



الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction

The Shortlist 2021



Abdulatif Ould Abdullah
The Eye of Hammurabi



Jalal Barjas
Notebooks of the Bookseller



Amira Ghenim
Calamity of the Nobility



Dunya Mikhail
The Bird Tattoo



Abdelmajid Sebbata
File 42



Habib Selmi – *Longing for
the Woman Next Door*



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INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

Excerpts from the novels of the 2021 Shortlist



The
Booker
Prize
Foundation



دائرة الثقافة والسياحة
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE
AND TOURISM

مركز أبوظبي
للاغة العربية
Abu Dhabi Arabic
Language Centre



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The Prize

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), is the most prestigious and important literary prize in the Arab world. It aims to reward excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing and to encourage the readership of high quality Arabic literature internationally through the translation and publication of winning and shortlisted novels in other major languages. IPAF was launched in April 2007 with the Booker Prize Foundation as its original mentor.

The Prize is currently sponsored by the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, under the umbrella of the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi. Its overall management is the responsibility of its Board of Trustees, whose members include leading figures from both the Arab and international literary worlds. Day-to-day oversight and administration is undertaken by the Administrator, who is appointed by the Trustees.

Each year the Board of Trustees selects a new panel of five judges who are responsible for the selection of the longlist, shortlist and winner. The panel changes every year. In order to help ensure the independence and integrity of the selection process, the judges remain anonymous until the longlist is announced. The announcement of the 2021 winner will be made at an online ceremony on 25th May 2021.

The shortlisted authors each receive \$10,000 US. The winning author goes on to receive a further \$50,000 US, with a commitment that IPAF will meet the cost of translation of the winning novel into English to help underwrite its publication for an English speaking readership.

In addition to the annual prize, IPAF supports literary initiatives including its Nadwa (writers' workshop) for emerging writers from across the Arab world. Established in 2009, the nadwa was the first of its kind for Arab writers. Each Nadwa results in new fiction by some of the Arab world's most promising authors, some of whom have gone on to be shortlisted and even win the Prize. Nine Nadwas have taken place in Abu Dhabi (eight under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and in 2017 supported by Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation). Others have been held in Jordan, Oman and Sharjah, in partnership with, respectively, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, the Muscat Cultural Club and the Department of Culture – Sharjah Government.

For more information:
www.arabicfiction.org



دائرة الثقافة والسياحة
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Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi

The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi) drives the sustainable growth of Abu Dhabi’s culture and tourism sectors, fuels economic progress and helps achieve Abu Dhabi’s wider global ambitions. By working in partnership with the organisations that define the Emirate’s position as a leading international destination, DCT Abu Dhabi strives to unite the ecosystem around a shared vision of the Emirate’s potential, coordinate effort and investment, deliver innovative solutions, and use the best tools, policies and systems to support the culture and tourism industries.

DCT Abu Dhabi’s vision is defined by the Emirate’s people, heritage and landscape. We work to enhance Abu Dhabi’s status as a place of authenticity, innovation, and unparalleled experiences, represented by its living traditions of hospitality, pioneering initiatives and creative thought.

For more information:
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The Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre

The Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, works to support Arabic language development and modernisation through comprehensive strategies and frameworks, enrich the scientific, educational, cultural and creative contributions of the Arabic language, promote Arabic language proficiency and cultural understanding, and support Arab talents in the fields of writing, translation, publishing, scientific research, arts, and content creation.

The Centre works to realise its foundational vision through dedicated programmes, human expertise, and meaningful partnerships with the world's most prestigious technical, cultural and academic institutions.

FOREWORD

Daring Narrative Adventures

The novels on the short list this year mark the stylistic and structural culmination of an upward trajectory that the narrative arts have been following for several years. Despite the linguistic and technical differences between these novels, they are united by their profound engagement with the continuing disruptions in the Arab world and in their relentless exploration of the intellectual, cultural and social roots of the tragedy. What is striking in this context is not only the appearance of new localities and environments where Arabic novels are appearing, but also the fact that most of the people on the shortlist are from the younger generation. They are open in their narrative approaches to various sensibilities and to extremely daring narrative adventures that seek not only to correct history but at the same time to change the present and the future. Although the purpose of this foreword is not to provide a lengthy reading of these works, that should not in any case prevent me from outlining in brief the most prominent features of each book:

The Calamity of the Nobility is an epic novel in which the Tunisian writer **Amira Ghenim** portrays an important and pivotal decade in the modern history of Tunisia. Although the emotional message that the activist and enlightened intellectual El-Taher El-Haddad sent to Zubaida al-Rassa' would not, under other circumstances, have led to so many unfortunate consequences, in a male patriarchal

society it becomes a real “calamity”. And it is a calamity that changes dramatically the fates of two families linked by marriage, causing deep fissures in their relationship. While the author gives the task of narration to witnesses from the two families, she leaves readers to explore the relativity of the truth and understand the dramatic transformations that Tunisian society underwent during this sensitive decade of the 20th century.

Notebooks of the Bookseller: In intensely poetic language, Jordanian writer **Jalal Barjas** throws light on a totally schizophrenic reality in his country, which lies on a fault line prone to frequent tremors. His hero, Ibrahim al-Warraq, is a newspaper seller who has been forced out of the city centre but decides against suicide after meeting a mysterious woman who shares his desperation. However, he continues to seek death in other ways. After losing his job and refuge, Ibrahim decides to live with the homeless people in his city and, assuming the identities of the heroes of the novels he has read, he becomes a professional thief who robs banks and the very wealthy, in order to help the abject poor and impose his own form of justice like Robin Hood. As events unfold, Barjas opens up many surprises for his reader, illustrating through his flawed characters the ruined state and complete emptiness of the world. He uses all the tools of emotional stress and engagement and of psychological exploration of human behaviour that narration necessitates.

The Eye of Hammurabi: In this novel the Algerian writer **Abdulatif Ould Abdullah**, through a protagonist who has escaped death, addresses one of the darkest chapters in the modern history of Algeria. The writer portrays the bloody confrontation between the government and the forces of Islamic extremism at the end of the last century as an opportunity to ask questions about fragmented identity and a relationship with the West, based on appropriation and systematic plunder of the country's wealth and resources. Through lucid, tight language and masterly narration the work reveals a succession of surprises. Ignorance armed with char-

latanism is entwined with abject poverty and patriarchal authoritarianism, in order to protect thieves and thugs from punishment, while the victims never stop slaughtering each other and offering sacrifices to gods with many faces and many purposes.

File 42: It was not without significance that the Moroccan novelist **Abdelmajid Sebbata** should have given the American author Christine Macmillan, who is suffering from writer's block, the task of narrating this novel, in which she tracks the life of her dead father, who was attached to a US air base in Morocco for several years. This gives him all the keys he needs to provide a surprising and very interesting novel, in which the relationship between the West and the Arab world is exposed as it really is, as hegemony, plunder and appropriation. The daughter's insistence on finding out the truth about her criminal father also appears to be tantamount to using literature to write real history, for example by exposing the incident of contaminated cooking oil that led to the death of hundreds of Moroccans in the 1950s. With help from a local novel entitled *A Moroccan Riddle*, which has been overlooked and ignored, Sebbata succeeds in uncovering many mysteries. Despite the novel's considerable length we do not feel it, because Sebbata opens numerous parallel tracks of narration, in addition to an ingenious plot that is almost a detective story, enriched by modernist techniques such as collages, posters, advertising material, press clippings, and so on.

Longing for the Woman Next Door: In this work **Habib Selmi** again poses the difficult questions he has addressed in some of his earlier works, especially in his novel *The Scents of Marie-Claire* – questions such as the ambiguous identity of educated Arabs who see the West as the promised land where they can take refuge from the hellish misery in their homelands, but who are soon confronted by the harshness of the alternative world and are unable to integrate properly there. This is especially illustrated by the cold and cerebral relationship between a Tunisian university professor and his French

wife, in contrast with his emotional attachment to Zahra the maid, who reflects the deep allure of his mother tongue and a parallel longing for his homeland. The most important part of the novel is not the subject, which has been repeatedly addressed by the same writer and by others, but his extraordinary ability to turn ordinary facts and events into an unusual work of art through an astute style that is pliable, elegant and portrays character skilfully.

The Bird Tattoo: In sweet language full of sorrows, the Iraqi poet and writer **Dunya Mikhail** addresses the time a few years ago when Islamic State swept through northern Iraq, driving people of various religions and ethnicities from their homes with brutal violence and threats of rape. In her distinctive work Mikhail goes beyond the usual chronicling of events and ideological campaigning to explore the tragedy through the way Islamic State brought an end to the pleasure of living in the Yezidi village of Haliqi, where people call each other by whistling and know each other by their tattoos, where innocence is evenly shared between nature and humankind. She narrates the moving relationship between Elias and Helen, which is followed by the murder of Elias and the escape of Helen, after she is raped and sold as a sex slave. It is reminiscent of an updated version of the Babylonian legend of Inana and Dumuzi, or Tammuz and Ishtar, or of a symbolic “Titanic” in which despair comes face to face with will, and love with death.

Chawki Bazih
Chair of Judges, 2021

The Eye of Hammurabi

by

Abdulatif Ould Abdullah



Abdulatif Ould Abdullah is an Algerian writer, born in Mostaganem, Algeria, in 1988. He graduated with a Diploma in Architecture from the University of Algiers and he writes on cultural subjects for newspapers and online. He is the author of three novels: *Out of Control* (2016), *Flaunting Finery* (2018) and *The Eye of Hammurabi* (2020).

In the canteen, the buffet tables were laden with trays of shrimp, salad, and fruit, and there was a roast calf surrounded by side dishes on a table of its own. I took a plate and piled it high with salad and a little of the shrimp and meat. Then I sat on my own in a corner to eat in peace. I had no desire to talk to anyone after what had happened with Hardy and his friend Helen Blank. I felt pangs of guilt, but these soon went when I saw the glasses of wine dancing before me. I heard someone call my name and turned to find it was none other than K. He invited me to join his table, around which hovered technicians and archaeologists. I headed over and felt awkward as several pairs of eyes looked me up and down as I approached K. I tried to shake his hand, but he threw the bulk of his body towards me and hugged me so tightly he squeezed the breath out of me. Before I could get my breath back, he slapped me on the back with his giant hand. My lungs twanged and I thought I heard my scapula crack. He bared his teeth in a grin, then muttered an obscenity in German before saying: “Hello! Hello to Hamras! It’s been a great day. Isn’t that right, my friend? *Willkommen*. Let’s drink a toast to all those who’ve walked this earth.”

He raised two glasses of wine to the level of his domed forehead and handed me one of them. Then he raised the other to those milling around the table. “*Meine Freunde!*” – everyone stopped talking and turned towards K – “A toast to our early ancestors on this continent. A toast to the future, which will reunite us with them. A toast to all those who illuminated the long path from Nebuchadnezzar to Heinrich Schliemann. *Lass uns feiern*, let us celebrate, and drink a toast to Nabonidus and Arthur Evans and all those who keep the faith.”

What he said reminded me of when I was a student. A researcher (who was in her late 30s) once gave a lecture in Hamburg on the history of archaeology and excavation techniques. I was taking part in a seminar about how to identify remains from before the Christian era.

Also in attendance were businessmen, geologists and archaeologists. The severe-looking woman talked about the Chaldean rulers of Babylonia. On a screen she showed the remains of temples and palaces, explaining to the audience that the Babylonian kings had taken an interest in the architectural designs discernible among the ruins of Ur and Uruk in Iraq. From her talk I understood that Nebuchadnezzar had undertaken excavations and restoration work in Ur, as had King Nabonidus¹. I raised the glass to my lips, poured the drink down my throat, and set it down on the table empty. Then I sat in silence listening to all the noise. I felt strangely depressed, as if the world I inhabited was very far from the world around me at that moment. My world was buried in a remote, inaccessible place. What did it mean that I felt so alone and detached, unable to perceive what everyone else there could see? I raised another glass to my lips and swallowed down the bitter draught – bitterness that became a pleasure, once you got used to it.

