

Blind Spots: A millennium of Arabic in translation

– from Ibn Al-Haytham to William Faulkner via *Don Quixote*

Lecture by
Anton Shammas

**The Inaugural Lecture
of the
Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize
for Arabic Literary Translation**

**7pm, 14 October 2016
Conference Centre, The British Library**



The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation

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 and general interest, and published in the original Arabic after, or during, the year 1967 – a year widely recognised as a ‘watershed’ year for Arabic literature, 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. The 2016 prize is now in progress, with the entries being read by the new judging panel, comprising the previous year’s winner Paul Starkey (Chair); Zahia Smail Salhi, professor of Arabic; Lucy Popescu, writer and journalist; and Bill Swainson, literary consultant and publisher.

The prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the UK, as are other prizes for literary translation into English from European languages with the Award Ceremony hosted by the Society. 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 online. The deadline for entries and publication of works each year is 31 March.

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. After its first year’s patronage by Mohammad Ahmad Al-Sowaidi, the prize has been wholly sponsored by Omar Saif Ghobash and his family, and named in memory of his father, the late Saif Ghobash, a man passionate about Arabic literature and other literatures of the world.

To mark the tenth year of the prize, Omar Saif Ghobash and his family extend their sponsorship to the establishment of an annual Lecture.

www.banipaltrust.org.uk

For more about the prize go to: www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/
or email: info@banipaltrust.org.uk

Bookstall at the Lecture courtesy of BookHaus

Blind Spots:

A millennium of Arabic in translation

– from Ibn Al-Haytham to William Faulkner via *Don Quixote*

19.00-20.30

Friday 14 October 2016

Conference Centre, The British Library

96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB

Tickets: £10 (£8 over 60, £7 other concessions)

To book, go to <http://www.bl.uk/events>

In his lecture, Anton Shammas explores the hitherto concealed connections between Arabic learning and western literature and art. He asks why Cervantes would claim that *Don Quixote*, 'the first great novel of world literature', was a history translated from Arabic, paying tribute to the vanished Muslim population of Spain; how the foundational *Optics* of 11th-century Cairo mathematician Ibn Al-Haytham ignited the Renaissance when translated into Latin and Italian; and considers the often unconscious transcribing of these influences into the work of later artists and writers, including Velazquez, Picasso and William Faulkner.

Anton Shammas is a Palestinian author, essayist and translator who works in, and between, Arabic, Hebrew and English. He has been, since 1997, a Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His novel *Arabesques*, written in Hebrew and published in 1986, has been translated into eight languages including English (1988), French, German, Spanish and Italian. He is the author of three plays, and has three poetry collections, the first written in Arabic, the second and third in Hebrew. Among the playwrights and authors whose works he has translated are Dario Fo, Athol Fugard, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Emile Habibi and Taha Muhammad Ali. He is currently working on a collection: *Blind Spots and other essays on translation*.



The 2016 prize

There are 19 eligible entries for the 2016 prize: 17 fiction titles and two poetry. The 18 translators are Kareem James Abu-Zeid, Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, Nesreen Akhtarkhavari and Anthony A Lee, Roger Allen, T M Aplin, Charis Bredin and Emily Danby, Nicole Fares, Russell Harris, Michelle Hartman, William M Hutchins (3), Abdulwahid Lu'lu'a, Melanie Magidow, Nancy Roberts, Jonathan Smolin, Karim Traboulsi, and Jonathan Wright (2).

Confessions by Rabee Jaber, translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid (New Directions, USA)

The Bride of Amman by Fadi Zaghmout, translated by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (Signal 8 Press, Hong Kong)

Desert Sorrows by Tayseer al-Sboul, translated by Nesreen Akhtarkhavari and Anthony A Lee (Michigan State University Press, USA)

My Torturers by Bensalem Himmich, translated by Roger Allen (Syracuse University Press, USA)

Hurma by Ali al-Muqri, translated by T M Aplin (Darf Publishers, UK)

Ebola '76 by Amir Tag Elsir, translated by Charis Bredin and Emily Danby (Darf Publishers, UK)

32 by Sahar Mandour, translated by Nicole Fares (Syracuse University Press, USA)

The Automobile Club of Egypt by Alaa Al Aswany, translated by Russell Harris (Canongate, UK)

Ali and his Russian Mother by Alexandra Chreiteh, translated by Michelle Hartman (Interlink Publishing, USA)

Telepathy by Amir Tag Elsir, translated by William M Hutchins (Bloomsbury Qatar

Foundation Publishing, Qatar)

