



Celebrating twenty years of
**The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize
for Arabic Literary Translation**

The 2025 Shortlist

The Banipal Trust for Arab Literature is pleased to announce the shortlist for the 2025 prize. The judging panel of four comprised **Professor Tina Phillips** (Chair), scholar and translator of modern Arabic literature; **Dr Susan F. Frenk**, Principal of St Aidan's College, Durham University; **Nashwa Nasreldin**, writer, editor and literary translator; and **Boyd Tonkin Hon. FRSL**, journalist, writer and former Literary Editor at *The Independent*

In the twentieth year of the prize there were 17 entries by 12 different publishers. They comprised 13 novels, one poetry collection, one short story collection, one memoir and one book for young readers. There are 16 authors (ten men and six women), one of whom has two entries, and 18 translators (14 women and four men), one of whom has two entries.

The Judges' Report

The six shortlisted novels for the 2025 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation are representative of the spread of entries, which covered a wide array of themes and storylines by writers and poets from Egypt, Palestine, Syria and the Gulf. Only one Maghrebi work was entered this year.

There was early consensus between the judges on the six books for the 2025 short list. The challenge this year lay more in the near impossible task of choosing a front-runner between two very different but equally masterful works of literature and translation.

The shortlisted novels include two comic works, an historical epic, a dystopian fiction, a prison memoir, and an eco-novel from the Gulf. Memory, identity, freedom and repression are common themes (among many more), whereas style-wise, each work is unique, creating its own special literary aesthetic. It is worth noting that five of the six translators are women, a gender imbalance in evidence in the wider 2025 submission and, it would appear, more widely in modern Arabic literary translation.

The Shortlisted Translations



- [*The Guardian of Surfaces*](#) by Bothayna Al-Essa, translated by **Ranya Abdelrahman** and **Sawad Hussain** (Selkies House Limited, 2024)
- [*Honey Hunger*](#) by Zahran Alqasmi, translated by **Marilyn Booth** (Hoopoe, an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press, 2025)
- [*On the Greenwich Line*](#) by Shady Lewis, translated by **Katharine Halls** (Peirene Press, 2025)
- [*Granada: The Complete Trilogy*](#) by Radwa Ashour, translated by **Kay Heikkinen** (Hoopoe, an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press, 2024)
- [*The Tale of a Wall: Reflections on Hope and Freedom*](#) by Nasser Abu Srour, translated by **Luke Leafgren** (Penguin Press, 2024)
- [*Sand-Catcher*](#) by Omar Khalifah, translated by **Barbara Romaine** (Coffee House Press, 2024)

For digital images of the shortlisted books' front covers, their translators, their authors, and logos for the prize and the Society of Authors, click [here](#) or click on this link: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/10wp1fvcmpygf3kyrtiil/AAdOM37Kzq6UW0iYW544HiY?rlkey=t1maoqiu4xxny3f0p0d52wjhf&st=2cqymtn7&dl=0>

Most of the books are available for purchase from the prize's page on [Bookshop.org](#). Please note that the Trust, as an affiliate, receives 10% of the proceeds of sales made on Bookshop.org.

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The Guardian of Surfaces

by Bothayna Al-Essa (Kuwait)

translated by **Ranya Abdelrahman** and **Sawad Hussain**

published by Selkies House Limited, 2024

THE JUDGES WRITE:

A book-lover's book, *The Guardian of Surfaces* by award-winning Kuwaiti writer Bothayna Al-Essa fuses classic dystopian themes of Orwell and Huxley with fantastical modern Arabic storytelling to produce a fast-paced, smartly plotted and (against the

odds) highly entertaining novel about censorship and resistance. Set in an unspecified totalitarian regime, the novel follows a newly appointed censor as he scans books for dangerous content in the government office by day and navigates undercover booksellers and forbidden literary worlds by night, against a backdrop of mounting fears for his family.

Ranya Abdelrahman and Sawad Hussain's bustling translation expertly recreates the colour, imagination and pace of this dystopian adventure story and does an excellent job of capturing the mix of nightmare and fantasy which drives the original. Nashwa Nasreldin from the judging panel comments: "*The Guardian of Surfaces* presents both the joys and terrors of a life of literature, told by a gifted storyteller and presented in a lively lucid translation."

COMMENT FROM RANYA ABDELRAHMAN

"I'm delighted that Bothayna Al-Essa's *The Guardian of Surfaces* has been shortlisted for the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize and truly grateful to see my co-translation with Sawad Hussain acknowledged in this way. Bothayna wrote this book in response to her own experience with book censorship in Kuwait, but its chilling message and dark humour resonate universally. I hope this recognition brings it to more readers in the UK and beyond."