I filled a third glass, then a fourth. Then I was lost in thought, contemplating the meaning of what I was thinking. The voices grew distant and faded as I gradually withdrew from the present. Images of the past appeared before me: a woman standing in the dark, her head hanging down and her jet-black hair falling unnaturally over her face. She slowly started to approach, not walking, just drawing nearer, and she kept calling out my name, her voice rising to a roar. On the point of blocking my ears, I froze at the horrific scene before me: her clothes turning red as blood flowed from between her thighs onto the ground, as if from a bubbling spring.

K's deep voice shattered my daydream. He had stopped talking with a man on the other side of table and was now directing his words at me. His pointy teeth jutted out and as he squinted at me his eyes gave off a sudden gleam. "Nothing compares with discovering the truth and learning how our ancestors lived on this Earth. *Stimmst du nicht zu?*

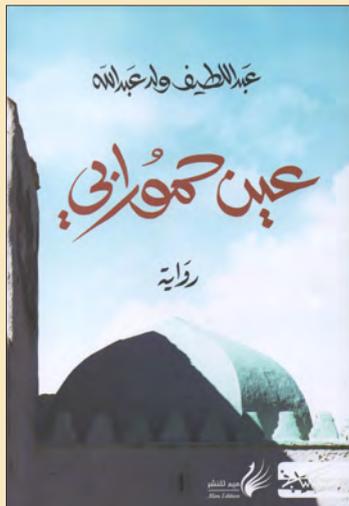
¹The last king of Babylon, who ordered the excavation of the foundations of a temple to find out which of his ancestors had built it. The foundation stone was discovered and it was inscribed with the name of the Akkadian Naram-Sin son of Sargon, who had ordered the construction of the temple twenty-five centuries before Nabonidus' time.

About

The Eye of Hammurabi

by Abdulatif Ould Abdullah

The novel opens with the interrogation of a man in a military encampment after he fled from the angry inhabitants of Douar Sidi Majdoub. This district in the town of Mostaganem, Algeria, is named after a Muslim saint whose tomb he and his German friend raided for ancient artefacts. He now faces serious charges, from conspiracy with foreign organisations against his country to murder. His accusers offer him a deal to protect him from the anger of the mob in exchange for a full confession. Throughout the course of the cross-examination, he revisits his past to explore the roots of his present dilemma and tells stories which blend imagination and reality, illusion and the truth.



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Don't you agree?"

I nodded my head in exhausted agreement and tried to focus on his image so as not to appear mentally somewhere else.

"We now uncover the past to discover our present. We, an advanced species, are ignorant of our history, ignorant as to how we came to be like this, where we came from, and what the conditions were that made us what we are today. Don't you agree?"

His eyes were bleary and his face flushed from the alcohol. I had heard lots about this man, the strangest of which was that he had eaten a lavish meal of mammoth meat: the most expensive dish anyone had ever eaten. Someone sitting there told me that years before, the inhabitants of a far-flung village in Siberia had found the huge frozen animal, its fur and flesh preserved. Its blood had even coagulated in its veins and there was undigested food still in its stomach. The permafrost had melted, exposing the carcass, and the flesh had begun to decompose in the sun, giving off a foul smell that drew the dogs. K's face grew more flushed, and I assumed it was the alcohol, but his intense gaze made me want to think of something appropriate to say. I felt a bead of cold sweat running down my spine. All heads were turned towards me, as though I were a prophet expected to miraculously levitate. I took a large gulp of wine and everyone around me vanished, save for the spectre of K.

"But what if the age of discoveries is over? At the same time as you're searching for an animal from thousands of years ago, the world is witnessing the extinction of dozens of animal and plant species. In my opinion, mankind never looks at what it has but at what it has lost. What does knowing about history do for us when everywhere, we keep killing and fighting and destroying? I think everything we'll discover in the future will be evidence of our own extinction, we, the human race."

"Bravo, *mein Freund!* Your thinking is spot on and deserves another toast."

He poured himself another glass and knocked it back in one. Before the drink had reached his belly, a gale of words blew out of his mouth: "Sure. I'm largely in agreement with you, and think, like you, that evil

is inherent in man. But there are exceptions that can determine the future of humanity. I think that in this period we should overlook the world's cruelty and identify instead with the joy of discovery. We can stop the destruction and direct man's interest towards other things through science. Despair breeds violence, and in two hundred years time the world won't have enough room for mankind. So we try to understand our past to save what we can of the future. We rule the world today thanks to our ancient ancestors and the achievements they made for us. They left us a magnificent heritage, having paved the way for us to keep living life, not to waste it on war and destruction.

“*Liebe Freunde!*” He suddenly raised his voice and his tone became serious. He addressed me across everyone there and was clearly drunk. “We are about to explore the depths of the earth, which conceal a city some six thousand years old. A magnificent palace is expected to be found there. Perhaps it is the remains of a great city, one that may contain amphitheatres and, given the natural springs in the area, mineral baths. I believe a volcanic eruption happened back then and spewed out lava and deadly, poisonous gases.”

He filled his glass and cooled his heart with white wine before continuing: “The city was buried under rubble and forgotten about for thousands of years, until the famous explorer Heinrich von Maltzan² came and visited the site in 1857, thanks to the maps of the topographer Carette³. To begin with, Heinrich did not believe there was a city here. His attention was focused on the Limes built by the Romans to stop incursions northwards by the Gaetuli desert tribes, and which do actually run parallel to the Houris River and extend close to Oumache, one of the Roman towns in Biskra dating back to the reign of the Emperor Hadrian.

² Heinrich von Maltzan (1826–1874) was a German explorer interested in the peoples of the Middle East, especially North Africa. He visited Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia as well as Mecca disguised as a pilgrim. He wrote poetry and prose, and among his works are *Three Years in Northwest Africa*, *The Hashish Smokers*, and *My Pilgrimage to Mecca*. He ended his own life.

³ A French military topographer, considered by some to be the first to link history with geography.

“Von Maltzan would disguise himself in Arab dress and he spoke several languages, including Arabic, the Maghrebi dialect in particular. He brought some Arabs with him – he promised them they’d get rich – as well as some poverty-stricken Jews, to excavate sites where he thought the remains of the walls of the Limes were to be found. Heinrich divided the workers into two groups: one to the west of the river and the other to the east. The workers started to dig with their very basic tools: no more than picks and shovels. Now, recently we have come across von Maltzan’s diaries, which went missing during the Second World War. They reveal that his plan went nowhere. The workers, after a week of digging with picks and shovels that proved quite enough for them, gave up hope. They conspired to kill him and take his belongings, but a faithful friend informed him of the plot and advised him to flee before daybreak. Heinrich did indeed manage to escape the trap that was laid for him. In his diary he writes that he slipped a manuscript into his pocket, then made his way along the mountain paths until he came to an ancient cave, where he spent two days waiting in terror. On the third day, as he was leaving his hiding place up in the mountains, he spotted a rectangular plateau that seemed to have been smoothed flat by human hands. This discovery happened by chance, then, and Heinrich wrote it all down in detail, describing the elevation and area of the plateau. He went back to the original site, but found it deserted, all his equipment gone. Years later the Bulletin of the Geographical and Archaeological Society of Oran was founded to record the geographical features and archaeological monuments of the Oran region. In 1884, this site was visited by numerous archaeologists from the Society, including Doumergue and Commandant Demaeght, who published several scientific papers on their discovery of human remains from the Lower Palaeolithic. However, the work did not progress and remained confined to paper, while the interest of researchers was instead directed towards the Roman towns in the north and east of the country.”

K raised his glass to his lips and knocked it back in one go. He wiped his mouth with the palm of his left hand. His eyes gleamed under the lights. My latest drink was on its way to my mouth when he

interrupted me: “*Mein Freund*.”

I could see the capillaries in the whites of his eyes as he slurred: “Tomorrow you will go to the village and find us some strong workers for good pay.” My glass was still halfway to its target when Helen Blank stood up next to me.

“I’ll go with you tomorrow.”

K stared in confusion at her, while the others looked at him. His cheeks trembled, then he bent his head over the table for few moments before looking up at her. “There’s no reason for you to go to the village.”

“*Nein!* I insist. You’re not my boss here.”

Her whisky-laced breath blew over me. The shout hit K and the spittle from it hit my neck. I wanted to wipe it off with my handkerchief, but then I remembered Helen already had it.

“I can go wherever I want. *Hast du verstanden?* My job requires it, and I don’t take orders from you.”

“Calm down Helen, *wie du willst*. You’ll go with him tomorrow.”

“That’s better.”

Then she disappeared. All I could see was my glass, which because of my surprise was still halfway to its target. The bitter drink slipped down my throat by some miracle. I felt an unexpected heat rising in my brain. Everyone, including K, had begun to leave the canteen, and I went outside for a stroll down the slope where I had tended the goats as a child. I listened to the crunch of the stones under my feet. The village signalled to me in the distance, silenced by humiliation in the darkness. I wanted to take another walk around the area. What was the point of staying in my tent, waiting for morning without doing anything useful? I came across Donald Hardy standing on the edge of the scree, not far from the dig site. He was dragging on a cigarette and blowing smoke out of his nostrils. I stood next to him, trying to broach the subject. Then he said suddenly, “*Mein Freund*, say what you want. I’m listening.”

I asked him for a thousand dollars.

“A thousand dollars. What are you going to do with them around here?”

I shook my head in embarrassment, but not for long, as he put his

hand into his pocket. He counted out some notes in his wallet, then gave me the requested sum. He seemed in a great mood, given how calm he was and his unusual manner with me.

“Nothing beats this tranquillity. See how calm it looks!” His words came out heavily, soaked in the smell of alcohol.

“The calm is deceptive. Evil lurks here under benign masks.”

He twisted his neck and narrowed his eyes as if to say: “What do you mean?”

Suddenly a commanding voice came out of the dark: “Put out the cigarette, *sidi*, and leave at once.”

On peering towards the voice it turned out to be one of the Gendarmerie Nationale officers assigned to guard the mission.

“*Verdammt*. Can’t we get even a breath of fresh air?”

“I’m sorry, *sidi*, but it’s orders.”

We headed back to the tent. I was still under the influence of the drink and felt a burning in my stomach, and a migraine getting worse by the minute. My tongue moved sluggishly in my mouth but I felt the urge to talk to someone. I opened my mouth to speak but talking was harder than I had imagined. Finally we reached the tent, and each of went silently into his corner. Hardy lay down on his bed, while I squatted down looking at the slanting roof and thinking things I’d never said before. I wanted to be rid of them. I wanted to say something. I knew the only way to do that was to talk to someone I trusted. When I turned to Hardy, I saw he was fast asleep. I closed my eyes to listen to the voice inside me. It wasn’t one voice. I was anxious about the future. A low voice said, “You’re a coward, afraid. You can’t face up to the truth like a man.” Somewhere I heard another, louder voice: “You did not come here to work. You have to go there and rediscover who you are.” A third, more powerful and insistent voice annoyed me: “What happened happened. You have to move on and not look back.” I was upset and I stood right up, but not knowing what I should do. Without thinking, I found myself outside the tent again.

Translated by Raphael Cohen

Notebooks of the Bookseller

by
Jalal Barjas



Jalal Barjas is a Jordanian poet and novelist, born in 1970. He works in the field of aeronautical engineering. For many years, he wrote articles for Jordanian newspapers and headed several cultural organisations. He is currently head of the Jordanian Narrative Laboratory and presents a radio programme called “House of the Novel”. His published work includes two poetry collections, short stories, travel literature and four novels. His short story *The Earthquakes* (2012) was winner of the Jordanian Rukus ibn Za’id Uzayzi Prize. His novel *Guillotine of the Dreamer* (2013) won the Jordanian Rifqa Doudin Prize for Narrative Creativity in 2014, and *Snakes of Hell* won the 2015 Katara Prize for the Arabic Novel, in the unpublished novel category, and was published by Katara in 2016. His third novel *Women of the Five Senses* (2017) was IPAF-longlisted in 2019.