The Scarecrow by Ibrahim al-Koni, translated by William M Hutchins (CMES, University of Texas at Austin, USA)

A Portal in Space by Mahmoud Saeed, translated by William M Hutchins (CMES, University of Texas at Austin, USA)

All Faces but Mine by Samih al-Qasim, translated by Abdulwahid Lu'lu'a (Syracuse University Press, USA)

Mortal Designs by Reem Bassiouney, translated by Melanie Magidow (AUC Press, Egypt/USA)

The Dust of Promises by Ahlem Mostaghanemi, translated by Nancy Roberts (Bloomsbury Publishing, UK)

Whitefly by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin (Hoopoe Fiction, Egypt/USA)

The Holy Sail by Abdulaziz al-Mahmoud, translated by Karim Traboulsi (Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, Qatar)

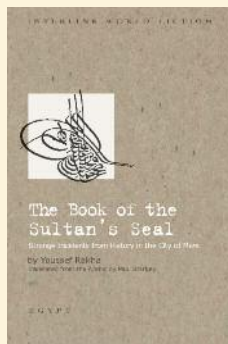
The Bamboo Stalk by Saud Alsanousi, translated by Jonathan Wright (Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, Qatar)

The Televangelist by Ibrahim Essa, translated by Jonathan Wright (Hoopoe Fiction, Egypt/USA)

THE JUDGES: Paul Starkey (Chair), Emeritus Professor & winner of the 2015 prize; **Lucy Popescu**, author and journalist; **Zahia Smail Salhi**, lecturer and translator; **Bill Swainson**, editor and literary consultant.

Ten Years of Winners from 2006 to 2015

2015



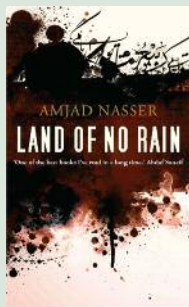
WINNER

Paul Starkey

for *The Book of the Sultan's Seal: Strange Incidents from History in the City of Mars* by Youssef Rakha, published by Interlink Books (USA)

"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," said the judges. "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."



COMMENDED

Jonathan Wright

for *Land of No Rain* by Amjad Nasser, published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing

"The outstanding feature of this book is its highly poetically charged prose . . . rendered into English with a sureness of stylistic touch

which does complete justice to the Arabic original." 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 JUDGES: **Robin Ostle** (Chair), Emeritus Research Fellow at St John's College, Oxford; **Samira Kawar**, literary translator; **Alastair Niven**, lecturer and writer; **Susannah Tarbush**, cultural journalist and blogger.

2014



WINNER

Sinan Antoon

for his translation of his own novel *The Corpse Washer*, published by Yale University Press (USA/UK)

The judges stated that *The Corpse Washer* is “heart-warming and horrifying, sad and sensuous in equal measure. It is

the moving story of Jawad, a young Iraqi whose family washes and prepares bodies for burial, and of the fracturing effects of war, occupation and civil strife – on Jawad, his family, his friends and their country .

“Thoughtful, precise and consistent in voice and mood, Sinan Antoon comes close, in this translation of his own novel, to the ideal in literary translation – the invisibility of the translator. His fluent and forthright language matches the style and rhythm of his own original Arabic and the unadorned, sometimes affectless tone reflects the hollowness of life as the onslaught of war brings an onslaught of bodies for the corpse washers of Baghdad. The novel ends with Jawad sitting under the pomegranate tree that grows from the water he uses to wash the corpses. A rich, profound insight into an Iraq we hear very little of, this is a story that resonates with human pathos and bears every hallmark of becoming a modern classic.”



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Paula Haydar

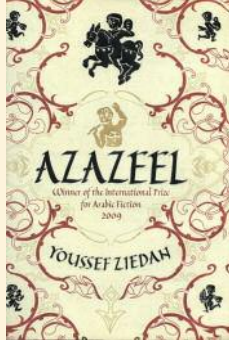
for *June Rain* by Jabbour Douaihy, published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing

“Paula Haydar’s astonishing translation exactly captures the tone and heft of an extraordinary novel that tells us so much about sectarianism and its heartbreaking legacies. Lyrical and at times wistful, Douaihy’s novel, part tragedy, part ‘whodunnit’, is rendered through a kaleidoscope of superb stories and characters.”