COMMENT FROM SAWAD HUSSAIN

"I feel absolutely honoured to once again be short-listed for the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, this time for co-translating *The Guardian of Surfaces* with Ranya Abdelrahman. Translating it stretched me in directions previously unexplored, and I am ultimately grateful that I had the privilege to work on this text, which speaks so powerfully to the moment in history that we find ourselves in. I hope this shortlisting will, as a result of Banipal's reach, result in a wider readership for what I believe to be at once a map and a curative for our uncertain times."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATORS

Bothayna Al-Essa is the award-winning, bestselling author of more than ten novels and several children's books. In 2023 she was the British Centre for Literary Translation Writer in Residence. In Kuwait she is the founder of Takween, a bookshop and publishing house of critically acclaimed works. *The Guardian of Surfaces* is her third novel to appear in English, after *Lost in Mecca* and *All That I Want to Forget*.

Ranya Abdelrahman's translation of *Out of Time* (2022) by iconic Palestinian author Samira Azzam was shortlisted for the Palestine Book Award. Her translations from the Arabic appear in *ArabLit Quarterly* and *The Common*. Ranya worked for sixteen years in IT before changing careers to join the Emirates Literature Foundation and pursue her passion for books and translation. *The Guardian of Surfaces* (US edition: *The Book Censor's Library*, 2024) was among *Time* magazine's 100 Must-Reads of 2024 and was a finalist for the US National Book Award (for Translation) the same year. She lives in Dubai.

Sawad Hussain is a British literary translator from Arabic. Her translations include *What Have You Left Behind?* by Bushra al-Maqtari, which was shortlisted in 2023 for both the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize and The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation and also longlisted for The Moore Prize in Human Rights Writing. A former co-chair of

the UK Translators' Association, she is a judge for the UK Palestine Book Awards and judged the 2023 US National Translation Award. She has run translation workshops under the auspices of Shadow Heroes, Africa Writes, Shubbak Festival, the Yiddish Book Center, the British Library, and the National Centre for Writing. In 2024 she was *Wasafiri* magazine's first translator-in-residence. She lives in Cambridge, UK.

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Honey Hunger

by Zahran Alqasmi (Oman)

translated by **Marilyn Booth**

published by Hoopoe, an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press, 2025

THE JUDGES WRITE

The fourth novel of Zahran Alqasimi, *Honey Hunger* takes us to the remote highland landscapes of Oman and the story of Azzan, a beekeeper who retreats into the mountains to rebuild his life and hives. As Azzan becomes immersed in nature and beekeeping, he forms bonds with fellow honey hunters and a lyrical story of loss, addiction, resilience, healing and the fragile balance of human and nature unfolds. This novel is exceptional not only for its beautiful evocative prose but for its exploration of the taboo topic of addiction in rural Oman and its vital ecological theme.

Marilyn Booth's translation of *Honey Hunger* is a masterclass in poetic translation which remains remarkably true to the original. The judges were greatly impressed by Booth's precision and sensitive handling of difficult language and local material and by the way in which the translation succeeds in bringing the remote landscapes and hidden worlds of the novel and its characters intimately close for the Anglophone reader.

COMMENT FROM MARILYN BOOTH

"I am delighted to find my translation of Zahran's haunting, ecologically dark (and timely), ultimately optimistic novel shortlisted for a prize that has been of inestimable importance in highlighting the vitality of contemporary Arabic literature across the world today. The list of entries, and the shortlist, attest to the creative breadth and richness of this literature and of the translation energies that go into its creative afterlives in other languages. Being shortlisted is also a welcome recognition of the rich literary creativity that characterizes Oman's cultural scene now. Zahran's fiction is fiercely local – how many species of trees I had to learn! – while speaking to the stresses of life in community everywhere. Bee society, human society: cooperation and eruption. I loved this novel immediately when I read it, and I feel privileged to have translated it – and now, to partake in its recognition. I'm grateful also to Hoopoe's excellent production team!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Zahran Alqasmi is an Omani poet and novelist, born in the Sultanate of Oman in 1974. He is also a medical doctor, with a specialisation in infectious diseases, and keeps bees. *Honey Hunger* is his third of four published novels and his first in English

translation. In 2023 he won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) for *The Water Diviner*. He has also published ten poetry collections and a collection of short stories.