About
Notebooks of the Bookseller
by Jalal Barjas

Set between 1947 and 2019, this novel is based on several notebooks of stories about people facing different hardships, such as losing their homes or not knowing who their family are. Their interwoven destinies reveal the value of the house, as a symbol of one's homeland, as opposed to the surrounding ruination. The central character is Ibrahim, a bookseller, a cultured man and voracious reader of novels. In fact, he even takes on the identity of the protagonists in novels which appeal to him. However, due to his isolation, loneliness and maltreatment by a cruel world, he suffers mental illness and descends into full schizophrenia. He attempts suicide, before meeting the woman who will change his life.



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Ibrahim (A Wicked Pregnancy)

Like a sponge full of water, I was weighed down by sadness after a seventy-year-old man looked me straight in the face as he paid me for a book. Before walking away on his crutches and disappearing, he had said: “The more you are silent, the more your sorrow will grow.”

All these years later, here I am, recalling what that man said as I write, despite my conviction that writing will not save me from what has become of me, nor will it fill the dark chasm that has inexplicably formed within me. I write to obscure it so that I might gain a peace, which, if it materializes, will allow me to smile back at any pain, however intense. If only you could imagine the extent of my joy at this notebook, with its clean white pages, and these pens. They’re the most precious gift in my strange existence, given to me by a woman who had engendered in me, the first time I saw her, a feeling like lightning striking the landscape of my soul. I swear that I experienced this, and I knew then that love’s hand was capable of rescuing a drowning person gasping his last breaths in the salty sea of life. But did I live, or did I die? That question has dangled before my eyes all these years, as I observed how oddities pushed everything else in this world aside, and stuck to me like metal particles piling onto the poles of a magnet.

I’m a lonely man, and the only road I take is the one from my home in Jabal al-Joufeh into the middle of town, where the bookseller’s shack that I used to own is located. Lonely in a very loud city, in a way I don’t know whether or not you can understand. I am not interested in anyone, and no one is interested in me, except for a woman who’s my neighbour. I don’t know where she came from or what her story is. I’ve never seen her leaving her home, which is on the second floor of an old building that faces my house. I’ve seen her

a few times on the terrace, hanging out her washing, with none of her face showing from behind her niqab except for her eyes. Once, she threw me a piece of paper and pointed at it. I picked it up, and saw a few words scribbled on it: "Come and see me after midnight about something important." But I didn't go, because I had no curiosity about what she wanted of me, and no sexual desire, although like any other man, I had contemplated the possibility that she would invite me into her bed. This doesn't mean I'm a saint, but rather that I am content with having a manner I know is negative and off-putting. When my body calls out, I lie on my bed and conjure up, from a novel, a woman I have fallen in love with, such as the enchanting gypsy Esmeralda dancing at the Feast of the Fools in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. I see her opening the door of the room, preceded by the heady scent of her perfume, and the fires concealed within me awaken. She spins in her coloured dress, and I see her smooth body and soft buttocks. She dances as though she's taming bees with a flower in her soul. Then she takes off her clothes and lies beside me, and we sink into a pleasure that sets both our bodies on fire, until we both shudder like an ibex that's been shot in the forehead, and I shake and give in to whiteness and tranquillity.

I recalled my neighbour as I was lying down one afternoon, staring at a thin layer of paint on the damp, rotting ceiling directly above my head. It was on the brink of falling down, shaken by a newly arrived November breeze. I was picturing the moment when it would fall, and what that would look like, wondering about its fate. Things don't just fall randomly. When an apple fell on Newton's head, an idea changed the course of the world. The day they told me my mother had died, I had heard a voice whispering in my ear: "She has fallen." I looked around, but all I could see was my father weeping silently. It was the same voice that had first begun whispering to me when we moved out of our first home, thirty-five years earlier: in 1980 to be precise. I could have told any of my family about it, but who would have believed me? The day my mother died, I thought she had died suddenly and without any warning. I did not know then that cancer had been eating away at her body in the final years of her life. After

our financial situation worsened, she had sat at a makeshift roadside stall, selling green leaves that only the poorest in our country would eat. Our means grew ever meagre and our situation became as miserable as the alleyways, streets and houses of Joufeh themselves. She had been nursing a pain in her stomach. Whenever it got bad, she would drink sage tea and pretend to us that it was over. But then when she fainted and the women carried her out, one said she had vomited up a thick, coffee-coloured liquid. The doctor at al-Basheer hospital said that signified she had stomach cancer. She died during the first operation. My brother Ahed was seized by a fit of rage, attacking the doctors and smashing anything he saw. As for me, I stood silently next to my father, unable to shed a single tear. It was a sharp grief, interrupted by my preoccupation with the voice, which whispered in my ear: "She has fallen."

Some years later, my brother Ahed disappeared after yelling at my father: "I will not be a copy of you." The next day, when we found his switched-off mobile phone, my father assumed he would return. But when a second day passed we started to worry, as none of his friends had any news of him either. On the third day, my father reported his disappearance to the police. Several days after that I received a letter from him saying that he had gone to Turkey, and that he planned to tear up his passport and emigrate, posing as a Syrian refugee. The last letter I received from him, before news of him completely dried up, was full of defeat and pain. He explained his feelings about being jobless in a neighbourhood where no one took any notice of him, where he had smoked cannabis with other frustrated companions until he lost the ability to dream. After reading the letter, my father remained silent. He spent half the night sitting with his arms crossed over his chest, until he went to his room when I was surprised to hear him sobbing painfully. Some years later, my father left home too. I found the anti-depressants he had thrown in the rubbish bin, and the note he had left me, which said: "I've got a job, and I get one day off a week, which I'll spend with you." I re-read his note several times in astonishment, and was unable to find a good reason for his sudden departure. He returned a week later and told me he had been in the

north, where he had been hired at a centre for strategic studies, and that he would only be able to come home one day a week. A month went by during which he visited me four times, and then he vanished. After searching extensively for him, I gave up, perhaps out of a well-concealed wish that he might stay away from me despite my great love for him. This issue resurfaced in my dreams, for dreams reflect those deeply held, secret thoughts of ours that others must never find out about. But then, after a seven-month absence, he returned. His familiar smell met me at the door as I was about to enter, and then I heard his cough, so I quickly looked around for him. He was clearly preoccupied, the only thing about him that moved was the smoke from his cigarette. His face betrayed a great deal of weariness, and his eyes held some unuttered words. He said nothing when I scolded him for being away so long, other than to say cryptically: "We'll talk later." I turned in early, seeking sleep as though I were escaping a mania. After dropping off, I felt his beard on my face as he kissed me, and I woke up. "I heard you dreaming," he said. Then he left, and I went back to sleep. In the moments between sleep and wakefulness I heard a noise in the kitchen, and I got up. I found he had hung a rope from the ceiling and had it coiled around his neck, and was standing on a chair. It was one of the cruellest moments of my life. The short distance between the kitchen door and the chair equalled the span of my life from birth until that moment. The words froze in my throat, and everything turned to a terrifying darkness that became complete as he fell, and his body dangled in the air. Ever since that day, I have been enveloped by a silence, the one that now surrounds me completely. I am as alone as a one-armed cat, with no sense of purpose in a neighbourhood on a mountain, with houses, narrow streets laid out by a drunk engineer, and tired, marginalised people, facing another neighbourhood on a mountain where commercial towers, villas and shopping malls rise up, and the night skies are filled with fireworks celebrating joys we have never experienced. I see the world through two windows. The first has been provided by the many books I read at the Bookseller's Kiosk, which became mine after my father's death; the second has been provided by the internet, at which I became so

adept as the days went by that I was able to hack into any electronic account. A parallel world to the one we inhabit. In fact, one day it will become our only world, and we'll turn into digital creatures controlled – like the sheep that graze in the fields – by unknown hands.

I straightened the pillow as I prepared to sleep, and continued to stare at the ceiling. Intermingled voices floated in from outside: a woman swearing at her daughter for not helping her with the housework and cursing the internet for stealing people away, even from themselves; the voice of a man singing a song about yearning; other voices from nearby houses, combined with the aroma of garlic frying and the reek of a large communal outdoor rubbish bin. Somnolence gradually put some distance between me and those noises, and blotted out the shape of the ceiling. I closed my eyes for a short time, which provided someone like myself, who had not slept for days, an enjoyment that I appreciated. But then it was dispelled by the layer of paint from the ceiling falling onto my face. I started awake, and my desire for sleep evaporated. I got up and went to the kitchen, passing through the sitting room and amongst the piles of books there. Some were in cardboard boxes, some were tied into bundles with string, and others were scattered about. A chaotic collection of books, all from the Bookseller's Kiosk my father had set up on a pavement at the top of King Hussein Street in 1981. I had brought them home a few weeks before, after being notified by the Municipality that I had to abandon the Kiosk so that the pavements could be widened. I was also promised that I would be given another spot to compensate me, one day. As a result I no longer had any work to make a living from.

I drank a glass of water and with a heavy step went back to bed and lay down. Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* lay on a bedside table beside me. I had read it several times, but I still returned to it, like several other novels whose protagonists had taken root in my memory, and whose main characters I had begun to imitate. I don't know why I acquired that "hobby", or how I got so singularly good at it. My teacher had once asked me, as he had asked most of the other pupils, "What's your hobby, Absent-Minded Ibrahim?" The question was also a reference to how rarely I spoke and how distracted I seemed. A

student quickly yelled out, “He’s good at imitation.”

The schoolteacher’s name was Jadallah, just like my father’s, but they had nothing in common. Mr. Jadallah had a stern face, and if he laughed, his laughter was superficial and followed by a sharp anger. He once stopped me from going to the bathroom, and I had severe cramps so I soiled myself. I had hated him ever since that day. He drew close to me with his narrow eyes, and said in a slightly hoarse voice, “Go on then, imitate me.” I did not, because I was unable to imitate a person I disliked, so I imitated the Arabic teacher instead. I closed my eyes to survey his appearance in my imagination, loosening my facial muscles and shifting them around until my face looked just like the Arabic teacher’s face. I spoke in the same tone as he did, and walked with the same rhythm as he did when he was talking lovingly about al-Mutanabbi. I had no explanation for this pastime, or for how my face and gestures became identical to those of whoever I was imitating. My family was also at a loss to explain this peculiarity, but grew to accept it in time despite its strangeness.

I shifted myself, and the sound made by the bed interrupted the sharp silence and my reading of *The Idiot*. I read two pages but didn’t feel like continuing. I picked up my mobile phone, which only had a few numbers saved on it, such as my brother Ahed’s. Whenever I missed him I would call the number, and it would be answered by a female voice saying the line had been disconnected. Another number belonged to a café that I used to call to order a coffee or a sandwich when I was working at the Bookseller’s Kiosk. There were also some other, unsaved numbers belonging to Kiosk customers. I pressed the Facebook icon and it led me through to its blue screen. I had registered as Diogenes, but I rarely posted anything, except for some excerpts from books that I liked. I never spent much time on Facebook. I thought about writing about what had happened to the Kiosk, which had been swept away like a pile of thorny weeds in a narrow alley, but as usual I backed down, limiting myself to reading what other users had written with a daring that pleased me, but that also made me aware of my anguish at my own fear of writing a single sentence to complain about what had occurred. I threw my mobile

phone aside and lay in bed, gazing up at the ceiling and contemplating the place where the paint had fallen from. New sounds floated in from outside, the loudest of which was the voice of Abdul Baset Abdul Samad reciting the Sura of Yusuf. Suddenly there was movement in my belly, and I saw it gradually swelling up until it became like that of a pregnant woman in her ninth month. I got up in a panic, whirling around in the room, touching my belly without understanding what was happening and how it had ballooned so. I took off my clothes and ran in a panic towards the mirror to ascertain whether what I had seen was a dream or reality. How could this be happening? What was going on? I rubbed my eyes to be sure of what was happening, then rushed to the tap and splashed my face with a few handfuls of water, but it was no use. What had happened to my belly was real. I ran in terror for the front door, tripped over the books and fell, then tripped again. I crawled until I was able to touch the door handle, and I heard the voice that had come to me the day my mother died, but this time loud and clear: "What will you tell them if you go outside, Ibrahim? I'll disappear as soon as you go through that door. I told you a long time ago, when I discovered you were not obeying my orders. I must do what you do not do, you coward."

