



Paul Starkey wins the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for 2015

The 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is awarded to Paul Starkey for his translation of the novel *The Book of the Sultan's Seal* by Youssef Rakha, published by Interlink Books, USA. And the judges commended Jonathan Wright for his translation of the novel *Land of No Rain* by Amjad Nasser, published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing.

The four judges this year were Robin Ostle (Chair), Emeritus Research Fellow at St John's College, Oxford; Samira Kawar, literary translator; Alastair Niven, lecturer and writer; and Susannah Tarbush, cultural journalist and blogger. They made their decision on 17 December 2015 at a meeting at the offices of the Society of Authors convened by Paula Johnson, the Administrator of the Translation Prizes, as below:

THE WINNER

**Paul Starkey for his translation of the novel
The Book of the Sultan's Seal by Youssef Rakha**

"The Book of the Sultan's Seal: Strange Incidents from History in the City of Mars, published at the height of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, is one of the most adventurous and innovative novels to have appeared in Arabic in recent years and its English version is a tour de force of translation. The book is an extraordinary exploration of the profound fragmentations and contradictions which mark the personality of the protagonist Mustafa Çorbacı, and by analogy the city and the society which he inhabits. Via a series of erratic (and on occasion, erotic) journeys through his Cairo, which is at once ancient and modern, he wrestles with the dilemmas of identity which beset this journalist, intellectual and aspiring artist. The solutions which are hinted at lie more within the rich variety and inclusiveness of Arabic culture rather than in any particular ideology.

"This text confronts the translator with extraordinary challenges. It mirrors the fundamental tension in the book between the heritage and modernity by constant reference to the classical literary tradition. The author chooses the pre-modern form of 'epistles' or 'treatises' for his rambling narrative, and the language of the text swings from the most formal classical Arabic to the most contemporary vernacular, along with extraordinary fusions of linguistic registers. Paul Starkey addresses these problems with great skill, and has produced a masterly English version of this riotous, chaotic and often comedic story, which is also deeply moving."

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COMMENDED

Jonathan Wright for his translation of the novel *Land of No Rain* by Amjad Nasser

“The judges were deeply impressed by Jonathan Wright’s translation of *Land of No Rain*, an inspired and inspiring account of that perennial theme of modern Arab experience: exile and return. The narrative is that of the protagonist’s return after twenty years in exile to a fictional Arab country where the body politic is dominated by a military dictatorship totally intent on the perpetuation of its repressive rule. Through its taut, succinct language, the reader is confronted by a succession of interlocking themes such as the workings of memory, the divided self of the narrator, and the manner in which individuals cope with threatening power in an atmosphere of constant imminent danger.

“The outstanding feature of this book is its highly poetically charged prose which Jonathan Wright has rendered into English with a sureness of stylistic touch which does complete justice to the Arabic original.”

Paul Starkey commented:

“It is a great honour to be offered this prize – which, as with all translation prizes, I feel really belongs to the author and the text as much as to the translator. The book is not an ‘easy read’, either in Arabic or in English, and with its complex, multi-layered themes and construction, translating it presented a huge challenge. But the novel is both timely and unique, and it deserves a wider audience. I very much hope that this award will help bring an exciting new novel to the attention of many new readers.”

Interlink Books publisher Michel Moushabeck commented:

“I am thrilled to hear the news that Paul Starkey’s translation of Youssef Rakha’s brilliant novel *The Book of the Sultan’s Seal* has won the 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. For the past 30 years, Interlink has had an unwavering commitment to publishing the best of Arabic literature in translation. It is such an honour and a privilege for one of translators to be recognized by the Prize, especially that this is the first time an Interlink title has won this prestigious award after having two runner-up titles. I’ve been singing the praises of Youssef Rakha’s debut novel set in contemporary Egypt from the moment I read it in its original Arabic. It is fresh and compelling – Rakha writes like no other novelist I’ve read. And I could not be happier when Paul Starkey – in my view, one of the best translators from the Arabic working today – agreed to take on the challenging job of rendering *The Book of the Sultan’s Seal* into English. I am pleased that his superb translation has received this well-deserved recognition and I hope that this award will bring Youssef Rakha’s literary masterpiece to the attention of a larger western audience.”

