PROMOTING ARABIC LITERATURE IN EUROPE

ARABIC DETECTIVE NOVELS: CASTING A WIDER NET TO CATCH CRIME WRITING

On Contemporary Arabic Literary Production:
a series of essays by Marcia Lynx Qualey
exploring trends and themes in contemporary
Arabic-language literary creation.

Arabic Detective Novels: Casting a Wider Net to Catch Crime Writing
A series of articles by Marcia Lynx-Qualey (ArabLit) commissioned in the framework of the LEILA Research Project

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Marcia Lynx Qualey is the founding editor of ArabLit, an online publication that has evolved over the years from a literary blog into a high-quality review, database, media platform and arts magazine featuring guest writers, rich media content, event calendars and comprehensive cross-referencing with other art forms and venues. She launched the ArabLit Quarterly as a print and e-magazine in 2018. In recognition of her 'strong personal dedication to creating cross-cultural understanding in the diverse world of Arabic literature', Qualey was awarded the Literary Translation Initiative Award at the 2017 London Book Fair. Based in Morocco, she holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Minnesota and is a freelance cultural journalist for a number of newspapers, journals and literary magazines. She co-hosts the Bulaq: The Arab World in Books podcast with Ursula Lindsey. Her published translations include *Ghady & Rawan* by Fatima Sharafeddine and Samar Mahfouz Barraj (co-translated with Sawad Hussain), published in 2019, and *Wondrous Journeys in Amazing Lands* by Sonia Nimr, published in 2020.

Arabic Detective Novels: Casting a Wider Net to Catch Crime Writing

Crime novels in Arabic have been a popular genre in many of the 20+ countries across the Arabic-speaking Maghreb (or West) and Mashreq (or East). Second-hand bookstalls in cities from Marrakesh to Muscat are full of Arabic translations of novels by Agatha Christie and Maurice Leblanc. Although for a while, literary writers avoided genre fiction, there is now a surging interest in crime and detective novels.

In mid-twentieth century Cairo, the genre of detective literature was thriving. If the 1940s and 1950s were a "Golden Age" of Arabic pulp fiction, then no pulp was more widely enjoyed than the detective story. Smoking guns and trenchcoated detectives were splashed across magazine pages in these decades, when the low cost of wood pulp paper and rising literacy rates created a boom in popular literature.

As a form of "adab al-shaʿbi" (popular literature), pulp crime generated both delight and controversy. Literary critics maligned the formulaic plots of the new genre, while moralists criticized its overt sexuality, deploring the spread of "vulgar tales and cheap novels." The police even found a crime novel in the possession of the famous serial killer Saad Iskandar (1911-1953), the "Karmouz Killer"—damning evidence that these books were a bad influence, or so one critic argued in *Majallat al-Risalah*.

Yet despite these complaints, detective stories remained an obsession in Egypt and beyond throughout the forties and fifties. Pulp magazines such as *Akhir Saʿah* and *al-Ithnayn* churned out true-crime stories, locked room mysteries, and crime puzzles for their hundreds of thousands of readers. At book stalls and kiosks, readers could also find Agatha Christie novels, Sherlock Holmes stories, Ponson du Terrail mysteries, and tales of the detective Monsieur Lecoq. Egyptian authors raced to pen original murder mysteries—and Egyptian artists such as Husayn Bikar (later famous for his *Sindbad* illustrations) sketched dramatic pulp art to accompany the tales.

These crime narratives didn't come from nowhere. Certainly, European crime stories were a key influence. But there were also earlier crime stories in the Arabic tradition. Back in the tenth century, Al-Tanukhi included short, compelling crime narratives in his collection *Al-faraj baʿd al-shiddah (Deliverance Follows Adversity)*. The thirteenth-century author Al-Jawbari, in his *Kitāb al-mukhtār fi kashf al-asrār (Book of Select Revealed Secrets)* relates the stories of charlatans, criminals, and assorted scoundrels. Some of these take the form of short tales, while others are more like quick mysteries, dissecting their tricks and telling us how they happened.