Such was my terror that I did go outside and I stood there at the front door, panting, not realising that I was naked until I became aware of my neighbour on the veranda. As soon as she saw me, she covered her eyes with her hand and rushed back inside, her shoulders shaking with laughter. I returned to the mirror to examine my belly in a state of shock, as it emitted mocking laughter.

Although incredulous at what I was doing and scarcely able to breathe, I said in a shaking voice: "Who are you?"

"I am the one who will rid you of all your pains. Do not underestimate me. If my foot touches down on the ground, buildings will crumble before it, and dust will rise."

"I don't understand. Who are you?"

I repeated my question several times, like a woman shocked by a robber invading her house late at night. No answer. I dressed hurriedly and again ran to the front door, and again the voice tried to persuade

me not to go out, asserting that what I was doing would be no use. I gathered my remaining strength, ran into the street on unsteady feet, and hailed a taxi, which almost ran me over. I quickly got in and despite how difficult it was for me to talk, asked the driver to take me to al-Bashir hospital.

“Are you all right?” the driver asked with concern. He turned down the volume of the cassette player, which was playing a fast-paced, popular song. When I did not respond, he used his horn to warn off pedestrians crossing the narrow street, which was choked by cars, and made his way through the jam until we got to the hospital. As soon as I got out of the taxi, my belly swelled up again and the voice returned, threatening me and laughing. It disappeared once I was past the entrance to the Emergency Department and was seated on a bed, waiting my turn among the hundreds of patients who had grown impatient at the length of their wait. I was shaking violently and could barely control my bodily movements as I begged for attention from a doctor, who passed by me after examining a patient lying in the next bed.

“What are you feeling?” he immediately asked, on putting his hand on my forehead. I remained silent, so he asked again: “Tell me, what’s wrong with you?”

I mustered enough strength to utter only: “My belly.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

The doctor seemed surprised, and asked again what was wrong with me. He sat on the edge of the bed and encouraged me to calm down. He held my shaking hand, and I told him what had happened. As he listened, his face showed signs of disbelief, mingled with a smile that appeared and disappeared. That day, they tested me to establish whether I had taken any drugs. When they found no sign of drugs, they took a moving picture of my belly. The doctor examined me, then looked at me with a strange expression on his face, and I was assailed by an even stronger fear.

Translated by Samira Kawar

The Calamity of the Nobility

by

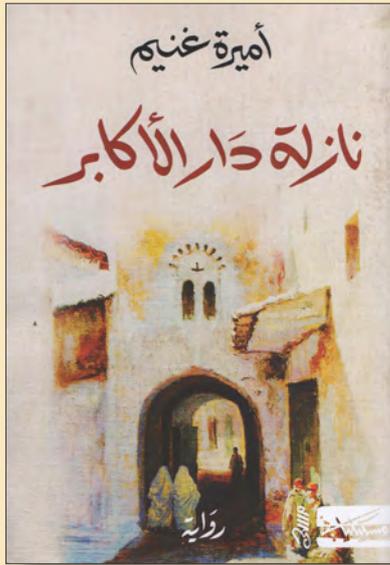
Amira Ghenim



Amira Ghenim is a Tunisian writer and academic, born in 1978. Having graduated with a Higher Teaching Certificate (agrégation) in Arabic Language and Literature and a PhD in Linguistics, she teaches Linguistics and Translation at Tunis University. She has published books on translation and linguistics and the novel *The Yellow Dossier* (2019), which won the Sheikh Rashid Bin Hamad Prize in 2020. Her second novel *The Calamity of the Nobility* was published in 2020.

About
The Calamity of the Nobility
by Amira Ghenim

The Calamity of the Nobility relays an important, untold story from Tunisia's contemporary history. Its hero is the historical figure, the reformer El-TaHER El-Haddad. Although historical references do not mention anything about his relationship with women, except for his desperate defence of them, the author adds an imaginary love affair with a woman called Lella Zubaida to her fictional retelling of his life. The novel gives prominence to the voices of female narrators, as custodians of memory who contradict a distorted, patriarchal version of history.



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Agent: Dar Masciliani

I am telling you the story of something that happened more than forty years ago: events, sealed in my chest, that nobody knows about, save for those family members who were there to bear witness. Family secrets, locked in their owners' chests, forced into a dark corner and covered over with a thousand veils. And why wouldn't they hide these shameful events, which, if exposed to a curious public, would be a stain on their noble bloodline for generations to come?

Forgive me, Bahiyya. I wasn't able to trust you with my secret, even after I found out you were deaf and mute. Zubaida's betrayal taught me to doubt everything. To be wary of everything. And now you've been in your grave for twenty years, and nothing remains of you but a bag of bones under a cold tombstone. So now, allow me to reveal the secret: my story of tragedy and sorrow.

Our house was a haven of peace and affection. The quiet was only ever broken by my two boys, Mohammed Habib and Mostafa, crying when they got hungry, or else by Khaddouj and Luisa fighting over a bucket or broom. Then suddenly our path veered sideways, and everything fell apart. Fate was cruel to us, turning affection into hatred, joy into silence and sorrow. Our peaceful haven became a hell; we became distant from each other, and from the happy days we had known.

All of a sudden, the house of Judge Othman al-Naifar witnessed events that would never happen in even the lowest of households. The wife made a fool of her husband, and her own brother-in-law revealed the secret. He was not forced to reveal it, neither out of pity for his brother nor concern for his honour. Rather, he did so in an act of revenge and spite, in the manner of one who has just caught his sworn enemy red-handed.

How could Zubaida have betrayed me? Why, and where, and when? I will never find out; at least, not in this life. Had she really cheated on me, as I pictured it, or was this nothing more than a delusion, the figment of a paranoid imagination? Is it possible the whole story is a fleeting palpation of fate? I'll never know. And there's no use finding

out. There's no-one more foolish than the man who convinces himself that emotional betrayal is somehow less vile than the physical.

I still had faith in her, in the love that united us that night when I attacked Mhammed, wanting to kill him. He had stabbed me in the back so I set upon him with the iron bar in my hand. I swear, I was about to bury it in his eye. I would have, if the appearance of Zubaida hadn't drawn me away from him. She came out of her room, calling for me. And because my concern for her was greater than my rage at him, I let the bar fall from my hand and ran to her. He escaped certain death, and I escaped the gallows, or the prospect of a life of regret behind bars.

My faith in her and in our love was strengthened that night when I saw her attack Mhammed, scratching his face with her nails and gouging a deep wound under his chin with her ring. That all happened after Si Ali al-Rassa' came out, angry at her for disobeying him and refusing to leave the al-Naifar household. He left with his wife and son and we all dispersed. I took Zubaida by the arm, wanting to talk to her alone in our room so she could explain the letter and the bundle of bread. She followed me, quiet and compliant, while my father walked leaning on Mhammed and dragging his bad leg. The night would have ended there with no harm done, had it not been for Mhammed then tossing more fuel on the fire. After taking just two steps with Father, he addressed Zubaida in the most provocative language, threatening her with summary divorce. She went crazy; she tore her arm from mine with a violent strength I would never have thought possible, then leapt on him, screaming like a fighter in the ring. I can't say what was going through her head at that moment, only that she seemed like a person bearing an unbearable weight, for whom Mhammed's words had been the last straw. She shoved him with both hands; when he stumbled, taken by surprise, she dug her nails into his face and clothes. My father lost his balance, teetering for a moment, then falling on his face. His turban came loose. Mhammed cried out in pain, the blood from his chin running down his neck and dripping onto his chest. He refrained from attacking her in return, only pushed Zubaida as hard as he could, then dashed upstairs to his

room. She ran after him: a sight that was difficult to believe. Should I have gone after her, instead of helping my father get to his room as I did? Yes, that was my fatal mistake. But how could anyone have known what would happen in the darkness of the stairwell? And how could anyone leave a lame, elderly man lying on the cold marble in the rain, so as to run after a young woman pursuing a cowardly man?

Mhammed and Zubaida disappeared into the maw of the stairwell. But I could still hear their footsteps as I pulled my father into the shelter of the covered walkway. I kept my eye on the open balcony upstairs, expecting them to appear at any moment. I wasn't worried. Earlier, Nana Jneina had gone up to our room to check on Mostafa; she came flying out when she heard the screaming, looking down at me with a frightened expression. I reassured her from where I was in the middle of the courtyard: no worries. The Hajj tripped over but we helped him stand up. Check on Zubaida – she's heading towards you, hunting your son, and she's almost caught up with him now.

There was a touch of black humour at play here. It seemed such a ridiculous scene, a partridge trying to hunt a bear; nor for one moment did I think the chase would end as it did, nor that it would have such grave consequences. Why didn't the partridge spread her wings at the critical moment, and fly straight over what fate had planned for her? How did she end up, in the blink of an eye, in a pile at the foot of the stairs, shivering and trembling like a slaughtered bird? No one really knows what happened. While running towards her like the rest of us, what Mhammed said was: She tripped on her dress on the top step and rolled down.

When she woke up a few days later, Zubaida had a different story: Mhammed pushed me with his elbow when I grabbed the back of his shirt. I lost my balance and fell.

Neither of them changed their version of events after being confronted with the other's. Mhammed swore to God he hadn't touched her. She swore he was responsible for her fall, even if unintentionally. We were never able to figure out which one was lying. All we knew was what we had heard that night: a horrific scream, multiple thuds, then an ominous silence. I got there to find her lying, lifeless, at

the foot of the stairs, a pool of blood spreading alarmingly under her head. To this day, when I remember the blood that trailed behind us as I carried her out to the street, I can't believe she survived. The head wound turned out to be less serious than I had thought, less serious in fact than her other injuries. In addition to a concussion, the doctor diagnosed a pelvic fracture and a spinal fracture that had affected the spinal cord.

We both came out of the accident paralyzed. She in her legs, I in my masculinity and motivation. I became accustomed to having a new companion around: one who followed me about and was rarely far away. He was a malicious, deformed companion, making life despite all its wonders seem narrow, making its taste bitter in my mouth, bewitching me with lethargy. This companion's name was ennui. I would get started on something, only to lose interest after half an hour and move on to something else. But after starting the new thing I would feel guilty and so go back to the first. No sooner was I about to start it than I would again lose interest. I would stop and start new things all day, without accomplishing anything and without any desire to accomplish anything. I had no interest in my work, I fumbled over my prayers, and I grew suspicious of my closest friends. If one of them told me something, I would assume he was lying; if one of them gave me advice, I would imagine he was conspiring against me.

Months passed in this way. I didn't talk to anyone in the house and they didn't talk to me. They thought Zubaida's disability had broken me; they did not realize it was the loss of values and meaning that caused my own fracture. Then I remembered something that, amid all the distress, I had forgotten. But I didn't go after it, so afraid and ashamed was I. I remembered Sidi Mansour's baker, who had delivered the letter together with the bad omen. How could I have forgotten him all this time? How could I have stopped searching for him, when he possessed half (if not all) of the truth? Was it the fear of certainty, stunning me with its caustic cruelty? Or was it the deeply rooted cowardice of the lover, which makes him avoid the naked truth so as not to sully his image of his beloved? I contemplated the matter; perhaps there was mercy in the persistence of doubt, of a type that

can only be appreciated by someone burdened with dangerous knowledge. I hesitated for a while, then made the decision to open the wound and probe at the pus inside.

I stopped by the baker's shop about four months after the accident, in the spring of 1936. It wasn't hard to find; everyone in the neighbourhood knew the story of Karrita. After locals boycotted his bakery – on account of the controversy around al-Haddad's book, he was forced to hawk his bread in the middle of the road. But, as the sheikh who directed me observed, time heals all foolishness: the matter had quickly been forgotten and the bakery got back to business as if nothing had happened. Tahar al-Haddad had paid the price alone, and had left this world in the prime of youth. Yet I shared the debt with him, remaining in the world but hollow and useless, like an oud with no strings.