Jonathan Wright, the commended translator, commented:

“I was delighted to hear that the judges decided to commend Amjad Nasser’s book. The novel was one of the most subtle and intelligent literary works I’ve had the pleasure to translate. It is full of perceptive observations on the effects of exile on the individual and the impossibility of ever going home unchanged. It explores identity, change and the process of aging in innovative ways and simultaneously reflects the intellectual conflicts

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that dominated the Arab world in the late 20th century. Amjad writes with the economy and sensitivity of a poet to evoke a succession of cities across the Middle East and Europe over the past several decades. By placing the events in a nebulous allegorical framework he gives them a universal significance they might not otherwise have. I hope that the commendation encourages more people to read and enjoy *Land of No Rain*."

And from **Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing**, Fakhri Saleh, Head of Arabic Publishing at BQFP (now known as Hamad bin Khalifa University Press) commented:

"We are very proud to work with such talented translators and writers as Jonathan Wright and Amjad Nasser. Providing access to literary works and authors from across the world through excellent translations is at the very heart of what we do at the press, and we are very proud that one of our titles has been honoured by the highly-esteemed Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation."

EVENTS FOR THE 2015 PRIZE

The Award Ceremony

Wednesday 17 February

*The Award of Literary Translation Prizes from
Arabic, Dutch, French, German, Spanish and Swedish*

6.15pm for 6.30pm, Europe House, 32 Smith Square, London SW1P 3EU

Introduced by Paula Johnson, Prize Administrator, the Society of Authors

Prizes presented by Sir Peter Stothard, editor TLS, with readings by the winning translators.

This event is hosted by the Society of Authors and the TLS

The Banipal Trust celebration of the 2015 Award

Thursday 18 February

Paul Starkey and Youssef Rakha in conversation

6.30-9.00pm WATERSTONE'S PICCADILLY BOOKSTORE

203/206 Piccadilly, London W1J 9HD

with Readings and Q&A; Reception and Book signing.

Jointly hosted by the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature & Waterstone's

NOTES TO EDITORS

- **Paul Starkey** was Professor of Arabic and Head of the Arabic Department at Durham University, UK, until his retirement in 2012. He is a former Co-Director of the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World, and is currently Vice-President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. He has published widely in the field of modern Arabic literature, particularly Egyptian literature. He is the author of *From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfiq Hakim* (1987), and *Modern Arabic Literature* (2006), and with Julie Meisami was a co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (1998). His book on the Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim will be published by Edinburgh University Press later in 2016.

Paul Starkey has translated a number of works by contemporary Arab authors

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including *Dear Mr Kawabata* by Rashid al-Daif (Quartet, 2000); *Stones of Bobello* by Edwar al-Kharrat (Saqi, 2005) for the European Cultural Foundation's publishing project Mémoires de la Méditerranée; Turki al-Hamad's *Shumaisi* (Saqi, 2005); Mansoura Ez-Eldin's *Maryam's Maze* (AUC Press, 2009); parts of Samuel Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* first published by Banipal magazine and Banipal Books; Mahdi Issa Saqr's *East Winds, West Winds* (AUC Press, 2010), and Adania Shibli's *We Are All Equally Far From Love* (Interlink, 2013). He has also published a large numbers of shorter translations and reviews in *Banipal*, of which he is a contributing editor. He is currently working on the translation of a Syrian novel, *The Shell*, by Mustafa Khalifa, to be published by Interlink later in 2016.

- **Youssef Rakha** is the author of the novels *The Crocodiles* and *The Book of the Sultan's Seal*. He is a bilingual writer and photographer, and the editor of the blog *The Sultan's Seal* (yrakha.com). Born and based in Cairo, Egypt, he earned a BA in English and philosophy from Hull University, England. He is the cultural editor of *Al-Ahram Weekly*, the Cairo-based English-language newspaper.