But it was at the end of the nineteenth century when Arabic-language readers began to enjoy crime writing that would look most familiar to European readers. Critic and crime-fic fan Jonathan Guyer has called the period from the 1890s through the 1960s "the golden age of illicit crime fiction translation" because of the number of English and French novels translated or

adapted to Arabic in various undocumented editions. The first Arabic translation of an Arsene Lupin adventure was published in 1910, and thousands of other crime novels followed. And while this golden age ended, crime narratives didn't disappear. Instead, they were adapted in different ways, and—despite all the changes in writing and publishing—young readers continued to be fans of detective and crime novels.

Many of the twentieth-century's major writers have said that they grew up reading crime and mystery novels. Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz said, in an interview with *The Paris Review*, that his earliest literary influence was Hafiz Najib, a popular thief who wrote 22 detective novels. For the great Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim, his passion was for books about the gentleman thief, Arsene Lupin, as Paul Starkey notes in *Sonallah Ibrahim: Rebel with a Pen*; Ibrahim also writes about a Lupin-obsessed boy in his short story "Arsene Lupin." There were several popular crime magazines and a flood of journalism focused on crime, including a popular magazine called *Akhbar al-Hawadith* (Crime News), dedicated to telling true-crime stories, particularly in the wake of the 1920 Raya and Sakina murders.

Yet toward the end of the twentieth century, traditional police and detective novels lost much of their glamor. In part, perhaps, it was because of how the genre can take the side of state-affiliated investigators and state institutions. Toward the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, readers were more likely to find prison novels in Arabic than police procedurals, as many serious novelists seemed to be more interested in humanizing prisoners rather than allying themselves with their jailers.

For this and other reasons, Arabic crime writing often doesn't map neatly onto the genre in European languages. In the new scholarly collection, *Le récit policier arabe*, Alessandro Buontempo points out that terms used for the genre in Arabic shift, and the same books are sometimes called al-ghaz (mysteries or enigmas), riwāya būlīsiyya (detective novel) , and sometimes riwāya jāsūsiyya (spy novel).

In their introduction to the scholarly collection *Le récit policier arabe*, Katia Ghosn and Benoît Tadié write that European academics sometimes miss out on the world of contemporary crime writing in Arabic because it doesn't quite line up with the "classic detective novel" in European languages. They quote scholar Gianluca Parolin as saying we can find a significantly larger body of crime writing when we "cast a net with a different generic mesh." In what follows, in order to catch a wide range of Arabic crime writing, we will be generous with the weave of our net.

Egyptian genre re-combinations

Naguib Mahfouz enjoyed crime-writing, and his *Thief and the Dogs* (1961) has been cited as an inspiration by the popular young Egyptian thriller and crime novelist Ahmed Mourad, who has managed to straddle the line between popular and literary writing. While his books are hotly anticipated bestsellers, he also was shortlisted for the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction for his thriller *Al-Fil al-Azraq (The Blue Elephant),* later adapted to film.

In his first crime novel, *Vertigo* (2007)*,* Mourad manages to evade the problem of sympathizing with the police and the country's broken criminal-justice system. In *Vertigo,* the detective is a not affiliated with the state, nor is he a private detective-for-hire. Instead, he is an ordinary photographer with a strong sense of justice, presumably modeled after the author, who was also working as a photographer. Instead of seeking out the police, the protagonist (also named Ahmed) is harassed by police when he attempts to go on a date with a young woman. Since he has no state apparatus at his back, he cannot arrest the perpetrator in order to bring the story to a satisfying conclusion. Instead, he releases details of the crimes publicly, in an early version of doxing, and we must hope the criminal is held to account. In his second crime novel, *Turab al-Mas (Diamond Dust),* the protagonist, Taha, is similarly an ordinary representative at a pharmaceuticals company until his life is up-ended by a murder.

While Mourad's novels follow a genre-format that will be more familiar to European readers, there are also a number of contemporary literary authors who weave crime writing together with a *Thousand and One Nights* set of nested stories; among these are Saudi novelist Raja Alem (*The Doves' Necklace*), Tunisian novelist Hassouna Mosbahi (*A Tunisian Tale)*, and Egyptian novelist Tareq Imam. In Imam's acclaimed 2018 novel *City of Endless Walls,* a new inhabitant of the city is murdered every day. In this series of thirty-six interlinked tales, murder meets the strange and supernatural. This book was chosen as one of the "Arab Voices" titles in 2020, with the judges calling it a "thrilling, wild, and sometimes frightening read."