I first thought of sending Khaddouj to the bakery on the pretext that she was there on Zubaida's behalf. She could take the deposit – the book and the poetry manuscript mentioned in the letter – and save me a humiliating confrontation. Before long, however, I cursed myself for my cowardice and weakness. Luisa might have already been to see the baker and told him the whole story. She could have taken everything and warned him of any messenger from the al-Naifar family, with the two of them agreeing to deny any knowledge of it. I'm the only one who can prise the truth out of him: gently if he cooperates, violently if he does not. This was what I told myself as I stood facing him, poised to bake him in his own oven if he so much as thought about lying to me.

Translated by Karen McNeil & Miled Faiza

The Bird Tattoo

by

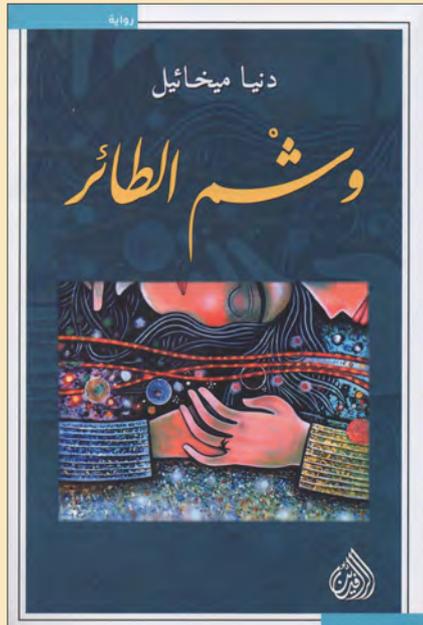
Dunya Mikhail



Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi poet, born in 1965 and living in America. She obtained a B.A. in English Literature from Baghdad University and a Masters in Eastern Literatures from Wayne State University in the U.S. She currently teaches Arabic Language and Literature at Oakland University, Michigan. She has published nine books in Arabic, several of which have been translated into English, Chinese, French, Hindi, Italian and Polish. Her first book in English, *The War Works Hard* (2005, translated by Elizabeth Winslow), was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize. *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009), which Mikhail co-translated with Elizabeth Winslow, won the 2010 Arab American Book Award and *The Beekeeper of Sinjar: Rescuing the Kidnapped Women of Iraq* (co-translated with Max Weiss) was longlisted for the National Book Award for Translated Literature 2018. Mikhail's poetry collection *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) was translated into English by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

About
The Bird Tattoo
by Dunya Mikhail

The Bird Tattoo is a painful novel about the sale of Yazidi women in Iraq by ISIS. It focuses on Helen and Elias, who fall in love and marry, and their experiences with the organisation. Alongside this tragedy, the novel sheds light on aspects of Yazidi folklore, rich in astonishing customs and legends.



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Number 27

Members of the Organization had taken all the captives' possessions, including their gold wedding rings. But Helen's wedding ring was not a ring. It was a tattoo of a bird. She was staring down at her finger when someone started shouting: "Twenty-seven! Number 27!"

He sounded angry, and as Helen belatedly realized that she was Number 27, she wondered if she was in trouble because of having just left the queue to run to Amina. She hadn't been able to believe her eyes when she'd spotted her dearest childhood friend on the other side of the hall. Amina's mouth, too, had opened in disbelief.

Their tearful hug had not lasted more than a few seconds when the irate voice announced: "Twenty-seven is sold." The speaker was pointing at Helen. In his other hand, he carried a cardboard box filled with the captives' mobile phones.

"Leave her be!" Amina protested, but her voice was barely audible. All the phones in the box were ringing, their loud tones from anxious relatives who kept on calling and calling the female prisoners gathered there, receiving no response.

The man, who wore a long black shirt that reached his knees and trousers that cut off just above his ankles, pushed Amina so hard she fell to the floor.

Helen bent to help her up, but the man pulled her away and led her into another room. He threw her to the floor and left, shutting the door behind him.

Other women were sat there on the floor, with their heads bowed. They, too, were labelled with numbers, like those distant planets that have no names.

The one woman who had no number sat at a desk. She handed Helen a document and said: "This is your marriage certificate. Your

husband will come soon.”

Helen returned the paper without looking at it and replied: “I’m already married.”

“Abu Tahseen purchased you online, and he’s on his way here.”

If she had not seen it with her own eyes, Helen would never have believed a market selling women existed. What had surprised her all the more was that this market was taking place in a former school building. Its name, Flowers of Mosul, was displayed on a banner at the front of the building, which looked just like the elementary school she had once attended with her twin brother Azad.

Even their headteacher, the strict Ms. Ilham, would have been unable to comprehend the notion of a market in women. For Ms. Ilham, the chewing of gum had been immoral, even if it happened during breaktime. Azad, who was fond of Arrow chewing gum, had thought it was no different to the sweets that other students ate without any problem – that was, until the day Ms. Ilham summoned him to her office.

Azad had been scared that Ms. Ilham would hit him on the hand with the sharp side of her ruler, as he had seen her doing to other students who were late for class. They were supposed to be in their seats before the bell rang so that when the teacher entered, they could all stand up in a show of respect. But to his astonishment, when at the end of her questioning she found out who had given Azad the chewing gum, Ms. Ilham had just smiled and said: “Say hello to your uncle, Mr. Murad, and tell him that chewing gum is not allowed. Now, go to your classroom.”

This room was similar to the headteacher’s office, with its neat table, at which the numberless woman now sat busily managing the sales of the captives.

“Put on these clothes. The photographer will come soon,” she said, handing a plastic bag to another prisoner in the room. Helen had been surprised by the contrast in the style of clothes imposed on them by the Organization. In the beginning, they had been forced to wear

niqabs, in which only their eyes were visible. Later, they were forced to change into 'promo' clothes for pictures and sales displays. The photographer had asked Helen to wipe away her tears so that he could take the picture.

In other classrooms, members of the Organization were using the former teachers' desks for doing paperwork. In the school's front yard, others were overseeing the selection of boys for military training. Where, on Thursday mornings, teachers and students had once held the Iraqi flag-raising ceremony, the Organization had now raised its black flag and members would recite the pledge to Islamic State instead of the national anthem.

It had been three months since 'she was first taken prisoner, and Helen had gradually come to understand the laws of this strange marketplace. When a man took her to another classroom for his pleasure and returned her immediately afterwards, it meant that he had taken her for temporary enjoyment only, like a customer sampling goods in the market. When one of them decided to buy her, he paid the Organization an agreed sum of money in line with a purchase contract that would be sealed with Islamic State's stamp. Helen's price had started at 75 dollars because she was in her thirties. Any buyer had the right to give her to another man in a 'rental' contract and then take her back. He could also return her to the market or exchange her for another captive. One of Helen's previous buyers would temporarily sell her whenever he needed money, then take her back. He finally brought her back to the market for good, saying: "This one screams in her sleep. Maybe there's a jinn inside her."

About 120 women were crammed into the hall. You could tell which of them had been raped most frequently by the number of bruises on their bodies. Some tried to hide behind one another, but the guards did not overlook a single one of them. At night, when the auction was closed, the guards came and took whoever they wanted for their own pleasure. They pushed the desks aside and raped them in front of them all.

Helen met other captives through the looks they exchanged during

these ordeals. They spoke with their eyes, and communicated through tears.

During a mass rape one afternoon, one captive had shouted at the men: “Enough! Would you let someone fuck your mothers and sisters?”

Right away, one of them had thrown her against the wall, knocking her unconscious. Another woman chased after him, screaming incomprehensibly, and spat at him. Helen imitated her, spitting on a man nearby. Another captive did the same. Every woman in that room spat on whomsoever she could in a crusade against the rapists.

Shocked by the collective reaction, the men beat the women with all their might. But eventually the room went quiet. The men seemed exhausted from all the beating, and probably from the shame. They left the room one after the other while the captives exchanged looks of encouragement, as if patting one another on the shoulder, though that would have hurt, with all the bruises they now bore. Some of them could not move for several days straight.

After Arabic and Kurdish, silence was the captives’ third language. The youngest among them, Layla, who was ten years old, did not know any Arabic except for the word *tafteesh* (inspection), which she had learned from the Islamic State woman who would enter the room and utter it loudly to make the captives line up side by side for inspection.

This woman also checked the captives’ clothes to ensure they weren’t hiding any sharp objects. The number of inspections had increased daily after suicide attempts among the captives had reached such a point that it irritated members of the Organization.

Rehana had tried to hang herself with a rope she found in a corner of the hall. It had been the school’s gym, and the rope was a jump rope. A female member of the Organization ran over to Rehana and managed to take it from her. She saved her life, then beat her with that same rope.

This was the same inspector who, in the first week of their captivity, had passed by the women one by one to ask: “Are you married?” and “When was the last time you had your period?”

One captive had replied: “Why this question?” Another screamed:

“Why?” And then a third, even louder: “Why?”

The inspector stepped back and yelled at them: “Because our State’s law prohibits the sale of pregnant women.”

Rehana was supposed to be given for free to Organization soldiers for domestic purposes only. This was according to the Organization’s code for those aged over 50. But the broken look with which she came back whenever she was taken showed that the soldiers were breaking their own rules.

‘Mama Rehana’ was what Layla called her, ever since that dark night during the second week of captivity when Layla had returned to the room, naked and wincing with pain and humiliation. They had thrown her clothes in after her.

Another captive picked them up, dressed her, and said: “May God avenge this girl and all of us.” She said it in Kurdish so the female inspector wouldn’t understand.

As a kitchen worker, Rehana had rushed to Layla with a pail of water and stayed up looking after her until morning. Layla had opened her eyes to see Rehana, who at that moment was wiping her forehead with a wet cloth to bring her fever down.

They exchanged looks of gratitude and sorrow. Rehana spoke Arabic and did not understand Kurdish. As such, she depended on Helen to translate between her and Layla – not always, but in the few times that passed without any rapes. They usually had no desire to speak after that. They would enter the room in silence, broken only by a greeting from one rapist to another. It sounded odd, like laughter at a funeral.

Thanks to Helen’s translations, Rehana knew Layla had not seen her parents since the day her mother had braided her hair before they left home along with the rest of their village, heading towards the mountains. Layla had not said more because they all knew what had happened next: how the men were separated from the women, young from old, and girls from the age of nine and above from the rest of their families.

One day, Layla had no words, not even for Helen, because Rehana had been found dead. She had not had a sharp tool or a rope. They did not know how she had died.

“Sadness killed her,” one of the captives said. Tears raced down Layla’s cheeks. Helen rocked her in her lap as she, too, wept. She held her for as long as she could, despite the pain in her back from the beating by Abu Tahseen, who had bought her once more and again returned her.

While braiding Layla’s hair, Helen remembered the day Abu Tahseen had taken her to his home in Aleppo, and how she had vomited on him while he was having sex with her. Helen had felt sick all the way to his house. When it happened, shortly after they arrived, he had struck her naked back with a stick until she passed out.

She had found herself in hospital, her hand tied to an IV drip.

A nurse handed her a pill with a glass of water and asked: “How are you?”

Helen had burst into tears and replied: “I’m not from here. I beg you, help me return to my family in Iraq.”

The nurse glanced left and right, and whispered: “How can I help you?”

“Just get me out of here into the street.”

“Sorry, but I can’t do that. Do you want me to call your family so they can help?”

“Yes, may God protect you.”

“I’ll bring my phone over during my break.” The nurse looked at her watch and added: “I’ll be back in an hour and a half.”

Helen had heard a far-off sound of explosions while she counted the 90 minutes, trying to remember any single relative’s number to give to the nurse. Since his imprisonment, her husband Elias’s phone must also have been taken from him, since he didn’t answer any of her calls, and Amina had been taken captive too. Helen didn’t know any other numbers off by heart.

