

One thousand and one delights

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The Guardian, Saturday April 12 2008

The counterpoint to the wars of aggression and the drumbeat heralding a 'clash of civilisations' is the desire of ordinary people in the West and in the Arab world to engage with each other. The London Book Fair's focus on the Arab world this year attempts to facilitate such an engagement. It's the result of 3 years' work on the part of the British Council and can be read – and praised – as an attempt to check the slippage back into the bad old days when the Arab world served merely as a locus for western imaginings, self-invention and ambition. It hosts some xx writers and publishers from xx countries in the Arab world and gives them a London platform. Some of them have spoken to the Guardian about issues they find important, and one thing you can see right away from the statements below is that Arabic literature today reflects a society in crisis.

But Arabic literature itself is not in crisis; in fact, it has at no time been more energetic, more varied than today. Some of the authors who came to maturity in the 'Sixties are now writing the swan song of that decade, others turn to history, either to look for parallels or to look for the lines that connect the 'then' to the 'now'. Younger writers are making their mark. Many write politically engaged works, others depict an alienation that is itself a comment on the 'now' – but is belied by its energy. Several deal with issues of the Arabs' relationship to the West. From the epic works of Ibrahim al-Kuni, to the contemplative narratives of Baha Taher, to the 'puzzle' novels published by Malamih, the best-selling Ala al-Aswani and the runaway success of the 'blogs' brought out by Shurouk Publishing House, Arabic literature today reflects, grapples with and comments on the ills experienced by Arab society.

And those ills are manifold. In the Arab world today you can see the effects of untrammelled global capitalism and so-called 'structural reform' creating a boom economy - and its underbelly of pauperized masses. You can see the degradation of once great national institutions of industry and learning systematically and deliberately undermined by corruption and greed. You can see a fearful disconnect between civil society and governing regimes hammered into place by western interests. You can see the absence of

hope that drives the young of old and rooted nations to trust their lives to leaking boats in search of a future. These are the ills shared by a large part of the world. For the Arabs today there is also the overwhelming sense of being the targets of a new western imperialism. And then there is Israel, a stone thrown into the heart of the Arab world, the ripples from which, far from fading away, are transforming into a tidal wave.

And yet the Arab world is not overwhelmed. There are protests, conferences, strikes, study groups, campaigning societies – and an upsurge of artistic activity. Politics, economics, religion, tradition, modernity and post-modernity are – in various forms - under discussion everywhere. Nowhere more than in literature.

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