internationalization! Alia wanted to protect it. So she asked the governor for permission to move the books out of the city to a safe place. He refused, and he didn't give her any explanation at all. Why would a person refuse such a request? Alia could not sit and do nothing, so, secretly, she

began to take the books to her home. She filled her handbag many times, and filled her little car. She took the most important books first. Next door to the library, was a small restaurant. Alia ate lunch there sometimes and enjoyed talking with the owner, a man named Anis. He came now to ask her what she was doing, and to see if he could help. Soon, his storeroom was stacked to the ceiling with books. People from all the shops and houses nearby came to carry books to safety, putting them in basements and under their beds, in spare rooms and on top of cupboards. All together, Alia and her helpers took about 30,000 books from the City Library. Nine days later, the city was again lit with a firestorm of bombs, and many buildings were burned down, this time including the library. But, because of Alia's heroic actions, many books were saved. The people of Basra still have access to all of the knowledge that they hold. Iraq is still a troubled country, but Alia believes that it is education and understanding that will bring peace. So now she stands guard in front of a new library building, and hopes for a lasting peace. See? She couldn't see through walls, or fly. But she could bring her community together to act to protect something important. A truly wonderful person: Alia Muhammad Baker, the librarian of Basra.