The nurse drew the phone out from her pocket slowly, as if it were a pistol, while looking at the nearby patients’ beds. “I’ll leave this with you for five minutes and will be right back,” she said to Helen.

“Wait, please. I don’t know any numbers. Do you know the code for Iraq?”

“Oh, no. Later then, I’ll ask around,” the nurse said, putting the phone back in her pocket.

At that moment, a female doctor entered the room. She picked up and read from a clipboard next to Helen's bed, and told her: "You can go home now."

"May I stay one more day?" Helen asked.

"You don't need it," said the doctor. "There are wounded people on their way to the hospital and we may not have enough beds."

Helen got up reluctantly from the bed. The nurse escorted her to the reception, where Abu Tahseen was waiting. As he approached, Helen froze on the spot.

The nurse told her: "Wait. I'll give you my number in case you have any questions."

Abu Tahseen had overheard. He said: "No. There will be no questions. She will leave here and return to her country."

"Really?" the nurse asked.

Abu Tahseen turned his back on the nurse and motioned with his hand for Helen to follow him out. Before Helen crossed the threshold onto the street, she looked back. The nurse was still standing there, watching.

Abu Tahseen hailed a taxi, then waited for Helen to get into the back seat before he himself climbed into the front. He might have been afraid that she would vomit on him again. She wondered if he really would take her back home, as he had told the nurse. About 15 minutes later she heard the driver talking about construction on the road to Mosul, and hope flickered inside her like a lamp in a darkened room. She could not suppress the hope that they were indeed on the way to Mosul, not to Abu Tahseen's home in Aleppo.

The journey to Mosul took about ten hours. Helen noticed the sign indicating when the highway became the Caliphate Way. At last, the driver stopped outside the same school-turned-auction-house where Abu Tahseen had purchased her.

He had taken her back to the same prison. And yet, she breathed a sigh of relief to be rejoining the rest of the captives, if only until she was next re-sold. Who knew, perhaps a miracle from heaven would allow her to go back home. She needed a miracle, to breathe in the scent of her family again.

“She’s sick and not fit for me,” Abu Tahseen had said to the guard in the ’front yard.

The guard offered to exchange Helen for another woman, but Abu Tahseen opted to get his money back.

The day Rehana died, Helen was brought outside to be auctioned off again. The school yard was packed with customers with extremely long beards, who looked as if they had just emerged from ancient caves.

Hoping to spot Amina again, Helen scanned the faces of the other captives. Had someone bought her dear friend, she wondered, as she glimpsed a huge man moving towards her. She lowered her head to avoid him.

Translated by the author

File 42

by

Abdelmajid Sebbata



Abdelmajid Sebbata is a Moroccan author, born in Rabat in 1989. He obtained a Masters in Civil Engineering from Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tangiers. He has written articles and translations on literary, cultural and historical subjects which have been published in print and online in Morocco and other Arab countries. He is the author of three novels: *Behind the Wall of Passion* (2015), *The Zero Hour 00:00* (2017), which won the Moroccan Book Award in 2018, and *File 42* (2020). He has also translated two novels by the French thriller writer Michel Bussi.

About

File 42

by Abdelmajid Sebbata

File 42 follows two parallel storylines. In the first, Christine Macmillan, a successful American novelist, and Rasheed Benaser, a young Moroccan researcher and doctoral student, embark on an investigation to find the unknown author of a forgotten Moroccan novel from 1989, in which Christine's father, Steve, appears as one of the characters. Steve worked as a soldier at an American military base in Morocco during and after the Second World War. Their search leads them to a 1959 event - the tragedy of the poisoned cooking oil, one of the worst disasters to occur in the years after Moroccan independence. The second plot line is narrated by Zuheir Belqasem, a rich and delinquent Moroccan teenager who rapes Al-Ghalia, an under-aged maid. His mother uses her influence as a prominent lawyer to close the case and send him to Russia to pursue his university studies.

However, horrors await him there which no-one had foreseen. Written in the style of a "crime thriller" full of suspense, *File 42* explores themes of reading and writing, as well as the issue of human worth and the Moroccan's search for dignity, as a fundamental human right.



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There were seven of them, exchanging banter and clinking glasses and beer cans. There was also a girl, not yet twenty years old, who recognised Mustafa. But as soon as she caught sight of his face, she took to her heels as if the new arrival was a monster intent on devouring her.

The police inspector ignored her and approached the table. He put his hand on the shoulder of one of the men and asked quietly: "Are you Steve Macmillan?"

The man was blond, with blue eyes and rippling muscles, and aged over thirty. His fist almost crushed the bottle he was holding. He looked up at the inspector with half-closed eyes. "Who are you? What do you want?" he asked in a strange form of Arabic.

Mustafa was reassured to find the man could speak some colloquial Arabic, albeit imperfectly, like most Americans who worked at the air base and frequented such places for evenings of pleasure.

"I'm an inspector at National Security. I'm going to ask you some questions about your relationship with Saleh Belkadi, who died in a traffic accident a few days ago," said the policeman.

Steve said something in English, of which the inspector understood nothing, and his friends burst out laughing, which annoyed Mustafa as he was sure they were making fun of him. He kept his cool with difficulty, even when the American answered him directly: "Given that you're an inspector at National Security, haven't any of your bosses told you that I'm a soldier in the US Army and I can only be formally interrogated by the US military police?"

What he said was correct, and the Moroccan was well aware of it. The tremor in his voice gave away the fact that he was irritated, just as the American wanted.

"Who told you it would be a formal interrogation, Private Macmillan? It's just some routine questions to which I'd like to hear your answers."

The soldier winked to his friends in a display of self-confidence and

stood up. He looked at least eight inches taller than the inspector. He then followed the inspector to a secluded table in the half-light, which made it more difficult for him to track the movement of Mustafa's eyes.

"Saleh was my friend. We always used to meet here and chat about rumours of whether the US Army was going to leave Morocco or stay. I was very sad to hear about the tragedy that's struck his family – the mystery of his wife's murder, and then his death in a traffic accident. It's really horrific."

"Was your relationship with him just a matter of spending evenings here with him, or did you meet in other places too?"

"What do you mean?" Steve replied cautiously.

"Some witnesses say you often met in his house. Was that an extension of your rowdy evenings here in the bar? Or did it have something to do with his business work?"

"Yes, I visited him at home several times, just as a friend. It had nothing to do with his work and I never asked him about that." Steve spoke with a composure that suggested he had already prepared himself for all possible questions, so Mustafa tried to catch him unawares with another.

"What about his wife Djamila?" he asked. "Did you know her personally?"

The American was silent for a while. He touched the tip of his nose involuntarily, then said: "I might have seen her briefly, once or twice. You know more than me about your conservative traditions. They wouldn't have thought it appropriate for her to sit with us."

The inspector had no choice but to play his most important card: "Where were you on the night of Wednesday, July 22?"

Steve replied unemotionally: "At the air base, of course. Six of my American friends would testify to that. They're the people at that table over there, and they could very easily prove I was there."

The inspector put his hand in his pocket and took out Saleh's diary. He looked for the right page and waved it in front of Steve's face. "I have a note written by the deceased that refers to an appointment he

had with you on Wednesday, July 22, at 10 o'clock in the evening, although he claimed that on that day he travelled to Casablanca for business."

The American gave the table a powerful push and it hit Mustafa in the stomach. "The meeting's over," he said, with provocative coldness.

He moved back towards his friends' table. Mustafa followed him, undeterred. Ignoring the pain from the sudden blow, he shouted out: "I haven't exhausted my list of questions yet! The numbers Saleh wrote in his diary under the appointment. What do they mean?"

Steve turned towards him with his fist raised: "My friends are waiting for me and I don't have time to waste on you. You're lucky I'm in a good mood. The right response to your stupid questions is a punch on the nose."

The Moroccan clenched his fist too, frustrated that the American was taller and stronger than him. "It's not in your interest to avoid my questions," he said in a trembling voice. "Rest assured, I'm not that weak and I'll keep after you until you're formally interrogated about your role in the case."

The American reverted to a passive-aggressive stance, despite his superficial calm. "Listen, my Moroccan friend. Your country is adrift and hasn't been able to stand on its own two feet since independence. You need us desperately. Whose sophisticated equipment helped warn you of the danger of floods in the Gharb region? Who then stepped in to save the victims? Who has closed their eyes to the smuggling of food, clothing, fridges and so on from the air base? Why do your bosses try to stop me detaining prostitutes, and force me to release them every time? Who is spared the headache of developing the economy of a town, maybe of a whole region, simply because we're there and we fill the cafés and bars, and keep the economy turning with our money and goods? Who provides you with direct aid in the form of tons of wheat and milk powder? Who trains your pilots to fly the latest warplanes? You can rest assured, my friend, that the Moroccan state will not put everything that has been accomplished in jeopardy for your sake, but it will hold you to account simply because you dared to harass me."

Mustafa swallowed the soldier's insults. But the feeling that had come over him when he read the man's name in Saleh Belqadi's diary had now turned into a certainty, without any remaining shadow of doubt.

Steve Macmillan was the key to the mystery of Djamila and her husband's murders. When, how and why? He couldn't answer any of these questions now, but he most certainly would do so. Whatever the cost.

A Moroccan Riddle, a novel
The story and how to interpret it

There's nothing real but chance
Paul Auster

Tuesday, October 22, 2002
The Old City, Rabat

Piled high with photographs, notebooks and dozens of pieces of paper, the table looked like the operations room for a military campaign. Rachid was busy going through them in silence.

After a long and exhausting night, in which I had been unable to get any sleep till the crack of dawn, I looked out into the distance and observed a curious mosaic made up of ancient houses, old walls, modern buildings and the bustle of traffic between the banks of the river.

What madness is this? Steve Macmillan, quiet and reserved to the point of being boring, as a character in the pages of a Moroccan novel! Moving, speaking, laughing, having fun . . . and committing a murder without anyone holding him to account!

"The truth is, your name kept ringing in my head long after I went home," said Rachid. "Not just because you're a writer and I'd seen a photograph of you in a cultural magazine, but also because the name

wasn't unfamiliar. I immediately associated it with the American soldier who's a character in the novel *A Moroccan Riddle*.

"It's an incredible coincidence, isn't it? You only come across things like this in novels. When fate takes you where it wants, you realise that those who complain about coincidences in the plots of novels don't have much experience of life, given that life can amaze us constantly, with surprises that are stranger than strange. What matters is that I set my amazement aside and wondered what this new piece of information about Steve Macmillan might mean, for your novel, and for my theory."

Rachid said all this without looking up from the photographs.

"Why?" I said.

He rested his chin on his fist in thought. His eyebrows almost met under a forehead so wrinkled it looked like the lines on the screen of a heart monitor. He looked ten years older than he was.

Rachid is a diligent young man. I only met him yesterday and don't know much about him, but I'm sure life hasn't been kind to him and he's struggling to find his feet.

"I read the text as fiction, written by a man called Khaled Rafiqi," he went on. "In it he combined a police investigation and an accurate portrayal of Moroccan society in the post-independence period. But the fact that it includes a soldier with the same name as your father gives us a choice between two possibilities."

I knew what he meant but I didn't stop him continuing.

"You know the expression 'The events and the characters in this novel are imaginary and have nothing to do with reality. Any resemblance between them and reality is coincidental'? That's a phrase that appears at the beginning of most fictional works, to protect the writer from the quirks of fate. Ordinary people have sometimes attacked writers because their works included insulting portrayals of characters who happened to share their name."

I interrupted him irritably: "Of course. My first novel, *The Prisoner of Class 12*, was based on a real incident where I was one of the victims: the massacre at Columbine High School. But I played around with the sequence of events and changed the names of some characters

while retaining some real names. In *A Moroccan Riddle* the author didn't preface the book with this disclaimer and there's no precise description of Steve Macmillan's appearance."

"Or else, the novel, which everyone ignored," he said, hesitantly and perhaps with fear, "is based on real events, and it includes the obvious allegation of an American soldier being implicated in the murder of a young Moroccan woman in the town of Kenitra, who was eventually able to escape punishment after a decision was made to remove the inspector from the case."