THE JUDGES: Literary translator and joint winner of the 2013 Prize **Jonathan Wright**, translator/writer **Lulu Norman**, broadcaster/writer **Paul Blezard**, Banipal editor and trustee **Samuel Shimon**

2013

JOINT WINNERS

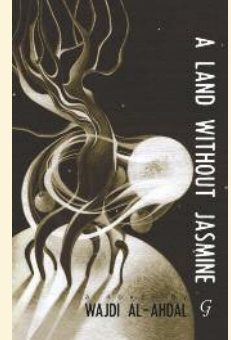


Jonathan Wright

for *Azazeel* by Youssef Ziedan,
published by Atlantic Books (UK)

"A masterful achievement. *Azazeel* is an enthralling book. The author, and translator, have evoked, and re-evoked, a time, a region, and people that come alive on the page despite our distance from them. The conflicts of the day between tolerance and anathematization – so reminiscent of those of our own time – are seamlessly embodied in the events . . . The translation is notable for its delicacy and well-judged restraint and deftly captures the feeling of the original.

"A beautifully crafted and evocative tale. Rich in description of the arid Syrian landscape and steeped in early history, *Azazeel* has been flawlessly translated, making this an easily accessible story."



William M Hutchins

for *A Land Without Jasmine*
by Wajdi al-Ahdal,
published by Garnet Publishing (UK)

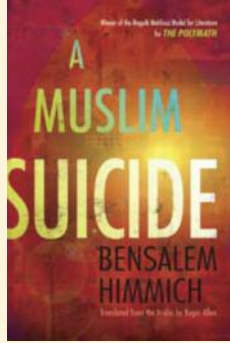
"Altogether a gripping page-turner from a talented writer, superbly translated by William Maynard Hutchins.

"Through its use of multiple perspectives we are given a revealing insight into society, reminding us that no event, or place, has an objective existence or truth. Wajdi al-Ahdal is a gifted and original storyteller.

"*A Land Without Jasmine* gives fascinating insight on life in Yemen, with a thriller-like plot . . . In sparse, lucid prose with a tight narrative structure, the author paints a riveting portrait of sexual confusion, frustration and shame. The translation succeeded in creating an enjoyable English read and at the same time preserving the soul of the original."

THE JUDGES: Translator, twice winner and twice runner-up of the prize **Humphrey Davies**, playwright **Hassan Abdulrazzak**, and authors **Rajeev Balasubramanyam** and **Meike Ziervogel**.

2012



WINNER

Roger Allen

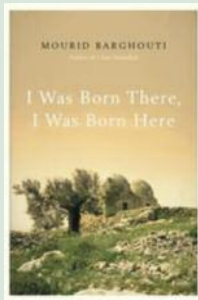
for *A Muslim Suicide* by Bensalem Himmich, published by Syracuse University Press (USA)

"A highly ambitious and erudite work that opens up remarkable historical, cultural and religious perspectives on the Islamic

heritage. It is a highly challenging yet deeply enriching read in its English translation. This is chiefly due, however, to the immense insight and long and hard-earned cultural and linguistic awareness of its translator.

"It is very hard indeed to imagine anyone besides Roger Allen capable of bringing this serious book alive to English readers. All those able, even briefly, to browse a little of the Arabic original would quickly recognize the translation as a major achievement.

"It is a major work of translation [that impressed all the judges] with its remarkable sophistication and ambition, its rich philosophical and literary tapestry, and the seamless way in which it has been translated."



RUNNER-UP

Humphrey Davies

for *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* by Mourid Barghouti, published by Bloomsbury Publishing (UK/USA)

"Humphrey Davies catches the spirit of the original text and lets us feel and enjoy the beauty of his English prose. He has adopted exactly the

right palette of both vocabulary and tone right the way through, giving readers the beautifully rendered revisiting of a riven landscape. In this fluid translation of a thoughtful and moving book he manages a rare thing – to make you feel you are reading the book in the language in which it was written."

THE JUDGES: Authors **Ruth Padel** and **Esther Freud**, author and translator **Fadhil al-Azzawi**, translator **John Peate**

2011



WINNER

Khaled Mattawa

for **Adonis: Selected Poems**,
published by Yale University Press
(USA/UK)

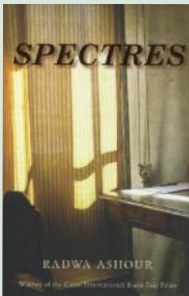
“Khaled Mattawa’s translation of this selection of Adonis’s poetry is destined to become a classic. It is a monumental

piece of work, a long-overdue compendium of works by one of the most important poets of our time, a contribution to world literature that demonstrates the lyricism and full range of Adonis’s poetry. Anglophone readers will gain a new appreciation of why Adonis has so often been likened to TS Eliot and Ezra Pound, with the freshness of his lines and imagination liberated from the self-conscious archaism of other translations, and allowing his unique reworking of the legends of East and West, the arcs of love and death, to spring forth.