There is also a renewed interest in nonfiction, true-crime works that look at society through the lens of crime, such as Salah Eissa's 2017 book *Rajal Raya w Sakina (Raya and Sakina's Men*). Eissa's book narrates the story of the region's two most notorious serial killers, women who operated in Alexandria in the early 1900s, and—in so doing—also gives a portrait of Egypt at the time.

More unsolved crimes: Lebanon and Palestine

It is not only in Egypt that crime novels avoid the figure of the state-affiliated detective or—indeed—any sort of resolution. In contexts where justice is elusive, novels also echo this elusivity. Elias Khoury's classic 1981 crime novel *Wujuh al-bayda* (White Faces) is set during Lebanon's civil war, and it asks the question of how an individual murder can even matter in such a time and place. In the novel, an ordinary citizen goes around trying to piece together the details of the murder and pin down the suspect, thus revealing stories about the neighbors and neighborhood—to no apparent resolution. Instead of a conclusion, at the very end of the novel, we get a nested series of *Thousand and One Nights*-like tales, where one possibly ending blurs into the next.

Rabee Jaber's innovative novel *Taqrir Mehlis* (*The Mehlis Report,* 2006*)* is a fictional detective story about one of the most high-profile crimes in Lebanon's recent history, the car-bomb assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik Hariri and twenty-two others. In the novel, fictional characters alternately wait on others to investigate and attempt themselves to piece together what has happened. But here, too, there is no resolution. No one is held to account, and—even though we visit the afterlife—we don't know who committed the crimes.

The same is true in Palestinian crime novels, where justice is also elusive. Abbad Yahya's 2016 novel *Jarimah fi Ramallah* (*Crime in Ramallah*) also looks at murder and justice at a slant. Three young men work together in a bar where a young woman is murdered. The one among them who is gay is arrested by authorities and interrogated. Although police recognize he's innocent, they also turn up the fact that he's gay, and begin torturing and humiliating him for that other "crime." Although Palestinian novelist Ibtisam Azem's 2014 novel *Sifr al-Ikhtifaa'* (*Book of Disappearance)* has been classified by some as speculative or science fiction, it also details a crime—the sudden disappearance of all Palestinians living inside Israeli-controlled territory. Yet although the novel investigates this mass disappearance through a series of journalists, we never even find who is responsible for this sudden mass vanishing, nor even where all the Palestinians have gone. Adania Shibli's award-winning 2017 novel *Tafsil Thanawi* (*Minor Detail),* translated into many European languages, is also a detective story in which an ordinary person goes off in search of details about a crime from long ago. In this case, the resolution is that the detective figure themselves is killed off by officials from the state.

Maghrebi crime fiction: The (mostly) clean detective

In the mid-twentieth century, crime novels by Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan writers were more likely to be written in French. However, since the 1990s, more Maghrebi crime novels—including some with police protagonists—have appeared in Arabic. It was 1970, according to SOAS historian and leading Algerian crime-fiction critic Nadia Ghanem, when the Algerian government-run publishing house SNED Editions brought out four French-language detective novels by "Youcef Kader," the pen name of Catalan novelist Roger Vilatimo. "This editorial decision seems to have opened the doors to the genre in the country, so that, within 10 years, crime novels written by Algerian novelists became part of a publishing house's repertoire."

Publishing was interrupted in the '90s, with the onset of the Algerian civil war. Still, crime novels continued to appear. The '90s was also when crime fiction came to neighboring Morocco. Individual crime novels may have appeared sporadically in Morocco in the 1960s and '70s, although these are difficult to trace. In 1963, Muhammad ibn al-Tuhami published a police procedural called *Dahaya Hubb (Victims of Love).* According to Dartmouth University scholar Jonathan Smolin, there was also a mid-twentieth-century Moroccan police journal that published some fiction. Yet for the most part, Smolin says, Morocco's repressive "Years of Lead"—which started in the '60s and continued through the '80s—did not inspire authors to make police their novels' heroes.

