



# The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation

## The 2018 Prize – The Shortlist

The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize is delighted to announce the shortlist of the 2018 Prize. The four works are translated by two former winners of the prize, **Khaled Mattawa** and **Jonathan Wright**, and two relative newcomers to literary translation **Ben Koerber** and **Luke Leafgren**.

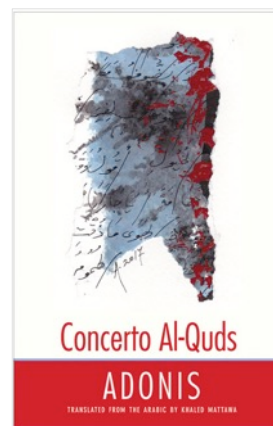
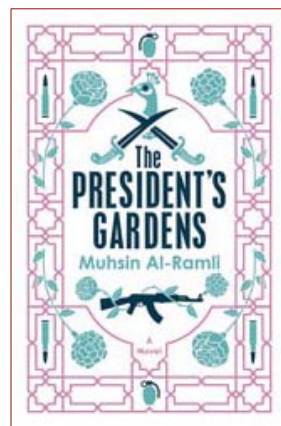
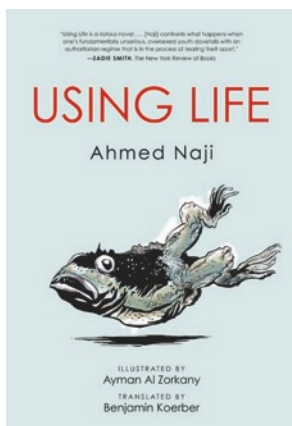
The judges were impressed by the tremendous variety of the entries from different parts of the Arab world, ranging through poetry, crime, literary fiction and graphic novels. The shortlist reflects this diversity, with two novels about the wars in Iraq and their aftermath, a collection of poetry about Jerusalem, and a contemporary take on Cairo today. In the face of social and political upheaval, literature continues to make waves in the Arab world.

*Using Life* by Ahmed Naji (Egypt),  
translated by **Ben Koerber** (CMES Publications, University of Texas at Austin)

*The President's Gardens* by Muhsin Al-Ramli (Iraq),  
translated by **Luke Leafgren** (MacLehose Press)

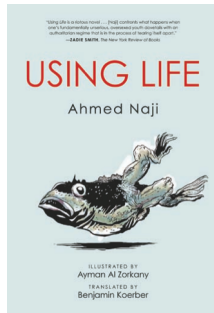
*Concerto al-Quds* by Adonis (Syria),  
translated by **Khaled Mattawa** (Yale University Press)

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi (Iraq),  
translated by **Jonathan Wright** (Oneworld)



The Judging Panel comprises publisher and translator Pete Ayrton (chair), editor and translator Georgia de Chamberet, Jordanian author Fadia Faqir and university lecturer and translator Sophia Vasalou.

## THE JUDGES' COMMENTS



**Ben Koerber,**  
shortlisted for his translation of  
*Using Life* by Ahmed Naji (Egypt),

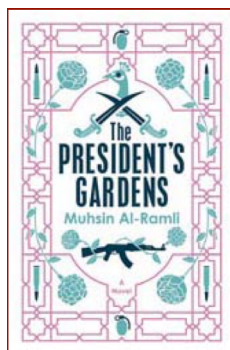
- Published by CMES Publications, University of Texas at Austin, 14 November 2017. ISBN 978-1477314807, paperback, 230 pages, £15.99 / \$16.92

Out of the fantastical time of a post-cataclysmic future, this novel unfolds a dystopian vision of Cairo seen through the eyes of a disaffected young filmmaker as he enters the circles of an age-old secret society with a mission to re-engineer Cairo from the ground up. A novel that stands out for its experimental style, originality, and freshness of voice, it presents the translator with unique challenges. This translation by Benjamin Koerber navigated these challenges with impressive skill, distinguishing itself by its bold and creative decisions, which enabled it to capture the briskness and zest of the original and recreate it with bracing fluency for the English reader.

- **Ahmed Naji** is an Egyptian journalist and novelist. He currently lives in the USA, where he moved following his release from a Cairo jail after serving six months of a two-year sentence for “indecency and disturbing public morals”. His trial had followed the publication of an excerpt from *Using Life* (*Istikhdamu al-Hayat*, 2014) by Cairo literary weekly *Akhbar al-Adab*.

- **Ben Koerber** is an assistant professor of Arabic in the Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures at Rutgers University. He has a PhD in Middle Eastern Languages and Literatures (Arabic) from the University of Texas at Austin. His current research is concerned with Arabic language, literature, and culture from all periods, with a focus on new literary genres in Egypt and Tunisia. His latest work is *Conspiracy in Modern Egyptian Literature* (Edinburgh UP, 2017).