"Don't these details remind you of something?" he added, his hesitation turning into something like anticipation.

I simply shrugged my shoulders with indifference. Excitement and fatigue prevented me from answering.

"*Who Killed Palomino Molero?*, a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa," Rachid continued, "is not a conventional detective story, but it features an investigation into the brutal murder of a young conscript, led by Lieutenant Silva and Sergeant Lituma. The investigation leads them into a maze of ethnic discrimination, conspiracy theories and what the author calls the devouring of little fish by big fish. The story ends with the two of them being transferred to a remote area even though they're close to solving the puzzle, some aspects of which are left unanswered."

"Okay," I said impatiently. "What's your evidence for the second possibility? I don't know anything about my father's past in Morocco, and I came here looking for information. For example, what proves he was working at the air base in Kenitra?"

Rachid picked up a picture of my father with a child rescued from the floods, and pointed to the writing on the back. "It says here that the picture was taken in 1958, when US forces took part in efforts to rescue flood victims in the Gharb region. For your information Kenitra belongs geographically and administratively to that region, which is known to have seen many incidents of flooding and landslides."

"That's not enough."

He put the picture aside, then picked up another picture of my

father with his old friends. He turned it over and pointed to what was written on the back. “Okay, what do you have to say about the fact that there’s strong evidence this photo was taken in Kenitra?”

His manner certainly caught my attention. I sat down on the chair opposite, rested my cheek in my hand and said: “What evidence is that?”

“The Arkan Bar is mentioned in the novel *An Attempt to Live*, by the Moroccan writer Mohammed Zafzaf. It includes a scene of a bar fight there between a group of drunken American soldiers. In his work, Zafzaf uses material drawn from real-life Morocco, things he saw with his own eyes in his childhood and early youth. The bar exists, or did exist, in the 1950s in Kenitra, the main setting of the novel’s events. Zafzaf spent several years in the town before moving to Casablanca.”

I picked up the photo of the bar and had a good look at it, until I felt I could get right inside it, as happens in science fiction dramas.

Then I said: “I don’t think Brandon will get anywhere now he’s established that most of the people in the photo are dead, and I don’t think the result will be any different with Tony Wagner. So what do you say we get in touch with the author of *An Attempt to Live*? The fact that he was around in the 1950s, and that my father might have worked at the Kenitra base, could help us obtain additional information. He might have heard about a real crime that was committed at that time, with a young woman found dead near the river Sebou.”

“How are you going to get in touch with him when he’s dead and buried? Mohammed Zafzaf, may God have mercy on him, died of cancer last July.”

He turned to the picture of the young, nameless Moroccan woman, and fear drove me to pose the inconvenient question: “Are you thinking that . . . ?”

My voice was so unsteady that I couldn’t go on, so he finished the question for me. “. . . that the woman in the photo your father kept for years is Djamila al-Baroudi? I don’t know. As for the name of the villa, obviously it’s written in Arabic so you and your literary agent

couldn't read it, but it's not really clear anyway. The photo's very old and of such poor quality that the details can't be picked out, and even if we could, I don't think it would be of any use to us."

"That leads us to the most obvious option," I said. "The puzzle of *A Moroccan Riddle* can only be explained by the author, Khaled Rafiqi. No one else can answer the question of what's real and what's fictional in the events related in that book."

Rachid stood up, put his hand in his pocket, went to the edge of the hotel roof, which the owners had turned into a restaurant with a magnificent view over the city, and dropped another bombshell:

"You don't seem to have read the introduction by the French translator, or the publisher's note on the back cover of the Arabic edition. The biggest puzzle about *A Moroccan Riddle* is the writer himself. The publisher received the manuscript in the post and, years after the novel was published, still no one knows who Khaled Rafiqi was!"

Translated by Jonathan Wright

Longing for the Woman Next Door

by
Habib Selmi



Habib Selmi was born in Al-Ala, Tunisia, in 1951. He obtained a Higher Teaching Certificate (agrégation) in Arabic Language before emigrating to Paris in 1985, where he now lives and teaches Arabic at a prestigious secondary school. His published novels include *Goat Mountain* (1988, English edition Banipal Books, 2020), *Portrait of a Dead Bedouin* (1990), *Sand Labyrinth* (1994), *Warm Pits* (1999), *Bayya's Lovers* (2002) and *Abdallah's Secrets* (2004). His novel *The Scents of Marie-Claire* (2008) was IPAF-shortlisted in 2009 and published in English translation by Arabia Books in 2010. *The Women of al-Basatin* (2010) was IPAF-shortlisted in 2012 and has French and German editions.

About

Longing for the Woman Next Door

by Habib Selmi

On the face of it, they have nothing in common, apart from both being Tunisian and living in the same apartment building. He is in his sixties, educated and married to a Frenchwoman. She is several years younger and from a lower social stratum, and married to an eccentric man. At first, he is cautious and patronizing. But later, the rules of the game change. The novel explores a rich, turbulent and extraordinary relationship, which celebrates life in its simplest and most beautiful manifestations but is also tinged with darkness and tragedy.



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Chapter 1

Now I've begun seeing her several times a day. Her name is Zahra, but most residents of the building we live in call her 'Madame Mansour'. Others call her 'the maid' or 'the Tunisian woman', the way they call Mrs. Rodriguez, who comes every evening to take the bins out and set them on the pavement, 'the Portuguese woman', and the way they call Mr. Gonzalez, who lives alone in a flat on the fifth floor, 'the Spaniard'.

Zahra was thrilled when she discovered there was another Tunisian living in the building besides her, her husband Mansour and their son Karim. She had thought they were the only non-Arabs there, which surprised me given that it's obvious from my features that I'm not French. True, not all French people are blonde, blue-eyed and fair-skinned. In fact, there are French people who to an extent resemble Arabs. But it's easy to tell the difference between them and me.

From the moment she found out I was Tunisian, Zahra stopped speaking to me in French, which she'd picked up from her interaction with French people and which she speaks much better and more easily than a lot of Arab immigrants her age, especially the women. Instead she started speaking to me in colloquial Tunisian, unless other residents were around, as she felt it wouldn't be appropriate to speak in front of our neighbours in a language they didn't understand.

The reason I see her several times a day isn't because we live in the same building; there are other residents I only see once a month for so. Rather, it's because she's started working as a maid for a ninety-year-old woman named Madame Albert, whose flat is on the first floor, where I live. In fact, she's just across the hall from me, and our front doors are only a metre apart (most residential buildings in Paris have really narrow corridors). So it happens every now and then that when Madame Albert and I are leaving or coming back to our flats at the

same time, the bags and baskets in our hands, or even our clothes, brush up against each other.

Madame Albert lives alone. She has no brothers or sisters because she was an only child, and nobody visits her but a friend of hers around her age. According to Zahra, Madame Albert is vaguely and distantly related to a lady who lives in Brussels, and whom she talks to on the phone a couple of times a year, once to wish her a happy birthday and once to wish her a happy new year. It's rumoured that Madame Albert was once fond of men and fell in love with quite a number of them in her day, but never married, and that she wouldn't mind people calling her Mademoiselle Albert instead of Madame Albert. But out of respect for her, nobody in the building would dare call her that, not to mention how bizarre it would sound to refer to a ninety-year-old woman as 'Mademoiselle'.

Madame Albert needed a woman to attend to her: to clean the house, cook for her, bathe her, trim her nails, help her get dressed, and accompany her on her twice-daily walks around the neighbourhood, and she couldn't have found a better person for the job than the well-mannered, amiable Zahra. And most importantly of all, Zahra lived in the same building as she did, which meant she could be on call day and night.

As for Zahra, she has no choice but to work in people's houses since Mansour, several years her senior, is retired, while Karim suffers from a physical disability and is unemployed. Madame Albert pays Zahra a good wage and gives her a bit extra on New Year's Day and religious holidays like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. So apparently, Madame Albert is both wealthy and generous. It's said that in addition to the flat she lives in, she owns and rents out a number of others around Paris.

I began seeing Zahra around the time I first moved into the building. I would run into her every now and again at the entrance, in the lift, on the stairs, next to the postboxes, or in the yard by the bins. At the time, I thought the only reason she was in the building was that she worked in some of the flats, because a lot of Arab women work in French people's homes. She would always greet me, which I

think she did with everybody who lived there. Sometimes she'd ask me what time it was, or make some comment about the fickle weather, the bins or the postman.

I would see both Mansour and Karim too, though a lot less often than I saw her. I also didn't realize they were her husband and son. I just thought they were among the numerous people who frequented the doctor's clinic on the second floor. It had never occurred to me that she and these two men, to whom I'd never spoken, might belong to a single household, nor that they might live in one of the flats in our building.

The first question that came to my mind was: How could a woman who works as a maid in people's homes, whose husband is retired and whose only son is unemployed, be living in an upscale Haussmann-style building, in a neighbourhood of Paris that could hardly be described as poor? At first I assumed she must be living in some tiny, cramped flat, or in one of the 'maids' rooms' on the top floor – so called because the building was originally designed to accommodate live-in maid servants. But I later discovered that she didn't live on the top floor, but on the fifth, and that her flat was no different to mine, because all the flats in the building, even those on the fifth floor, had the same design and area. What perplexed me even more, though, was the fact that her flat wasn't rented, but belonged to her and her husband.

I was married to a French woman by the name of Brigitte, and we were in a good financial situation; you might even call it excellent. I'm a professor of mathematics, and since completing my degree – which was what I moved to France for – I've worked at a French public university, which guarantees me a respectable salary and delivers me from the spectre of unemployment that's threatened so many in recent years. As for Brigitte, she's been employed for quite some time now at a Paris branch of a major Spanish bank, because she studied Spanish at university. In addition, our family is small, comprising just us and our son Sami.

After he graduated, Sami found a job at a big company, so he moved out and began living on his own. We kept our expenses down, and we

had some savings. Even so, we had to take out a bank loan when we decided to buy a flat in this building, and we're still paying it back in monthly instalments that come to a quarter of our combined salaries. So how did Zahra and her husband manage to buy theirs?

Something else I've found odd is that Arabs like Zahra and her husband, who come from a humble social milieu and have only limited education, generally don't choose to live in flats in Paris, most of whose residents are French, even if they do have abundant financial resources. They tend to prefer the suburbs and surrounding cities where lots of Arabs live, which alleviates their sense of alienation and reduces their exposure to racism. These neighbourhoods are home to plenty of shops that sell halal meat and the sorts of fruits and vegetables that they prefer, and the prices are lower than they are in Paris.

I wondered constantly what might have prompted them to insist on staying in France after Mansour had stopped working. Most migrants from Tunisia leave France as soon as they retire and go back to Tunisia, where they build themselves villas, open businesses and buy farms. Back in Tunisia, they spend the final years of their lives enjoying a level of comfort that helps them forget all they went through during their long years in a foreign land. Then they pass away surrounded by family, and are buried in the soil of the villages and towns where they were born.

"Why do you care about this? It's none of your concern," my wife Brigitte says to me a bit reproachfully when I speak to her about this, which I do every now and then in hope of finding convincing answers to my questions. The fact is, Brigitte isn't nosy like me. She rarely takes an interest in what's going on in the building, and she only talks about other residents when she's really irritated by something, such as the barking of the dog that belongs to the lady who lives on the second floor with her elderly mother, and who's rumoured, like Madame Albert, to have never married.

I must confess that after I took an interest in Zahra and her family, I would periodically surrender to my imagination, going off on mental tangents and thinking up bizarre and exciting stories about her and her husband to satisfy my curiosity. However, the information I did

later manage to gather, with difficulty, put a stop to all of that.

Mansour had emigrated during a period when France and all of Europe were open to foreigners. At that time there was no unemployment in these countries, and everyone who moved there found a job without any difficulty. Racism wasn't widespread in the way it is now. He worked in the construction sector for a few years, after which he had the good fortune to be appointed to work at the famous Renault car manufacturer, where he stayed until he retired.

