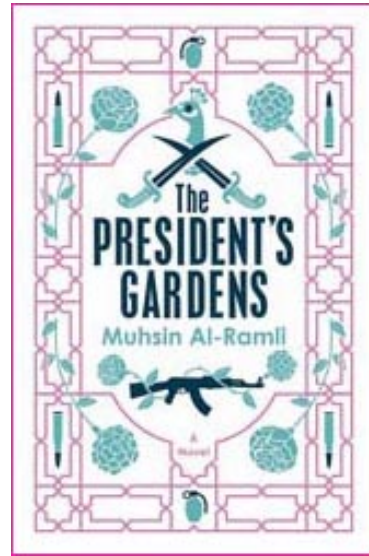




LUKE LEAFGREN
wins the 2018 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize
for Arabic Literary Translation

**“A seamless rendering
of an outstanding work of fiction”**



The 2018 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is awarded to Luke Leafgren for his translation of the novel *The President's Gardens* by Iraqi author Muhsin al-Ramli, published by MacLehose Press. The judges chose his translation from the shortlist of four works announced on 10 December 2018. The award of £3,000 will be presented to Luke Leafgren on 13 February 2019 at the Translation Prizes Award Ceremony, organised and hosted by the Society of Authors, at the British Library's Knowledge Centre, along with the other translation prizes being awarded this year.

The judging panel comprised publisher and translator Pete Ayrton (chair), editor and translator Georgia de Chamberet, Jordanian author Fadia Faqir, and university lecturer and translator Sophia Vasalou. For more information about the judges go to this link: <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/judges2018.cfm>. The prize is administered by Paula Johnson, Head of Prizes and Awards at the [Society of Authors](#).

THE JUDGES' REPORT

THE WINNER

Luke Leafgren for his translation of the novel
The President's Gardens by Muhsin al-Ramli

In this brilliant novel the personal, political and fantastical are interwoven to excavate and record Iraq's recent history in all its complexity, horror and absurdity. The translation by Luke Leafgren is imperceptible and mirrors the writer's many changes of register. The author is fortunate to have found a translator totally in sympathy with his writing. Faced with many difficult choices, Leafgren has produced a work both faithful to the Arabic and a work of art in English.

In a clear reference to Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Macondo*, which was destroyed by the establishment of a banana plantation, Muhsin Al-Ramili's begins his novel with the discovery of nine banana crates, each containing a severed, mutilated head in an Iraqi village without bananas – one of the heads belonged to Ibrahim, 'the fated', who is made sterile by poison gas in the Iran war, loses his foot during the invasion of Kuwait and, then, finds a job in the President's Gardens.

When Ibrahim is appointed to "care for these roses", he is impressed with how immaculate the garden appears on the surface – the crimes lie beneath. His job description and responsibilities keep shifting as he descends into the inferno until he becomes a grave-digger.

Despite Ibrahim's fear and fatalism, he begins to give the dead a dignified burial, register the date and time of their killing, establish and document their identity by painstakingly gathering shreds of evidence like skin, teeth, nails, etc.

Ibrahim's acts of salvation give a history to the thousands of Iraqi disappeared. The point is made that ordinary people can make a difference – giving an identity to nameless corpses ensures that they cannot be forgotten.

Tender, funny, tragic, wise and poetic, *The President's Garden* is imbued with the richness and complexity of a region that has known little peace over the last century. Luke Leafgren's translation conveys beautifully the spirit and idiosyncrasies of the original. It is a seamless rendering of an outstanding work of fiction. Both author and translator are to be warmly congratulated.

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Winner Luke Leafgren says:

"Learning that my translation was selected for the shortlist was already the recognition that pleased me more than any other in my life, and I've been enjoying a complicated feeling of being grateful, humbled, proud, and inspired ever since. I am so grateful to Muhsin for writing this novel and then entrusting me with its translation. I think of Khaled Al-Masri, my good friend and Arabic teacher who helped me get my start in translating. I also feel my debt of gratitude to Yousif Hanna, an Iraqi friend who read parts of *The President's Gardens* with me to answer all my linguistic and cultural questions, and who could become a

preeminent literary scholar if he weren't committed to a career in medicine. Finally, to Paul Engles and Christopher MacLehose, for believing in this book and publishing the translation."

Publisher Christopher MacLehose says:

"This is wonderful news. It gives a publisher immense pride that the scholarship and the genius of our translator should be recognised by the jury for your award."

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Luke Leafgren is an Assistant Dean of Harvard College and teaches Arabic at Harvard University, where he received his PhD in Comparative Literature in 2012. He is also a keen sailor, and the inventor of the StandStand portable standing desk. As well as translating the winning novel *The President's Gardens*, his first venture into literary translation was Mushin al-Ramli's second novel *Dates on my Fingers* (2014). He has also translated the debut novel of Shahad Al Rawi *The Baghdad Clock* (2018), whose Arabic original was shortlisted for the 2018 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and *Oh Salaam!* (2014) by Najwa Barakat.

On the MacLehose Press website he describes how he came to translate *The President's Gardens*.

"Muhsin Al-Ramli was the first author I ever translated. While writing my dissertation and needing a creative outlet, I approached one of my Arabic teachers during the final years of graduate school to ask about how to get a start in literary translation. My teacher told me about a friend of his who was looking for a translator for his second novel. That friend was Muhsin, who passed through my teacher's hometown of Irbid, Jordan, on his way from Iraq to Spain in the early '90s. I read the novel – *Dates on My Fingers* – and as I was reading the Arabic text, I could hear in my head the voice of the narrator telling his story in English. I found myself relating to the narrator's attempt to make sense of his place in the world, and the English translation came through almost as quickly as I read." To continue, go to this link: <https://www.maclehosepress.com/blog/2018/4/5/luke-leafgren-on-translating-the-presidents-gardens>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muhsin al-Ramli was born in the village of Sudara, northern Iraq, in 1967. Since 1995 he has lived in Madrid, Spain, where he has published 11 works – collections of short stories, novels, a play, essays and poetry, in addition to translating some Spanish classics into Arabic, most notably *Don Quixote*, and co-founding *Alwaha* literary magazine. He has a PhD in Philosophy and Spanish Literature from the Autonomous University of Madrid (2003), and teaches at the Saint Louis University, Madrid.