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**Luke Leafgren,**  
shortlisted for his translation of  
*The President's Gardens* by Muhsin Al-Ramli

- Published by MacLehose Press, 20 April 2017, ISBN: 978-0857056788, paperback, 352 pages, £12.99 / \$16.99

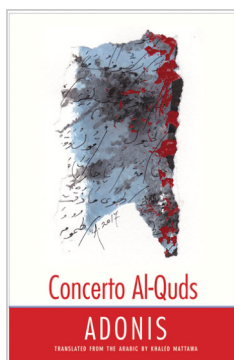
The dedication “To the souls of my nine relatives slaughtered on the third day of Ramadan, 2006 . . .” sets the tone of this powerful, evocative novel. Taking place in the period that covers the two Iraq wars, the book has at its centre the friendship of three men from the same village – the lives dependent on the fickle

choices of the country's despotic rulers. The subject matter is sombre but lyrical descriptions and dark humour make the book a gripping and inspiring read. You do not notice Luke Leafgren's translation – a sure sign of how good it is.

• **Muhsin al-Ramli** was born in 1967 in northern Iraq. 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*. He has a PhD in Philosophy and Spanish Literature from the Autonomous University of Madrid (2003), and teaches at the Saint Louis University, Madrid.

• **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 has also translated Muhsin al-Ramli's novel *Dates on my Fingers* (2014), the debut novel of Shahad Al Rawi *The Baghdad Clock* (2018), and *Oh Salaam!* (2014) by Najwa Barakat, and is the inventor of the StandStand portable standing desk.

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**Khaled Mattawa**,  
shortlisted for his translation of  
*Concerto al-Quds* by Adonis

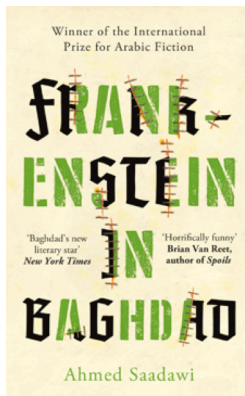
• Published by Yale University Press, 28 November 2017, ISBN: 978-0300197648, hardcover, 96 pages, £18.99 / \$25.00

Adonis's poem about Jerusalem, written in free verse, explores the tension between the static and the dynamic, religion and secularism, modernity. The *Concerto*, drawing on historical and philosophical sources, is an intertextual work, which echoes or alludes to classical literature, the Bible, the Qur'an, etc. and is punctuated by a central narrative written in modern journalese, with the aim of liberating the secular, multi-civilizational city of Jerusalem from the tyranny of religious narratives and contestation. Very few translators are brave enough to tackle Adonis' multifarious poems, but Khaled Mattawa has risen to the challenge and produced an English translation that captures the beauty, multiplicity and resonances of the original.

**Khaled Mattawa** is a poet and a translator of poetry. Born in Benghazi, Libya, in 1964, he emigrated to the USA in 1979. Alongside his own poetry collections, written in English, he has translated poetry by Adonis (winning the 2011 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for his *Adonis: Selected Poems*), Saadi Youssef, Iman Mersal, Amjad Nasser, Fadhil al-Azzawi, Joumana Haddad and Mariam al-Masri. In September 2014 he was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, one of 21 "genius grants" awarded to outstanding figures by the MacArthur Foundation.

**Adonis** is internationally renowned as a poet, essayist, philosopher and theoretician of Arab poetics and has been referred to in interviews as “the greatest living poet of the Arab world” and “the grand old man of poetry, secularism and free speech in the Arab world”. He has been writing poetry for 75 years and has more than fifty published works in Arabic of poetry, criticism, essays, and translations. His modernist influence on Arabic poetry is often compared to that of T S Eliot on Anglophone poetry. Born Ali Ahmad Said Esber in Qassabin village, Syria, in 1930, he adopted the name Adonis when he was 17.

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**Jonathan Wright**,  
shortlisted for his translation of  
*Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi

- Published by Oneworld Publications, UK, 1 February 2018, ISBN: 978-1786070609, paperback, 288 pages, £12.99.
- The US edition is published by Penguin Books USA, 23 January 2018, ISBN: 978-0143128793, paperback, 288 pages, \$16.00

Jonathan Wright’s fluid translation of this weird and wonderful magical-realist novel inspired by Mary Shelley’s monster is superb. After the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, Baghdad becomes a lawless place where sectarian violence, administrative bungling and political corruption run rife. Armed gangs roam the streets. Suicide bombings are the norm. The narrative centres around the residents of Bataween and what unfolds when Ahmed Saadawi’s enraged Frankenstein – created by a notorious junk dealer – embarks on a killing spree to eliminate those who have turned the city into a slaughterhouse. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a surreal satire; an absurdist horror show.