“Khaled Mattawa has brought Adonis’s poems to the English language with a musicality and aesthetic sensitivity that echo their innovative, conceptual and stylistic complexities – and in doing so he has created an original, powerful and lyrical poetic work in English. In a word: stunning.”

RUNNER-UP

Barbara Romaine

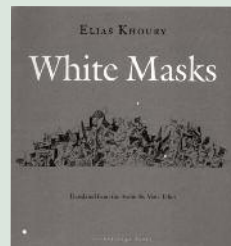


for **Spectres** by
Radwa Ashour,
published by
Arabia Books (UK),
Interlink Books
(USA)

“Impressive
translation – fluent
and refreshing”

COMMENDED

Maia Tabet

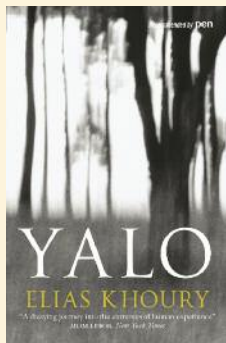
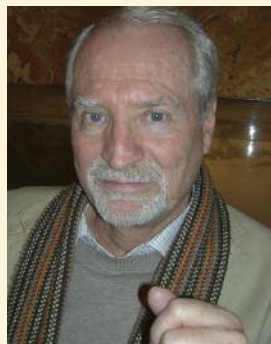


for
White Masks
by Elias Khoury,
published by
Archipelago
Books (USA)

“A masterful
translation”

THE JUDGES: Professor and broadcaster **Sarah Churchwell**,
journalist **Joan Smith**, academic and translator **Christina Phillips**,
Banipal editor and trustee **Samuel Shimon**

2010



WINNER

Humphrey Davies

for *Yalo* by Elias Khoury,
published by Maclehose Press (UK)

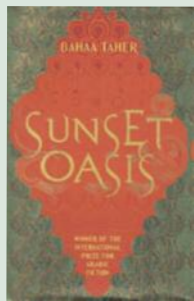
“This novel is a tour de force for both author and translator. It is a powerful, moving book that works on many levels . . . The

judges this year were impressed by the sensitivity of the winning translation and its ability to take the reader into the inner recesses of Yalo’s mind and soul in an intimate way. The simple but exquisitely crafted prose lines create a narrative free of the clutter which is sometimes present in translations of Arabic fiction. The authentic voice of the author comes through rather than that of a univocal translator who renders different texts in a near monochrome fashion.

“Humphrey Davies’s seamless translation hides the skill with which he works here. The language of this novel is notoriously difficult. Davies renders this difficulty in a fluent British idiom, but never at the expense of the complexities of the original.”

RUNNER-UP

Humphrey Davies

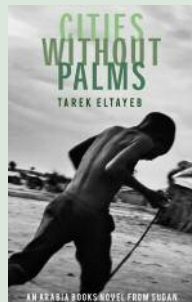


for *Sunset Oasis*
by Baha Taher,
published by
Sceptre (UK)

“ . . . the
virtuosity of
Humphrey
Davies”

RUNNER-UP

Kareem James Abu-Zeid

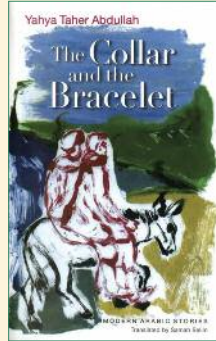


for *Cities without
Palms*
by Tarek Eltayeb,
published by
Arabia Books
(UK)

“A skilful and
unobtrusive
translation”

THE JUDGES: Author **Margaret Drabble**, Professor **Susan Bassnett**, professor and translator **Elliot Colla**, and Banipal trustee Professor **Yasir Suleiman**

2009



WINNER

Samah Selim

for *The Collar and the Bracelet* by the late Yahya Taher Abdullah, published by American University in Cairo Press

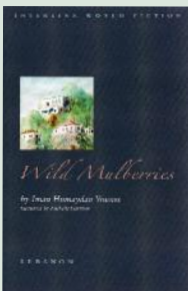
"This wonderful translation captures a particular style of narrative, written a third of a century ago but entirely modern.