His three novels to date are all translated into English: the first, *Scattered Crumbs*, translated by Yasmeen Hanoosh, won the Arkansas Manuscript Translation Award; his second, *Dates on My Fingers*, and third, *The President's Gardens*, were both

translated by Luke Leafgren, with both their Arabic originals being longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, IPAF, aka Arabic Booker Prize, in 2009 and 2013 respectively. His novel-in-progress, *Qisma's Fate*, a follow-up to *The President's Gardens*, and also being translated by Luke Leafgren, is due out later this year.

Muhsin Al-Ramli writes on the MacLehose Press website about how he came to start writing the book in 2006. "I began writing *The President's Gardens* in 2006 after receiving the news of the murder of nine of my relatives, who were fasting on the third day of Ramadan. The people of the village found only their heads in banana crates, along with their identity cards. I dedicated the novel to their souls. It was a huge shock to me. It horrified me, and, to start with, the novel was a reaction to this event undertaken without planning or a clear vision.

To read more: <https://www.maclehosepress.com/blog/2018/4/5/muhsin-al-ramli-why-i-wrote-the-presidents-gardens>

ABOUT THE WINNING TRANSLATION

The President's Gardens

MacLehose Press (20 April 2017),

Paperback edition: 352 pages ISBN 9780857056788

The translated novel *The President's Gardens* has already been much reviewed and talked about since publication in 2017. Its Arabic original sold well and was longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2013. It also has a Spanish edition *Los Jardines Del Presidente*.

Buy a copy in UK

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Presidents-Gardens-Muhsin-Al-Ramli/dp/0857056786>

Buy a copy in US

<https://www.amazon.com/Presidents-Gardens-MacLehose-Press-Editions-ebook/dp/B01GVOH04W>

EVENTS:

• TRANSLATION PRIZES AWARD CEREMONY

7.00pm Wednesday 13 February

The Knowledge Centre, The British Library, 96 Euston Rd, London NW1 2DB

Hosted and organised by the Society of Authors, who administer all the prizes, the ceremony will award prizes for translation from Arabic, French, Italian German and Spanish and the Translators' Association First Translation Prize. <https://www.societyofauthors.org/Prizes/Translation-Prizes>

• AN EVENING WITH LUKE LEAFGREN AND MUHSIN AL-RAMLI

6.30pm Thursday 14 February, Waterstones Piccadilly, London W1V 9LW

Hosted by Banipal Trust for Arab Literature. <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award2018.cfm>

This is a free event, but places must be booked via the [Waterstones Piccadilly Events](#) webpage.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- If you require digital images of Luke Leafgren and Muhsin al-Ramli, the front cover image of *The President's Gardens*, or the logo of the Prize, please contact margaret@banipal.co.uk
- To attend the Award Ceremony on Wednesday 13 February 2019 at the British Library please apply to Paula Johnson at the Society of Authors (Pjohnson@societyofauthors.org) for a Press Pass.
- To arrange an interview with Luke Leafgren or for any other information, please email Margaret Obank on info@banipaltrust.org.uk or margaret@banipal.co.uk.

About the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation

The prize is an annual award of £3,000, made 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. The Prize aims to raise the profile of contemporary Arabic literature as well as honouring the important work of individual translators in bringing the work of established and emerging Arab writers to the attention of the wider world. It was the first prize in the world for published Arabic literary translation into English and was established by *Banipal*, the magazine of modern Arab literature in English translation, and the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature. The inaugural prize was awarded on 9 October 2006.

The prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the United Kingdom, alongside the other prizes (annual, biennial, triennial) for literary translation from languages that include Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. The prizes are awarded annually at a ceremony hosted by the Society.

The Prize is wholly 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.

In 2015, to mark the tenth year of awarding prizes for contemporary Arabic literature translated into English, the sponsors Omar Ghobash and his family generously extended their sponsorship to the establishment of an annual lecture on literary translation. The inaugural lecture took place on 14 October 2016 at the British Library Conference Centre in London, and was given by author, translator and essayist Anton Shammas. The second lecture, by the historian and novelist Robert Irwin, was on 7 November 2017, also at the British Library. The third, on 9 November 2018 in the British Library, was given by Syrian poet and philosopher Adonis. With the Lecture, the Banipal Trust looks forward to increasing support for reading literature from the Arab world in English translation, and to working with publishers, translators and booksellers to encourage and promote both the wider translation and wider availability of contemporary works of literature by Arab authors.

The deadline for entries and publication of works each year is 31 March.

For further history of the prize, more information about entries, judges, rules, and any other details, please go to: <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/>

and to these links: <http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award2018.cfm>
<http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/rules/>
<https://www.facebook.com/SaifGhobashBanipalPrize/>

For information about the Annual Lecture established in 2015 to mark 10 years of awarding the annual prize for the best translation of contemporary Arabic literature, see these links:

<http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/lecture2018.cfm>
<http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/lecture2017.cfm>
<http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/lecture2016.cfm>

To contact the Prize or the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature directly, email the Trust's administrator Margaret Obank on info@banipaltrust.org.uk or margaret@banipal.co.uk