



THE SAIF GHOBASH – BANIPAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC LITERARY TRANSLATION

The 2009 Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is to be awarded to **Samah Selim** for her translation of *The Collar and the Bracelet* by the late **Yahya Taher Abdullah**, published by the American University in Cairo Press. The runners-up are Michelle Hartman for her translation of Iman Humaydan Younes's novel, *Wild Mulberries*, published by Interlink Books, USA, and Elliott Colla for his translation of Ibrahim al-Koni's *Gold Dust*, published by Arabia Books in the UK and by AUC Press in North America.

This year's judges were literary translator Marilyn Booth, author Aamer Hussein and literary critic Francine Stock. Literary translator Roger Allen was chair of judges for the Banipal Trust.

The Winner

Samah Selim for her translation of *The Collar and the Bracelet*

On hearing the news, Samah Selim said: "*The Collar and the Bracelet* was just such a challenge for me – a labour of love in fact. It is a unique literary text with a language all its own, and I had always dreamed of translating it. I would like to thank Neil Hewison and the AUC Press for making this possible, and the judges of this year's Banipal Prize for their recognition. My only regret is that the author, Yahya Taher Abdullah, is not alive today to personally share in this honour with me."

On behalf of the Judges, Roger Allen states:

"At the time of his tragically early death in 1981, Yahya Taher Abdullah was already being acknowledged in Egypt as one of the leading members of a younger group of writers who had come to prominence during the post-revolutionary (post-1952) period. Even in such a context, Abdullah's works stood out, not merely because of the Upper (Southern) Egyptian environment in which he had grown up and chose to set his narratives, but also for the sparse, yet intensely poetic style that was one of his principal characteristics. *The Collar and the Bracelet* is his 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. Samah Selim's English translation, the 2009 winner of the Saif Ghobash–Banipal Prize for Translation, succeeds admirably in conveying all these facets of Abdullah's style and technique."

Commenting further on the winner, Francine Stock states: "This wonderful translation captures a particular style of narrative, written a third of a century ago but entirely modern." Marilyn Booth adds: "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." In a review of the novel, published in *Banipal* 33, Peter Clark wrote: "It comes as no surprise to learn that Abdullah used to

recite his stories to literary gatherings, for the story appeals to the ear rather than to the eye. The translator has succeeded in transferring this stylistic feature into English.”

Runner-up**Michelle Hartman for her translation of *Wild Mulberries***

Roger Allen writes for the judges:

“Iman Humaydan Younes’s beautifully crafted narrative tells a familiar story of life in a Lebanese village, and yet her narrative method and the poetic style that she invokes to tell her story make of this work a very different and unique portrait of a small societal unit that finds itself in confrontation with the processes of change, reflected in a clash of family values — most especially within the framework of gender issues, the tensions involved in either remaining in the homeland or travelling into exile abroad, and the relationship between present and past. Michelle Hartman’s excellent translation provides the reader with an English text that manages to mirror with both accuracy and readability the narrative traits of the Arabic original.”

Francine Stock comments: “The translation never overstates, allowing the reader to see how the woman’s life is circumscribed by political and economic forces within her relationships with friends and family, so her father’s adherence to the silkworms that feed on the mulberry tree, for example, presages financial trouble. The detail here is all.” Marilyn Booth commented that “her translation illuminates the juxtaposition of artless narration and complex structures of memory, social rootedness and its erosion, local and panoramic.” In his earlier review of *Wild Mulberries*, also published in *Banipal 33*, prize judge Aamer Hussein remarks: “Humaydan’s spare style, sensitively replicated in Michelle Hartman’s translation, pays homage to a number of influences, both Arab and European, through her prose, reflective, intelligent and pared down to necessities, is ultimately very much her own.”

Runner-up**Elliott Colla for his translation of *Gold Dust***

Roger Allen comments for the judges:

“Ibrahim al-Koni, a Libyan novelist of Tuareg origins, is a thoroughly original voice in world fiction, and that of Arabic in particular; as such, he needs to be much better known to an English readership. His novels take their readers far into the deserts of Africa, the environment where he himself was raised, and use that environment, its natural features and the animistic beliefs of its nomadic inhabitants, to create wonderful, magic realist portraits that explore the more elemental instincts and complexes of humanity. In Colla’s excellent translation, *Gold Dust*, the focus is placed on the follies of a single character within the larger tribal group, someone whose love for his much prized Mehri camel leads him to make a series of bad decisions leading to a tragic, indeed unforgettable, conclusion. The almost gnomic style in which al-Koni’s novel is couched is admirably conveyed by this English version, allowing the English reader a unique insight into the vision of one of the Arab world’s most innovative novelists.”

Francine Stock goes on to say: “The descriptions – whether of the camel’s betrayed gaze, the man clinging to his crazed beast as it careers through the sands or the growth of a stealthy plant in the sand – all impress themselves vividly and permanently in your imagination.”

Marilyn Booth describes the author Ibrahim al-Koni as a “magnificent novelist”, and says that “this translation does justice to the beauties of a story far removed from the experience of English-language readers”. Translator Elliott Colla explains the challenges he faced with the translation: “Since al-Koni’s work is so rooted in a particular world, translation is often not so much an act of finding equivalences as of tearing something from the sense.”

Samah Selim is an Egyptian-born translator and professor of modern Arabic literature at Rutgers University, USA. She has lived in the UK, Libya, France and Germany, and has taught at Columbia University, Princeton University and the University of Provence. She is the author of a book on the rural novel in Egypt and is currently working on a book about translation and popular fiction in early 20th century Egypt. Her previous translation to *The Collar and the Bracelet* was *Memories of a Meltdown: An Egyptian between Moscow and Chernobyl* (AUC Press, 2006).

Reception to Announce and Celebrate the 2009 winner

5.30 – 6.30pm

Friday 16 October, 2009

Frankfurt Book Fair

Banipal Stand, Hall 5.0, D912

*Presentation of Translation Prizes
and readings by seven prizewinners*

Monday 11 January, 2010

Kings Place,

90 York Way, London N1 9AG

followed by

The Sebald Lecture on the Art of Literary Translation
to be given by Will Self

The Saif Ghobash – Banipal Prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the UK, together with a number of well-established prizes for literary translation into English from European languages, such as the prestigious Scott Moncrieff Prize for translation from French. The Award Ceremony is hosted by the British Centre for Literary Translation, the Arts Council, and the Society of Authors. The annual prize of £3,000 is awarded to the translator of a published translation in English of a full-length imaginative and creative Arabic work of literary merit published in the thirty-five years prior to submission of the translation and first published in English translation in the year prior to the award. 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. The prize, the first specifically 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 now sponsored by Omar Saif Ghobash in memory of his father, the late Saif Ghobash, a man passionate about Arabic literature and other literatures of the world.

For more information. or to make an interview with the winning translator, please contact

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