The Collar and the Bracelet is the author's most famous and enduring literary monument: a collection of short stories originally, combined into a novel it manages to place its reader into a fishbowl society, where traditional mores, family feuds, and elemental passions all come into play as part of the narrative. The translation succeeds admirably in conveying all these facets of Abdullah's style and technique.

"Samah Selim has been able to catch the Upper Egyptian and folkloric rhythms – and their utterly unromantic yoking to the everyday grimness and intimacy of modern realities – that Abdullah pioneered in his fiction."

RUNNER-UP

Michelle Hartman

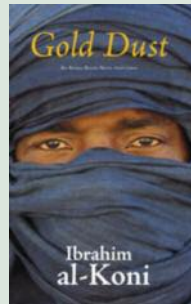


for *Wild Mulberries* by Iman Humaydan, published by Interlink Books (USA)

"Mirrors the original's narrative traits"

RUNNER-UP

Elliot Colla



for *Gold Dust* by Ibrahim al-Koni, published by Arabia Books (UK)

"Excellent translation"

THE JUDGES: Author **Aamer Hussein**, journalist and broadcaster
Francine Stock, professor and translator **Marilyn Booth**, professor and translator **Roger Allen**

2008



WINNER

Fady Joudah

for *The Butterfly's Burden*, selected poetry of Mahmoud Darwish in a bilingual edition, Bloodaxe (UK), Copper Canyon (USA)

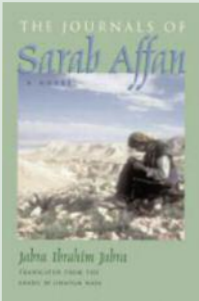
"The translator's sensitivity to the nuances and music of the original texts is already

evident in the way in which the poetry is introduced and the translation process discussed in the Preface. Darwish is there described as 'a songmaker whose vocabulary is accessible but whose mystery is not bashful.' The resulting versions in English replicate, deliberately so, the structures of the original poems that parallel them on the opposite pages. The poems can be read . . . as wonderful transfers of the images and music of the Arabic poems.

"It goes without saying that this bilingual anthology is a major achievement. Darwish's recent contributions to contemporary Arabic poetry and to the literary tradition of his Palestinian people – most especially the siege poem emerging from the Second Intifada – are here made available in a carefully produced and beautifully translated volume."

RUNNER-UP

Ghassan Nasr

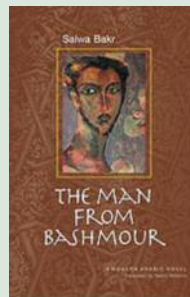


for *The Journals of Sarab Affan* by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, published by Syracuse University Press (USA)

"... transfers the nuances"

COMMENDED

Nancy Roberts

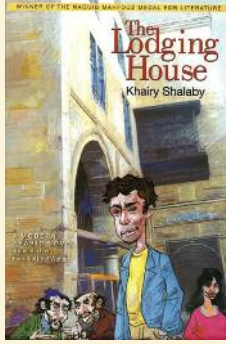


for *The Man from Bashmour* by Salwa Bakr, published by American University in Cairo Press (Egypt/US)

"... highly complex"

THE JUDGES: Professor and translator **Marilyn Booth**, author **Aamer Hussein**, editor **Bill Swainson**, and professor and translator **Roger Allen**

2007



WINNER

Farouk Abdel Wahab

for *The Lodging House* by Khairy Shalaby, published by American University in Cairo Press (Egypt/US)

"The Lodging House is a wise, anarchic, ribald, compassionate compendium of life at its most precarious and most ebullient. Its

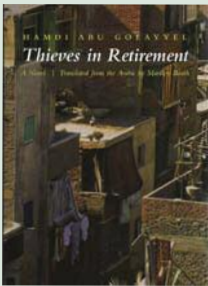
narrator is a young drop-out expelled from teachers' college for assaulting an instructor who picked on him as 'barefoot riffraff', one of a generation of peasants and urban poor rising with the widening of education.

"Set in the years following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, after political parties have been dissolved by decree, and as suspected members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood are being rounded up, jailed or executed, the novel hints at the forces feuding in Egyptian society, while illuminating the lives of those whose main goal is simply to survive.

"The translation is a brilliant exercise in the transfer of both literal meaning and nuance into the context of another language's culture – no mean feat."