According to Smolin, the shift toward crime writing in Morocco started in 1993. That was when an influential police commissioner, Hajj Mustafa Tabit, was put on trial, accused of abducting and raping more than 500 women and girls. The Moroccan press was given an unexpectedly free hand to write about the trial of this powerful police figure, and it was coverage of this trial, Smolin says, that led to a new wave of Moroccan crime journalism. It was also around this time that novelist Abdelilah Hamdouchi met former detective Miloudi Hamdouchi (no relation). The press had nicknamed Miloudi Hamdouchi "Columbo," after the 1970s American TV series, and this "Columbo" was considered a rare clean cop.

"At the time, the Years of Lead were drawing to a close, and Morocco was entering into a new political period," Abdelilah Hamdouchi said in an interview with Emily Drumsta, published in the collection *Le Recit Criminel Arabe*. "The state was trying rehabilitate the police, and this was very fertile soil in which to plant the seeds of crime fiction Morocco." In this environment, the Hamdouchis co-published a detective novella, *Al-Hut al-A'ma (The Blind Whale*) in 1997 and *al-Qiddīsa Jānjāh* (Saint Janjah) in 1999. From there, each went on to write more crime novels. Abdelilah Hamdouchi also wrote the scripts for several televised police serials, where his work had a broader impact on other writers and a far larger segment of the public.

Other notable works in recent years include Abdelatif Ould Abdellah's 2015 novel *Kharidj al-Saytara (Out of Control*), and Ismael Ben Saada's 2014 detective-espionage novel *Shifra min sarab (Code from a Mirage)*. The male detective in Algerian crime novels, according to Italian translator and literary scholar Jolana Guardi, "is usually someone like Marlowe…he fights against the power, he is alone, and eventually has a 'past' he wants/has to forget." But male detectives are not the only ones fighting crime in Maghrebi novels.

The Maghreb's women detectives

Most Maghrebi crime novels published in the 1970s and 80s featured male detectives—even when they were written by women such as Zehira Houfani, who wrote in French. Yet in the last decade, as an increasing number of Algerian detective novels have appeared in Arabic, some of them have been led by women protagonists. The woman detective in Nassima Bouloufa's fast-paced *Nabadhat Akher al-Layl (Heartbeats in the Dead of the Night*) must fight not only crime, but also misogyny. There are other Algerian women crime writers. In the opinion of Jolana Guardi, "I think the best woman detective writer at present is Amal Bouchareb. She wrote *Sakarat Najma (Flutters of a Star),* a wonderful novel published in Algeria in 2015." This novel is set to appear in Guardi's Italian translation in the fall of 2022.

Another recent star of Algerian crime fiction is Djamila Morani. Her 2016 novel *Tuffahat al-Djinn (The Djinn's Apple,*) is part crime novel, part historical fiction. Set during the eighth-century caliphate of Haroun al-Rashid and narrated by a twelve-year old girl named Nardeen, the novel explores justice in a broken system.

Detective novels for young readers

Mahmoud Salem (1931-2013) is perhaps the best-known author of Arabic detective stories for young readers. He started publishing crime stories in 1968, with *Lughz al-kukh al-muhtaraq (The Case of the Burning Shack)*, which kicked off his popular "Al Moghameron Al Khamsha" (The Five Adventurers) series. This influential series, which ran until 1972, followed the adventures of a group of young children—Tewfik (Takhtakh), Nossa, Loza, Moheb, Atef and their dog Zinger—who solved different mysteries and stopped crimes and criminals. Salem wrote another series called *13 Devils* starting in the mid-1970s. This series of adventure novels featured 13

characters from different Arab countries as they dealt with plots of foreign intelligence services. Popular young-adult series that followed in the 1980s, '90s and early 2000s, by authors like Nabil Farouk and Ahmed Khaled Tawfiq, also drew on genre-literature tropes, particularly spy, horror, speculative, and detective fiction.

In the most recent decade, publishers have worked to bring out more of the sort of young-adult literature that would be familiar to a European or US publisher: literary realism about growing up, fantasies, and science fiction. Still, Arab teen readers remain interested in crime stories. Egyptian novelist and book-activist Rania Hussein Amin, speaking at a meeting of the Egyptian Board on Books for Young People (EBBY) in 2014, said that in a survey of Egyptian teens, they self-reported that they were most interested in reading crime novels aimed at adult audiences. These Egyptian teens particularly cited Essam Youssef's *¼ Gram*, a narrative based on addicts' true stories, and Ahmed Mourad's *Blue Elephant*, the aforementioned International Prize for Arabic Fiction-shortlisted psychological thriller, which follows a doctor who works in the criminal department of the Abbasiya Psychiatric Hospital in Cairo.