Marilyn Booth is professor emerita, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and Magdalen College, Oxford University. She has translated many works of Arabic fiction into English. Her translations of novels by Omani author Jokha Alharthi include *Bitter Orange Tree* and *Celestial Bodies*, the latter winning the 2019 Man Booker International Prize. She has also translated works of Hoda Barakat, Hassan Daoud, Elias Khoury, Latifa al-Zayyat and Nawal al-Saadawi. Her research publications focus on Arabophone women's writing and the ideology of gender debates in the nineteenth century, most recently *The Career and Communities of Zaynab Fawwaz: Feminist Thinking in Fin-de-siècle Egypt*.

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On the Greenwich Line

by Shady Lewis (Egypt)

translated by **Katharine Halls**

published by Peirene Press, 2025

THE JUDGES WRITE

Set in East London and bound up with the absurdities of UK social housing processes, *On the Greenwich Line* by Egyptian novelist Shady Lewis is an unusual and brilliant addition to Arabic comic fiction. This short novel follows the movements of its Egyptian–Coptic protagonist as he becomes entangled in the funeral arrangements of a Syrian refugee and navigates the complexities of migrant experience, including his own, with bittersweet wit and sardonic sympathy.

The judges were excited by *On the Greenwich Line*'s fresh and witty perspective on migrant London and impressed by Katharine Halls's dexterous translation, which required transferring sardonic humour across languages and adapting a number of idioms to English. Boyd Tonkin praised Halls's 'bracingly funny translation', while Susan Frenk appreciated how the novel 'brilliantly captures experiences of displacement and precarity' while offering a 'counter-narrative of possibility and hope' through the protagonist's efforts on behalf of the deceased stranger, a balance expertly recreated in the English.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Shady Lewis, born 1978, is an Egyptian novelist and journalist whose writing centres on cultural and political intersections within and beyond the Arab world. He lives in London, where he has spent many years employed by the National Health Service and local authority housing departments, working with homeless people and patients with complex needs. He has published three novels in Arabic to date – *The Lord's Ways* (2018), *On the Greenwich Line* (2019), and *A Brief History of Genesis and Eastern Cairo* (2021) – each of which engages with the social history of Coptic Christians and trajectories of migration from Egypt to the West, and a travel diary, *Death Tourism, or a Comedy of Foreigners* (2024). *On the Greenwich Line* has also

been translated into German, French and Italian; the French translation was short-listed for the 2023 Prix de la littérature arabe.

Katharine Halls is an Arabic-to-English translator from Cardiff, Wales. Her translation of Ahmed Naji's prison memoir *Rotten Evidence* (McSweeney's, 2023) won the 2024 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize and was a finalist for the US National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography. She was awarded a 2021 PEN/Heim grant for her translation of Haytham El-Wardany's *Things That Can't Be Fixed*. Her translation, with Adam Talib, of Raja Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* (Overlook Duckworth, 2016) was shortlisted for the 2017 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize and won the 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award. Her work has appeared in *Frieze*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Believer*, *McSweeney's*, *The Common*, *Asymptote* and others. She is one third of teneleven, an agency for contemporary Arabic literature.

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Granada: The Complete Trilogy

by Radwa Ashour (Egypt)

translated by **Kay Heikkinen**

published by Hoopoe, an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press, 2024

THE JUDGES WRITE

The long-awaited translation of Radwa Ashour's epic *Granada* did not disappoint. This monumental Andalusian trilogy, first published in Arabic thirty years ago, follows the declining fortunes of bookbinder Abu Jaafar's family in Muslim Spain as the Christian Reconquista closes in, and the Muslim community sees its cultural, linguistic and religious freedoms eroded with mounting force and violence. *Granada* is a monument of Arabic historical fiction and, with its size, scope and multiple registers and quotations, represents a difficult task for any translator. Kay Heikkinen handles the plurilingual trilogy brilliantly, reproducing the textual variety and historical colour of the original with enviable skill and accuracy. The judges paid tribute to the significance of this labour of translation and agreed that 'Heikkinen's translation, bringing us the entire trilogy in English for the first time, earns its own accolades as a stunning rendition of a masterful work of Arabic literature'.

