

The 2020 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation



KAY HEIKKINEN wins the 2020 Prize



“A celebration of the triumph of the imagination over the mundane”

The 2020 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is awarded to Kay Heikkinen for her translation of the novel *Velvet* by Huzama Habayeb, published by Hoopoe Fiction. Following the shortlist of five titles that was announced on 24 November 2020, the judges are unanimous in naming Kay Heikkinen as the winner of the £3,000 prize, to be awarded by the Society of Authors on 11 February 2021.

The judges in this 15th year of the Prize comprised Emeritus Professor of Arabic, University of Durham Paul Starkey (Chair), fiction editor at *The Guardian* Justine Jordan, writer, publisher & broadcaster Nii Ayikwei Parkes, and film director & philanthropist Omar Al-Qattan.

THE WINNER: Kay Heikkinen for *Velvet* by Huzama Habayeb

THE JUDGES' REPORT

“Kay Heikkinen deserves the highest commendation for her sensitive translation of Huzama Habayeb’s award-winning Arabic novel *Mukhmal*, published in 2016. The novel is an intense and vivid story of one woman’s life in a Palestinian refugee camp, told with sensitivity to the sensuous but tragic world of its heroine but above all to her disturbing and almost heroic defiance of reality. The coarseness of Hawwa’s everyday life stands in stark contrast to the softness of the material around which much of her world revolves. On one level, the novel is a study of the claustrophobia of poverty and oppression, of daily lives shorn of all tenderness and of the stranglehold of family and patriarchy. Throughout it all, however, there remain dreams of individual fulfilment and the possibility of love and escape, turning the novel into a celebration of the triumph of the imagination over the mundane.

“Hawwa’s story is told in a rich, carefully crafted Arabic that represents a significant challenge for any translator, requiring stamina and resilience as well as accuracy and precision. The judges were impressed by the way in which Kay Heikkinen’s translation has succeeded in conveying not only the sense but also the mood and emotion of the original, bringing to life a narrative that vividly portrays the repressive life of ordinary Palestinian women while

scrupulously avoiding any hint of political platitude. Her translation faithfully adheres to the elegance of the original without losing the deeply tragic tenor of its events.

“The judges were impressed by the quality of several other shortlisted translations, including two shorter works, but after extensive discussion reached the decision to award the prize to Kay Heikkinen for a translation that they considered to be of outstanding quality and which deserves to enjoy the same success in English as it has already done in Arabic, through the award of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 2017.”

ABOUT THE WINNING TRANSLATION of *Velvet* from the translator, the author and the publisher

Translator Kay Heikkinen reacted to the news:

“I am overwhelmed! I cannot begin to thank you as I would like to. Nor can I begin to thank Huzama Habayeb as she deserves, both for writing this beautiful book and for her unfailing and unstinting support throughout the translation process. I am delighted at the recognition of her accomplishment in writing such a beautiful human story of a courageous woman, who retains a capacity to be light-hearted in the face of crushing circumstances, and of her accomplishment in writing a new kind of Palestinian story, one that engages with politics only very indirectly. I’m grateful also to all those at Hoopoe who championed this project, as well as to the Banipal committee—more grateful than I can say. Thank you all.”

Author Huzama Habayeb wrote:

“I am thrilled that *Velvet* won the 2020 Saif Ghobash Banipal Translation Prize. It is a well-deserved award to the wonderful Kay Heikkinen, who has done a great job in conveying it into English. I thought the translation of *Velvet* would be a rather challenging task or even a “mission impossible” at times, partly because of its language, which is delicately woven, freshly coined, personalized, and infused with a character of its own, and also for its narrative, which spirit Kay brilliantly captured. I was more than lucky to have Kay work on the translation, as she exhibited utter dedication, approaching the work with an open heart and mind.

“I also greatly enjoyed discussing the translation with her – our discussions often leading us to delve deep in the social and historical context of the novel. A particularly heartening moment was when I explained the symbolism behind one of Fairouz’s songs to Kay, only to see her express greater appreciation for the novel, which made me even more convinced that hers was truly a labour of love. Only love can produce a work like *Velvet*, both in Arabic and English. Thank you Kay for your brilliant and passionate translation. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking care of Hawa and Sitt Qamar, loving them as much as I had loved them, and feeling heartbroken for them as much as I had felt.”