Recently, some authors of children's and young-adult literature have worked to bring together the YA and detective genres. In 2014, award-winning Jordanian YA novelist Taghreed Najjar published *Loghz 'Ayn al-Saqr (Mystery of the Falcon's Eye*), a fast-paced realist mystery set in contemporary Palestine, where teens need to follow clues to find their ancestors' buried gold and pay for a sibling's surgery. The novel, for teen readers 13+, has been a popular read among teens. In classroom research done by leading Arabic children's literature scholar Susanne Abou Ghaida, Lebanese teens chose the book from amongst a range of possible YA selections.

Police: Penning crime in the Gulf

In her 2011 novel *Tawq al-hamām (The Doves' Necklace)*, Saudi novelist Raja Alem frames her stories-within-stories around a detective story. Like Tareq Imam's *The City Without Walls* and Hassouna Mosbahi's *Tunisian Tale,* Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* weaves together a detective story and the *1001 Nights.* A police officer is incapable of finding the killer of a young woman who he discovers lying naked in one of Mecca's streets. Each time we look for the killer, we open a door to a new story.

Yet in the neighboring United Arab Emirates, a very different sort of crime fiction is being fostered. There, the state has led an effort to cook up more popular crime writing. It surely hasn't been lost on the Dubai Police that crime writing can showcase state institutions as being on the side of justice. For more than a decade, Dubai Police have been encouraging officers to write crime fiction inspired by true-life cases. These efforts began in 2006, and the Dubai Police, in coordination with the UAE's Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development, began publishing these literary works in 2008. In 2016, Dubai Police launched a contest to select the best short stories written by officers and chose 100 of them. From this, according to *Gulf News*, they published four collections of 25 stories each.

"The books aim to educate the public through exciting stories that hold an element of suspense. It will help highlight the officer's role in enabling and upholding security across Dubai. We fight

crime through education and reading," Captain Abdullah Al Saadi, Director of Sports, Social, and Cultural Activities at the Dubai Police Officers' Club told *Gulf News* in 2017.

In this case, the Dubai Police department's goal of encouraging more crime fiction is surely to bring the Arabic-reading public in a closer alliance with the state. "One of the readers told me that he once saw an unclaimed bag in a metro station and he immediately contacted Dubai Police because he had read a story that referred to a similar incident," Capt. Al Saadi told *Gulf News*. "Some stories in crime fiction can occur in a real-life situation and people [then] know what to do in that circumstance due to having read that story,"

In conclusion: Criminals at the center, unsolved crimes

In the summer of 2020, the magazine *ArabLit Quarterly* brought out a "crime"-themed issue. In it, Egyptian novelist Nael Eltoukhy, whose 2013 novel *Nisaa' al-Karantina (Women of Karantina)* follows competing crime families and has been translated to English, wrote an essay for the issue titled "Some Advice on Avoiding Censorship." He writes, in David Kanbergs' translation, about how contemporary publishers are interested in crime fiction: "When you present a film or a novel as treating the topic of 'criminal society,' just these two words alone are enough to stir up the excitement of any producer or publisher, with no further description needed. This was certainly my own experience when in 2013 I wrote a novel on 'criminal society.' I saw countless publishers' eyes light up just on hearing these two little words."

As a child, Eltoukhy said, he read books that centered the police or justice system's perspective. "The drama I read and watch now does quite the opposite of the books I read as a kid. The works I consume now glorify the figure of the criminal, not in the sense that they explicitly say that crime is ethical, but in that they dedicate page after page to their criminal characters, while simultaneously marginalizing the role of the police."

Although police play a central role in fictions encouraged by the state, as in the Emirates, there is far more crime fiction that centers the criminal, or the amateur detective working against a massive apparatus and usually not solving any crimes. As in all great detective fiction, the best of Arabic detective fiction is also social criticism, looking at the nature and possibilities of "justice" and whether—as Elias Khoury asks in *White Masks*—a single murder even matters in a violent and unjust world. And while Arabic detective novels focus on local contexts, they also have a great deal to say about the essence and possibilities (or impossibilities) of justice.

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