**Ahmed Saadawi** is a novelist, journalist and documentary filmmaker, born in 1973 in Baghdad, where he still lives. In 2010 he was selected for the Beirut39 Hay Festival project as one of the thirty-nine best Arab authors under the age of forty. His third novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), won the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Its French edition won Le Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire in 2017, while the English edition was shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker International Prize. The Arabic original was listed No 15 in *Banipal 63*’s focus feature “The 100 Best Arabic Novels”.

**Jonathan Wright** is an award-winning translator of contemporary Arabic fiction. He has won the prize twice before, in 2013 for Youssef Zeidan’s *Azazeel* and in 2016 for Saud Alsanousi’s *The Bamboo Stalk*, both of whose Arabic originals were winners of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. His translation of *The Iraqi Christ*, short stories by Hassan Blasim, won the 2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

## ABOUT THE JUDGES

**PETE AYRTON** (chair of judges) was born in London in 1943. His first job in publishing was as a translator from French and Italian. In 1986, he founded Serpent's Tail, an independent publisher with a commitment to publish striking and innovative fiction in translation and first novels. In 1988 Serpent's Tail published works by two authors who were later awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature – *The Silent Cry* by Kenzaburo Oe (Nobel 1994) and *The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek (Nobel 2004). In 1989, Serpent's Tail won the *Sunday Times* Small Publisher of the Year Award. In 2008, Pete Ayrton was awarded France's Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres for his contributions to French culture. In 2015, he retired from Serpent's Tail, now an imprint of Profile Books, and has since edited three anthologies, *No Man's Land: Writings of a World at War*, *No Pasarán!: Writings from the Spanish Civil War* and *Revolution!: Writings from Russia 1917*. Pete Ayrton lives in North London and can be found some afternoons walking on Hampstead Heath.

**GEORGIA DE CHAMBERET** is an editor and translator with thirty years' experience in independent publishing. She founded BookBlast® Ltd in 1997, and the first [bookblast.com](http://bookblast.com) website went live in 2000. A founder-member of English PEN's Writers in Translation committee, she kicked off the *BookBlast® Celebrates Independent Publishing* promotion via online journal *The BookBlast® Diary* in February 2016. She is the literary executor of the historian and traveller Lesley Blanch (1904-2007), whose memoirs she edited. *On the Wilder Shores of Love: A Bohemian Life* was published posthumously by Virago in 2015; and a collection of early journalism and biographical essays, *Far To Go and Many To Love: People and Places*, was published last year by Quartet. De Chamberet's journalism has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Prospect*, *The Lady*, the *TLS*, *Book Brunch*, *Booktrust*, *Banipal*, [3ammagazine.com](http://3ammagazine.com) and [wordswithoutborders.org](http://wordswithoutborders.org).

**FADIA FAQIR** was born in Amman, Jordan, in 1956. She has a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Jordan and worked as a freelance reporter for the Jordanian English-language weekly *Jerusalem Star*, now called *The Star*. In 1985 she gained an MA in Creative Writing from Lancaster University and in 1990 the University of East Anglia awarded her the first PhD in Critical and Creative Writing in the UK. After teaching Arabic language and literature and gender studies for a few years she turned to being a full-time writer before being awarded an honorary fellowship at St Mary's College, Durham University. Since 2009 she has held a Fellowship at St Aidan's College, teaching Creative Writing. In 2016 she co-founded the annual Banipal Visiting Writer Fellowship at St Aidan's College, a three-month residency for a published Arab author. She is a trustee of the Durham Palestine Educational Trust. In 2016 she was a judge on the new Arabic prize for short stories Al-Multaqa. She has four published novels, *Nisanit* (Penguin, 1990), *Pillars of Salt* (Quartet Books, 1996), *My Name is Salma* (Transworld, 2007, translated into 12 languages), and *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (Quercus Books, 2014). Her novels have been published in nineteen countries and translated into fifteen languages.

**SOPHIA VASALOU**, originally from Greece, studied Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and obtained her doctorate from the University of Cambridge in 2006 with a thesis on Mu'tazilite ethics. Since then, she has occupied a number of teaching and research posts in different universities and academic institutions, including the University of Cambridge, the European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin, Orient-Institut Beirut, and New York University Abu Dhabi. She is currently a senior lecturer in philosophical theology at Birmingham University. Her research focuses on Islamic ethical thought, particularly ethical theories with a strong rationalistic dimension. She is also the author of a number of philosophical studies. Her published works include *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: the Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics* (2008, winner of the Albert Hourani Book Award for Middle Eastern Studies in 2009), *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime* (2013) and *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics* (2015). She is also a translator of classical and modern Arabic literature. Her translation of the philosophical

anthology *The Scattered and the Gathered*, by the 10th-century intellectuals al-Tawhidi and Miskawayh, and the IPAF-shortlisted novel *Sabiliyat*, by the Kuwaiti author Ismail Fahd Ismail, are due to appear in the next year.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

### 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 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>

## CONTACT

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