COMMENT FROM KAY HEIKKINEN

"I am delighted by this news! I am deeply honored that my translation of Radwa Ashour's *Granada: The Complete Trilogy* has found a place on a list of very strong contenders for the 2025 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation. I am also very pleased that the committee of judges has honored the work of an important author who is no longer with us, and that a work of historical fiction is included among their selections. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude for the tireless work of several editors at AUC Press, who made the publication of this translation possible. Many thanks to all concerned!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Radwa Ashour (1946–2014) is a highly acclaimed Egyptian writer and scholar. She is the author of more than fifteen works of fiction, memoir and criticism, including *Granada* (AUC Press, 2008) and *The Woman from Tantoura* (AUC Press, 2014) and was a recipient of the Constantine Cavafy Prize for Literature and the prestigious Owais Prize for Fiction.

Kay Heikkinen is a translator and academic who holds a PhD from Harvard University. She was previously Ibn Rushd Lecturer of Arabic at the University of Chicago. Among other books, she has translated Naguib Mahfouz's *In the Time of Love* (AUC Press, 2010) and Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura* (AUC Press, 2019). She has translated two novels by the Palestinian author Huzama Habayeb – *Velvet* (Hoopoe Fiction, 2019), for which she was awarded the 2020 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* (MacLehose Press) which was shortlisted for the 2024 prize. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

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The Tale of a Wall: Reflections on Hope and Freedom

by Nasser Abu Srou (Palestine)

translated by **Luke Leafgren**

published by Penguin Press, 2024

THE JUDGES WRITE

Part memoir, part meditation on freedom, part love story, *The Tale of the Wall* by Palestinian Nasser Abu Srou adds fresh accents and insights to the long tradition of prison literature. Its author, who spent over three decades in an Israeli jail before his recent release as part of the Gaza ceasefire agreement, recounts his life growing up in a camp, his arrest during the First Intifada and the years that followed in confinement. At the heart of the book is Abu Srou's relationship with the prison wall, which transforms from a symbol of oppression into a companion, mirror and source of reflections on history, politics, violence, freedom and existence, alongside a poetic story of love, loss and longing.

Luke Leafgren's translation is the outcome of a thoughtful and challenging project which involved a variety of textual interventions, as well as ethical and artistic decisions arising from limited access to the author. The resulting book in English is a lyrical masterpiece which seamlessly weaves the political, philosophical and poetic into a memorable story of freedom in captivity.

COMMENT FROM LUKE LEAFGREN

"I am deeply gratified to be included in the shortlist of the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize out of a longlist of authors and translators I admire. Translating Nasser Abu Srou's *The Tale of a Wall* was both challenging and inspiring. Among the books I've translated, I've never felt a greater sense of responsibility to my text because I was giving voice to an imprisoned writer who did not have the freedom to share his story and engage with readers directly. I am overjoyed that Nasser has been released after more than 32 years in prison, and I hope he will continue to inspire and challenge us with his writings."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Nasser Abu Srou was arrested in 1993, accused of killing an Israeli intelligence officer, and sentenced to life in prison. While incarcerated, Abu Srou completed the final semester of a bachelor's degree in English from Bethlehem University and obtained a master's degree in political science from Al-Quds University. *The Tale of a Wall* is his first book to appear in English. After more than 32 years in prison he was one of over 150 Palestinians serving life sentences who were freed on 13 October 2025 as part of the US-brokered Gaza ceasefire and then immediately exiled to Egypt.

Luke Leafgren is an Assistant Dean of Harvard College and the Allston Burr Resident Dean for Mather House. After growing up in northern Wisconsin as the child of a high school teacher and a sled dog racer, Leafgren received bachelor degrees in English from Columbia University and in Philosophy and Theology from the University of Oxford before completing a PhD in Comparative Literature at Harvard University, where he teaches Arabic language and courses on translation. Over the past ten years, he has published nine translations of contemporary Arabic novels, twice winning the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, for Muhsin Al-Ramli's *The President's Gardens* and for Najwa Barakat's *Mister N*, the latter also selected as a finalist for the EBRD Literature Prize. His translation of Nasser Abu Srou's *The Tale of a Wall*, was longlisted for the 2024 US National Book Award in the Translation category. His tenth translation, Bushra Khalfan's *The Garden* (forthcoming in 2026), is the winner of the Bait AlGhasham DarAdab Prize for an unpublished translation.

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Sand-Catcher

by Omar Khalifah (Palestine)
translated by **Barbara Romaine**
published by Coffee House Press, 2024

THE JUDGES WRITE

The debut novel of Palestinian academic and writer Omar Khalifah, *Sand-Catcher* is a highly original work which probes, in the medium of social comedy, issues of Palestinian memory and history writing. Wry, droll, sometimes uproarious, the novel follows a group of Palestinian journalists tasked with interviewing one of the last surviving witnesses of the Nakba and their dysfunctional behaviour when their subject refuses to cooperate. As the journalists attempt to wrest the story from their elderly witness, their own detachment from their heritage is revealed, and questions about the ethics of storytelling and co-opted trauma come into sharp relief.