Khaled Seoudi of Hoopoe Fiction said:

“Kay Heikkinen is an incredibly accomplished and talented translator and it is always a pleasure and a privilege to work with her at Hoopoe. Her exquisite translation of Huzama Habayeb’s *Velvet* has rendered this powerful and complex novel into eloquent, flowing English, capturing the passion and pain, the nuance and the many layers of the original. We are delighted that she has been given this much-deserved recognition.”

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



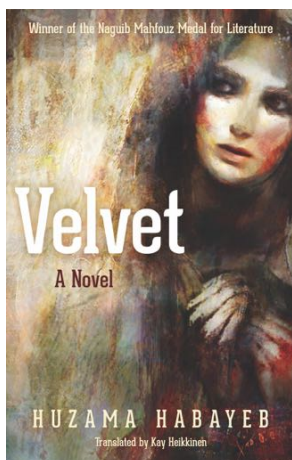
Kay Heikkinen is a translator and academic who holds a PhD from Harvard University and is currently Ibn Rushd Lecturer of Arabic at the University of Chicago. Among other books, she has translated Naguib Mahfouz's *In the Time of Love* and Radwa Ashour's *The Woman From Tantoura*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Huzama Habayeb is a Palestinian writer who was born and raised in Kuwait, where she started writing and publishing short stories, poetry, and journalistic pieces as a student of English language and literature. She started writing and publishing short stories and poetry as a student, and her journalistic writings were published in several newspapers and magazines. When the Gulf War erupted in 1990, she fled to Jordan and established her reputation as a short-story writer. Habayeb's first novel, *Asl al-hawa* (Root of Passion), was published in 2007, gaining wide critical acclaim, and her second novel, *Qabla an Tanama al-Malika* (Before The Queen Falls Asleep), published in 2011, was described by critics as an epic novel of the Palestinian diaspora. Her third novel, *Mukhmal* (Velvet), for which in December 2017 she was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, was first published in Arabic in Beirut in 2016 by the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing.

ABOUT THE BOOK



Velvet by Huzama Habayeb (Palestine)

Published by Hoopoe Fiction (an imprint of AUC Press), Cairo, 2019
ISBN: 9789774169304. Pbk, 272 pages, £10.99 / USD17.95. Kindle
£9.41 / USD12.42

Hawa is a child of the grinding hardship of a Palestinian refugee camp. She has had to survive the camp itself, as well as the humiliation and destruction of an abusive family life. But now, later in life, something most unexpected has happened: she has fallen in love. *Velvet* unfolds over a day in Hawa's life, as she makes plans for a new beginning that may take her out of the camp. She sifts back through her memories of the past: the stories of her family, her childhood, and her beloved mentor, who invited her into the glamorous world of the rich women of Amman. This is a novel of enormous power and great beauty. Rich in detail, it tells of the women of the camp, and the joy and relief that can be captured amid repression and sorrow.

"This is Huzama Habayeb's third novel and marks a high point in her writing career, with the Arabic original, *Mukhmal*, awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 2017. It was hailed by the judges as "a new kind of Palestinian novel" that wrote about the "everyday lives

of Palestinians”, and about the “human condition” through its portrayal of woman [...] *Velvet* is a heady, emotional read.”

From the review of *Velvet* by Margaret Obank, published in *Banipal* 68 (Summer 2020).

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The Translation Prizes Award Ceremony, hosted by the Society of Authors, will take place on 11 February 2021 as an online event, with a Banipal Trust online event celebrating the 2020 Winner taking place the following week on Wednesday 17 February.

For information about the events celebrating the award, visit this link: <https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award2020>

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- If you require digital images of Kay Heikkinen, Huzama Habayeb, the front cover image of *Velvet*, the Prize logo, please email: admin@banipaltrust.org.uk
- To arrange an interview with Kay Heikkinen or for any other information, please email Clare Roberts on admin@banipaltrust.org.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 of Authors.

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

The deadline for both 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:

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

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/judges2020>

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

<https://www.facebook.com/SaifGhobashBanipalPrize/>