Rumour has it that Mansour was violent, and a drunkard, and that he mixed with pimps and drug dealers, but after he got to know Zahra and married her, he changed a great deal. Within a few years he had managed to save a significant sum of money. Then, after taking out a small loan and, with help from the Renault factory, he was able to buy the flat. All this happened more than thirty years ago, at a time when the neighbourhood was poor, the real estate market sluggish, and the building dilapidated. It was only later that it was renovated and became as it is today. And that's all there is to that.

As to why they didn't move back to Tunisia after Mansour retired, this was mostly to do with the son's disability, which required ongoing treatment that he received free of charge at France's largest hospital. Because he was both disabled and unemployed, he received benefits and assistance from social welfare funds. His mother was also drawing unemployment benefit. And of course, if they had gone back to Tunisia, they would have been deprived of these perks.

When Zahra found out I was Tunisian, Mansour started saying hello to me whenever we ran into each other at the entrance to the building, whereas before he had simply glanced at me without saying anything. Sometimes he would nod his head so faintly I barely noticed it: a gesture that was always a bit of a mystery to me. I couldn't tell whether it was his way of greeting me, or whether he was surprised to see me. In truth, our paths rarely crossed because he didn't leave the house much, and when he did, he tended to do so at times when I wasn't out and about myself.

As concerned as Zahra was about her appearance, Mansour was negligent about his. He always wore old clothes that hung loose on

his skinny frame. His beard was unshaven most of the time, and his hair was uncombed. But what most drew my attention was the fact that sometimes he went out without wearing shoes and, instead, would have his house slippers on. And even when the weather was cold, he would have no socks on.

A lot of the residents in the building looked at him a bit strangely as it wasn't acceptable to leave one's flat in such a state of neglect even if one didn't leave the actual building. Brigitte herself started talking every now and then about the condition of 'Monsieur Mansour', as she called him because the French are keen on using the prefix 'Monsieur' whenever they talk about a man they don't know well, even if the person concerned is a vagrant, a thief or a criminal. I find this a very odd custom and I still haven't got used to it.

Because Mansour was Tunisian like me, sometimes Brigitte would ask me questions that I myself had been wondering about, but that I had no answers to: Didn't he notice that other residents gave him strange looks? Why didn't he comb his hair? Didn't he feel cold when he went out in the winter without socks, wearing those types of slippers? But the question that perplexed her the most was: How could Zahra allow him to go out in such a pitiful condition?

Karim, who seemed to be a little over twenty-five years old, took after his mother in both disposition and manners. He took care of his outward appearance and his clothes were always clean. Sometimes he would wear patent leather shoes, and clothes that looked a bit vintage for a young man his age. He didn't appear to be connected to his father in any way. I even wondered for a time whether Mansour was actually his father, or whether Zahra might have had him by a previous husband.

Karim had also changed since his mother discovered I was Tunisian. He began greeting me with a warmth that showed not only in his smile, which was wider than before, but also in his insistence on shaking my hand. He had a slight limp due to his disability, and as soon as he saw me, he would approach me so quickly I was afraid he might lose his balance and fall. So to make things easier for him, I started approaching him too. Once he'd shaken my hand he would

say nothing else, and he avoided looking directly at me. In fact, his shyness would sometimes make me feel awkward. Fortunately, the encounter would only last a few seconds. This behaviour surprised me at first because from a distance, Karim seemed normal: more or less like any other young man his age. For a while I wondered whether he was suffering from a mild mental disability alongside his physical one.

Translated by Nancy Roberts



The 2021 Judging Panel

Chair of Judges

Chawki Bazih is a Lebanese poet and writer, born in Tyre, southern Lebanon, in 1951. After graduating in 1973 with an M. A. in Arabic Language and Literature from the College of Education in the Lebanese University, he worked as a teacher, a cultural consultant for the Ministry of Media and a columnist for a number of Arabic newspapers. He is the author of works of literary criticism, with a particular focus on poetry and the novel, as well as seventeen books of poetry and four works of prose. Recently, his collected works were published in three volumes. His poetry has been translated into several languages, including English, French and German, and studied in many books of literary criticism and university theses. He has won several prizes and awards, including the Okaz Prize for Arabic Poetry (2010), the Kamal Jumblatt Medal (2010), the Sultan Owais Award, in the poetry category (2017), The Palestine Medal for Culture and the Arts (2017) and the Mahmoud Darwish Award for Culture and Creativity (2020).

Members of the Panel

Mohammed Ait Hanna is a Moroccan writer and translator, whose interests include philosophy, literature and aesthetics. Born in 1981 in Rabat, he completed his education there, obtaining a Higher Teaching Certificate (agrégation) in Philosophy and a Diploma in Advanced Philosophy Studies

and History of Sciences. He is currently a lecturer in Philosophy at the Regional Centre for Teaching Careers and Training in Casablanca and has previously served on the judging panels of several prizes. His published works include: *Desire and Philosophy: An Introduction to Reading Deleuze and Guattari* (2010), *On Painting and The Short Story: Moroccan Examples* (2012,, *Their Libraries* (2017) and *The Red Garden* (a novel, 2018). His translations from French into Arabic include Kadhim Jihad's *La part de l'étranger, La traduction de la poésie dans la culture arabe* (2011), Albert Camus's *L'étranger* (2013), André Miguel's *Du monde et de l'étranger* (2016), Jeanne Hersch's *L'étonnement philosophique* (2018) and Alexander Dumas's novels *Georges* (2014) and *Le compte de Monte-Cristo* (2021).

Safa Jubran is a Lebanese university lecturer and academic, born in Marja'youn, southern Lebanon, in 1962 and living in Brazil. She teaches Arabic Language and Modern Literature at the University of San Paolo, where she was Head of the Department of Eastern Languages for four years. She is the author of many academic papers and articles on linguistics, the history of sciences, Arabic manuscripts and translation. She translates from Arabic into Portuguese and her translations include *Miramar* by Naguib Mahfouz, *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, *Gate of the Sun* by Elias Khoury, *Sunset Call* by Gamal Al-Ghitani, *The Night Mail* by Hoda Barakat, and *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi. She has also translated Brazilian literature into Arabic, such as *Two Brothers (Dois Irmãos)* by Milton Hatoum and *From Exile to Homeland* (selections from Brazilian literature). She won the Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation in 2019.

Ali Al-Muqri is a Yemeni writer, born in Yemen in 1966 and now living in France. He has written five novels which have been translated into several languages, including English, French, Italian and Kurdish. Two of his novels were longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2009 and 2011 respectively, while the French edition of his novel *Hurma* (under the title *Femme Interdite*) received a special commendation from the jury of the 2015 Prix de la Littérature Arabe, awarded by the Institut de Monde Arabe and the Fondation Jean-Luc Lagardère. Another novel, *Adeni Perfume* was shortlisted for the 2015 Sheikh Zayed Book Award.

Ayesha Sultan is an Emirati writer and journalist, born in the Emirate of Dubai in 1962. She holds an M.A. in Communication and Media Sciences and a B.A. in Political Science from the United Arab Emirates University. Since 1996, she has written a daily column in *Al Bayan* newspaper entitled “Abjadiyat”, before becoming Head of its Culture section from 1997 to 2004 and moving to become the Director of the political programmes department of Dubai TV. She is the founding director of Warrak Publishing House in Dubai and Vice President of the Emirates Writers Union. She is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Culture and Science Symposium, a founding member of the Emirates Journalists Association and founder of a group of book clubs in the Emirates (Book Salon, Forum Salon). She is the author of *Winter of Tales* (2012), *In Praise of Memory* (articles, 2014) and *Margins in Cities and Travel* (2015).

The Translators

Raphael Cohen is a professional translator and lexicographer who studied Arabic and Hebrew at Oxford and the University of Chicago. His published translations include the *Poems of Alexandria and New York* by Ahmed Morsi, and the novels *Guard of the Dead* by George Yarak, *Butterfly Wings* by Mohammed Salmawi, *Status Emo* by Islam Musbeh, *The Bridges of Constantine* by Ahlem Mostaghenemi, and *So You May See* by Mona Prince. He is a contributing editor of *Banipal* magazine, has contributed translations of short stories and poetry to a range of anthologies and magazines, and translates books and articles in the humanities and social sciences. He is based in Cairo.

Miled Faiza is a Tunisian-American poet and translator. *Remains of a House We Once Entered* (2004) was his first poetry collection. He translated into Arabic the 2017 Man Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Autumn* as well as *Winter*, both by Ali Smith. He also translated Shukri Mabkhout’s *The Italian* (with Karen McNeil, 2021). He teaches Arabic at Brown University.

Samira Kawar is an experienced energy journalist who served as Middle East Editor at London-based energy publishing house Argus Media since 1999 until she resigned that post in March 2015 to concentrate on literary translation. She has contributed translations to *Banipal* magazine since its foundation in 1998, and is a trustee of the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature. Her translations include *The Eye of the Mirror* by Liana Badr (Garnett Publishing, 2008) and Abdul Rahman Munif's *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman* (Quartet 1996). She is an experienced TV and radio journalist, working for Reuters TV, Worldwide Television News (WTN, now known as APTV), NBC News and BBC World Service Radio. She has also written on the Middle East for the *Washington Post* and the *Jordan Times*.

Karen McNeil co-translated Shukri Mabkhout's *The Italian* (with Miled Faiza) which won the 2015 IPAF. She has also translated poems and short stories for *Banipal* and *World Literature Today*. She was a revising editor of the *Oxford Arabic Dictionary* (2014) and is currently completing a Ph.D. in Arabic linguistics at Georgetown University, with a focus on the sociolinguistics of Tunisia.

Nancy Roberts is an Arabic-to-English translator and independent researcher in the areas of modern Arabic literature, current affairs (environment, human rights, economy, law), Christian-Muslim relations, and Islamic thought and history. She has contributed articles to *The Muslim World*, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *Studies in Spirituality*, and *Sufi*. She won the 1994 University of Arkansas Translation Prize for her rendering of Ghada Samman's *Beirut '75*. Her translation of Salwa Bakr's *The Man From Bashmour* (AUC Press, 2007) was commended by the 2008 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and her translations of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Gaza Weddings* (Hoopoe Press, 2017), *Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (AUC Press, 2015) and *Time of White Horses* (Hoopoe, 2016) earned her the 2018 Sheikh Hamad Prize for Translation and International Understanding. Other authors Roberts has translated include Ahlem Mosteghanemi (*Chaos of the Senses*, *The Dust of Promises*), Laila Aljohani (*Days of Ignorance*), Abd al-Rahman Farsi (*Earth Weeps*, *Saturn Laughs*), Ezzat

Kamhawi (*House of the Wolf*), and Ahlam Bsharat (*Codename: Butterfly*). Her most recent literary translation is the IPAF 2017 shortlisted novel, *The Slave Yards*, by Najwa Bin Shatwan, (Syracuse University Press, Spring 2020).

Jonathan Wright is an award-winning translator of three IPAF winners: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (IPAF 2014), Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk* (IPAF 2013), which also won the 2016 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* (IPAF 2009), which was joint winner of the 2013 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. He is also the translator of Hassan Blasim's *The Iraqi Christ* which won the 2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. He studied Arabic, Turkish and Islamic History at St. John's College,, University of Oxford, and worked for many years as a journalist in the Arab world including in Tunisia, Oman, Lebanon and Egypt. He was a judge of the 2014 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. His translations also include works by Khaled el-Khamissi, Rasha al-Ameer, Fahd al-Atiq, Alaa el-Aswany, Galal Amin and Bahaa Abdelmegid, as well as the 2019 Man Booker International Prize shortlisted short story collection *Jokes for the Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, two IPAF shortlisted novels – Hamour Ziada's *The Longing of the Dervish* (2015 prize) and Ibrahim Essa's *The Televangelist* (2013 prize) – and Amjad Nasser's *Land of No Rain* (commended, 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize). His most recent translation is *God 99* by Hassan Blasim (Comma Press, 2020).