RUNNER-UP

Marilyn Booth

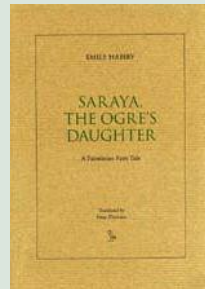


for *Thieves in Retirement* by Hamdi Abu Golayyel, published by Syracuse University Press (USA)

"A supple, subtle translation"

COMMENDED

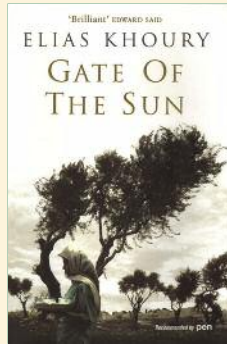
Peter Theroux



for *Saraya the Ogre's Daughter* by Emile Habibi, published by Ibis Editions (Israel)

THE JUDGES: Author **Moris Farhi**, literary journalist **Maya Jaggi**, professor and translator **Roger Allen**, and poet and Banipal trustee **Saadi Youssef** (Chair)

2006



WINNER

Humphrey Davies

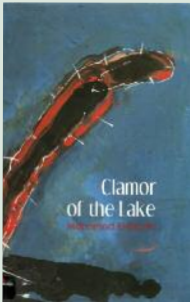
for *Gate of the Sun* by Elias Khoury,
Harvill Secker (UK), Archipelago (US)

"Inspired by refugees' accounts of the Palestinian expulsion of 1948 and its lingering aftermath, Khoury's ambitious and richly crafted novel is an epic retelling of myriad individual stories through the central narrative of Khaleel, a doctor tending to a comatose former Palestinian fighter in a refugee camp's makeshift hospital on the outskirts of Beirut. Tracing the meshed histories of Lebanon and Palestine from the 1930s to the 1990s, and the multiple crossings of a once-porous border with the state of Israel, it subtly questions the nature of memory and history, literature and imagination, heroism and defeat. The novel is a monumental achievement, whose translation by Humphrey Davies brilliantly captures the nuances and style of the original."

On being told of his award, Davies said: "Winning the Banipal Prize represents for me, primarily, recognition of the novel itself. *Gate of the Sun* is a work of extraordinary strength . . . I am doubly happy that, in translating it, I have helped to put before the reader of English so compelling an account of the dispossession of the Palestinians."

RUNNER-UP

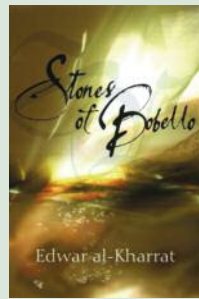
Hala Halim



for
Clamour of the Lake
by Mohamed
el-Bisatie,
published by the
American
University in Cairo
Press (AUC)

COMMENDED

Paul Starkey



for
Stones of Bobello
by
Edwar El-Kharrat,
published by
Saqi Books (UK)

THE JUDGES: Author **Moris Farhi**, literary journalist **Maya Jaggi**, professor and translator **Roger Allen**, poet and Banipal trustee **Saadi Youssef** (Chair)

In Memory of SAIF GHOBASH



The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is wholly sponsored by Omar Saif Ghobash and his family in memory of his father, Saif Ghobash, who was passionate about the literature of the Arab world and the literatures of other countries. Saif Ghobash was a self-made man with a broad knowledge of culture and world affairs, “an international intellectual” as his friends called him. He loved the world of books, and had his own collection in many different languages, which his family inherited on his untimely death in 1977.

Saif Ghobash was born in 1932 in Ras Al Khaimah. When he was 12 his father died and just three months later he lost his mother. He moved to live with his aunt in Dubai for the next three years. In 1949, aged 17, he left his home country and began a journey, which was to last twenty years, in search of knowledge. First, he travelled to Bahrain to continue his studies and, in 1953, after graduating from The Eastern School in Manama, he travelled to Iraq to study engineering at the University of Baghdad. In 1956 he moved to Egypt after receiving a scholarship from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Cairo. However, the College of Engineering in Cairo did not recognise his Baghdad studies, and so he travelled to Kuwait, where he worked as an assistant engineer in the Kuwaiti Public Works Department.

In 1959, Saif Ghobash left Kuwait for Austria, working in Graz and learning German. He then moved to Germany, working for a construction company in Düsseldorf, still determined to save enough to continue his studies. He worked also in Switzerland, from where he made frequent visits to Italy, and in 1963 travelled to Paris, working, learning French and studying literature and philosophy, before receiving a scholarship from the Soviet Union, enabling him, at last, to continue his studies at Leningrad University.

In 1969, after twenty years working and studying abroad, Saif Ghobash returned to his home town in Ras al-Khaimah. He began to work in the field of diplomacy and, on 25 December 1973, he became the First Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the recently federated United Arab Emirates.

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