Barbara Romaine's deft translation vividly recreates the tragi-comic mood of Khalifah's novel and expertly handles the text's acerbic humour, which will have been challenging to translate. Boyd Tonkin from the judges notes how *Sand-Catcher*, "in this swift, sharp translation, manages to find humour, satire and even sitcom-style farce in the exploitation of enduring trauma".

COMMENT FROM BARBARA ROMAINE

"When you're notified that a book you've translated is being specially recognized in some way, there is this moment of intense ego gratification, as if it were all about you.

But of course it's not. It's all about the book, which is almost like a living organism, nurtured and cultivated by a number of people, from the author of the original work to the translator to the copy-editor(s), and all who help the book to gain visibility – not least of all the reading public. With *Sand-Catcher*, I feel very fortunate indeed to be able to add the Banipal Trust to this list. Thank you, with all my heart."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Omar Khalifah is a novelist and short story writer in Arabic. His book, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, was published in English by Edinburgh University Press in 2017. His collection *Ka'annani Ana* (As If I Were Myself) was published in Amman, Jordan in 2010, and his novel *Qabid al-Raml* (*Sand-Catcher*) was published in 2020. His articles have appeared in *Middle East Critique* and *Journal of World Literature*. A Fulbright scholar, Khalifah is assistant professor of Arabic Literature and Culture at Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

Barbara Romaine is an academic and literary translator. She has published translations of five novels, most recently *Waiting for the Past* (Syracuse University Press, 2022) by Iraqi novelist Hadiya Hussein. She has held two NEA fellowships in translation, one of which supported her translation of Radwa Ashour's *Spectres* (Interlink Books, 2011), which was runner-up in the 2011 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. Romaine's translations of essays, short stories, and classical poetry have appeared in a variety of literary periodicals.

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ABOUT THE SAIF GHOBASH BANIPAL PRIZE

From this 20th year, the prize has a fund of £4,000 with which to make an annual award to the translators of published translations in English of full-length imaginative and creative Arabic works of literary merit published after, or during, the year 1967 and first published in English translation in the year prior to the award. From the 2025 prize an annual runner-up will be announced in addition to the winner. The winner will receive £3,000 and the runner-up £1,000. The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize was the first prize in the world for published Arabic literary translation into English and was established by *Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* and the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature. The inaugural prize was awarded on 9 October 2006.

In 2015, to mark the tenth year of awarding a prize for contemporary Arabic literature translated into English, the Saif Ghobash family generously extended their sponsorship to the establishment of an annual lecture on literary translation in the name of the prize. The inaugural lecture took place on 14 October 2016 at the British Library's Conference Centre in London. The 2025 Lecture will be given by the literary critic and editor Boyd Tonkin, Hon FRSL, who was also a member of the 2025 judging panel, and will take place at a celebration of the 2025 Prize at the Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS. Date and time in early February 2026 to be confirmed.

The Winner of the 2025 Prize will be announced on 7 January 2026.

The submission period for Prize entries each year is from 1 January to 31 March. Entries for the 2026 prize must have been first published in English translation between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, covering 12 months. For the history of the prize, more information about entries, judges, rules, and any other details, please go to: www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/ and

<https://societyofauthors.org/prizes/translation-prizes/arabic-saif-ghobash-banipal-prize/>.

For all information about the Annual Lecture see this link: www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE PRIZE

The prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the United Kingdom, alongside other (annual, biennial, triennial) prizes for literary translation from languages that include Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish, and also the Society's Translators' Association First Translation Prize for a debut translation into English from any language and the newly established John Calder Translation Prize for a full-length ambitious, groundbreaking work of literary merit and general interest translated into English from any language.

More information on the SoA's translation prizes can be found [here](#). The Award Ceremony for all the prizes administered by the Society of Authors will be held in early February 2026, the exact date to be confirmed.

SPONSORSHIP OF THE PRIZE

The prize is wholly sponsored by the Saif Ghobash family in memory of the late Saif Ghobash, husband and father, who was passionate about Arabic literature and other literatures of the world, and it is named in his memory.

See https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/the_sponsor/

For further history of the prize, please go to:

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/>

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award2025>

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/judges2025>

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/press.cfm>

To interview any of the shortlisted translators or for any further information, please email the Banipal Trust's administrator on admin@banipaltrust.org.uk.