- **Jonathan Wright** studied Arabic, Turkish and Islamic History at St. John's College, Oxford University. Between 1980 and 2009 he worked for Reuters news agency mainly in the Middle East. His latest literary translations include *Land of No Rain* by Amjad Nasser (BQFP, 2014), commended for the 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and *The Bamboo Stalk* by Saud Alsanousi (BQFP, 2015), whose original Arabic edition won the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. He was joint winner of the 2013 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for his translation of the novel *Azazeel* by Youssef Ziedan (Atlantic Books, 2012) whose original Arabic edition won the 2009 IPAF, and in 2014 he won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for his translation *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim (Comma Press, 2013). He was a judge of the 2014 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize.

Wright's first literary translation, from Egyptian colloquial dialect, was Khaled al-Khamissi's *Taxi* (2009). Further literary translations include Hassan Blasim's *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Comma Press, 2009); *Judgement Day* by Rasha al-Ameer (AUC Press, 2012); *Life on Hold* by Fahd al-Atiq (AUC Press, 2012); *Sleepwalkers* by Said Makkawi (Dar el-Shorouk); and Bahaa Abdelmegid's *Temple Bar* (AUC Press, 2014).

- **Amjad Nasser** was born in Jordan in 1955. He is a major contributor to today's Arab poetry scene and prior to his debut novel *Land of No Rain*, has published many volumes of poetry and four travel memoirs. He was managing editor and cultural editor of *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* daily newspaper for many years, and has judged a number of literary prizes, including the International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

His first volume of poetry in English translation was *Shepherd of Solitude* (translated by Khaled Mattawa and published by Banipal Books, 2009). He has won many prizes for his poetry and performed at festivals around the world. Selected poems have been translated into English, Spanish and French.

- **The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation** is an annual prize of £3,000, awarded to the translator(s) of a published translation in English of a full-length imaginative and creative Arabic work of literary merit published after, or during, the year 1967 and first published in English translation in the year prior to the award. Entries are judged by a panel of four distinguished authors, critics and literary experts, two of whom read and consider both the Arabic original and the English translation.

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The prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the UK, as are other prizes for literary translation into English from European languages. The Award Ceremony is hosted by the Society of Authors and the *Times Literary Supplement*. The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize entries can have been published anywhere in the world but must be available for purchase in the United Kingdom, either via a distributor or on-line. There were 29 entries for the 2015 prize.

The prize, the first worldwide for a published work of English literary translation from Arabic, was established in 2005 by *Banipal*, the magazine of modern Arab literature in English translation, and the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature, and is sponsored by Omar Saif Ghobash and his family in memory of his father, the late Saif Ghobash, a man passionate about Arabic literature and other literatures of the world. The 2015 prize is the 10th award.

- For general details about the prize, go to <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/index.cfm>
- For all information about the 2015 award, go to: <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award2015.cfm>
- For all information about the judging panel for the 2015 prize, go to: <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/judges2015.cfm>
- If you require digital images of Paul Starkey and Jonathan Wright, and/or of their authors Youssef Rakha and Amjad Nasser, the front cover images of *The Book of the Sultan's Seal* and *Land of No Rain*, or the logo of the Prize, please contact margaret@banipal.co.uk
- To arrange an interview with Paul Starkey or for any other information, please email Margaret Obank on info@banipaltrust.org.uk or margaret@banipal.co.uk, or contact the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature at: 1 Gough Square, London EC4A 3DE , Tel: +44 (0)20 7832 1350
- To attend the Award Ceremony on Wednesday 17 February, please apply to Paula Johnson at the Society of Authors (Pjohnson@societyofauthors.org) for a Press Pass.
- To attend the Banipal Trust event at Waterstone's Piccadilly bookstore, please email margaret@banipal.co.uk