

The 2023 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation



Announcing LUKE LEAFGREN the winner



“Capturing the spirit and the letter of the original in all its depth and virtuosity”

The 2023 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is awarded to Luke Leafgren for his translation of *Mister N* by Najwa Barakat, published by And Other Stories. Following the shortlist of six works that was announced on 1 December 2023, the judges are unanimous in naming Luke Leafgren as the winner of the 2023 prize, to be awarded by the Society of Authors on 7 February 2024.

The judging panel of four comprised **Ros Schwartz** (Chair), award-winning translator from French of over 100 fiction and nonfiction titles, **Tony Calderbank**, translator, former teacher of Arabic and translation, and for many years British Council director in South Sudan, Bahrain

and Libya, **Sarah Enany**, winner of the 2021 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize and Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Cairo University and **Barbara Schwepke**, founder, publisher and CEO of Ginkgo Library, and founder of Haus Publishing. For more information about the judges click [here](#).

THE JUDGES' REPORT

It was quite a challenge to select a winner from such a range of genres – including fiction, testimony, a children's book and historical fiction – but the judging process was as delightfully simple as it was unanimous. In our individual selections, almost all the judges had *Mister N* as a contender and it was highly spoken of by all.

We soon reached a consensus as to the shortlist, and one of us said, “Right, so we all seem to pretty much agree that *Mister N* is our winner?” There was enthusiastic assent from everyone. This unanimity is even more striking given the sterling quality of the works on our shortlist. All of them are beautifully written originals, with compelling narratives – saddening and sobering in the case of *What Have You Left Behind?*; uplifting and exciting in *Thunderbird*; contemplative and profound in *The Turban and the Hat*; captivating and atmospheric in *The King of India*; and complex and enthralling in *Firefly*. The translations of these works more than do them justice; they give the originals new life in a new language.

And yet, this said, *Mister N* was the standout choice for its magnificent translation. In smooth, self-effacing prose, enriched by a widely varied vocabulary, Luke Leafgren leads the reader seamlessly into Najwa Barakat's creation of a labyrinthine world where all is not as it seems. The shifts in time and point of view are conveyed with aplomb, and the general effect is of a riveting psychological thriller written in delightfully rich and eloquent English.

Capturing the spirit and the letter of the original in all its depth and virtuosity, *Mister N* is an exceptionally good example of the translator's art. It is both faithful and creative, fully representing the original work with all its dark complexity, fragmented narration and splashes of sombre humour. The choices of structure, vocabulary, and idiom that Luke Leafgren has made, perfectly render the Arabic, recreating the obsessive fastidiousness of the protagonist, the ambiguous nature of his accommodation and the serial instability of the city around him.

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REACTION FROM WINNER LUKE LEAFGREN

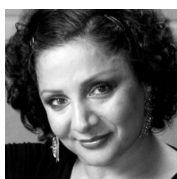
“Winning the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation in 2018 meant more to me than any other achievement in my life, and that special feeling is echoed now. This prize is also for Najwa Barakat, whose creativity is a gift to readers, and whose remarkable novel rewarded all the hours I spent in reading, drafting, revising, and editing since the day she sent me two sections of the manuscript in 2018. I am happy to share this honor with Stefan Tobler and everyone at And Other Stories, and especially with editor Jeremy Davies, whose careful reading and creative suggestions improved my translation immensely. In addition to being a powerful work of literature, this book is a testament to the capacious history of Beirut, and to that great city's resilience and promise through past and current tragedies.”

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



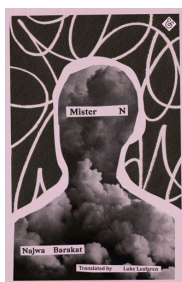
Luke Leafgren is an Assistant Dean of Harvard College. He has published seven translations of contemporary Arabic novels and received the 2018 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for his translation of Muhsin Al-Ramli's *The President's Gardens*. In May 2023, And Other Stories published his translation of *Shalash the Iraqi*, by Shalash.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Najwa Barakat was born in Lebanon in 1961. After receiving a degree in theatre at the Fine Arts Institute in Beirut, she moved to Paris and studied cinema at Le Conservatoire Libre du Cinéma Français. She has hosted cultural programs produced by Radio France Internationale (RFI), the BBC, and Al Jazeera, and is the author of seven novels as well as being the Arabic translator of Albert Camus's notebooks. She lives in Paris.

ABOUT THE BOOK



Mister N by Najwa Barakat (Lebanon).
Published by And Other Stories, 17 May 2022.
<https://www.andotherstories.org/mister-n/>
Pbk ISBN: 9781913505325. £11.99
Ebook ISBN: 9781913505332 £9.99.

Mister N is a dark tragi-comic novel which relates the tale of a former novelist who has returned to writing in order to exorcise the disturbing memories of his past. As he sits in his room in a mysterious hotel, struggling to disentangle the relationships he has had with the members of his own family and the characters he has created in his novels, his life lurches further into disorder. Time, place, and Mister N's inner dialogue become ever more fragmented, and just like the damaged city around him, he cannot quite manage to put things back together.

THE AWARD CEREMONY – 7 February 2024



The Translation Prizes Award Ceremony, hosted by the Society of Authors, will take place on 7 February 2024 at the British Library, and will award eight translation prizes: the Bernard Shaw Prize (Swedish biennial), the Premio Valle Inclán (Spanish), the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize (Arabic), for the first time the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation Translation Prize (Japanese), the Schlegel-Tieck Prize (German), Scott Moncrieff Prize (French), the Translators' Association First Translation Prize (debut translation from any language into English) and The Goethe-Institut Award (biennial).

A CELEBRATION OF LITERARY TRANSLATION – 8 February 2024
The Annual Lecture and the Winner of the 2023 Prize



On Thursday 8 February, from 6.00pm GMT, at the SOAS Brunei Gallery, The Banipal Trust for Arab Literature will co-host with the SOAS Centre for Translation Studies and Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies *A Celebration of Literary Translation* at which Prizewinner Luke Leafgren will be in conversation with chair of judges Ros Schwartz, and acclaimed poet and poetry translator Khaled Mattawa will give the Annual Prize Lecture on the subject: *Stations of Translation: Power, Eros, and Betrayal*. The event will be in-person and online, followed by a Q&A and reception.

All welcome to this free event. Register to attend in-person or online at these links:

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/lecture2023.cfm>

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/event/saif-ghobash-banipal-prize-arabic-literary-translation-2023-annual-lecture-and-2023>

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- For digital images of Luke Leafgren, Najwa Barakat, the front cover of *Mister N*, and Prize logo and the Society of Authors' logo, click [here](#):
- To arrange an interview with Luke Leafgren, or for any other information, email 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 to honour 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 to the late Humphrey Davies.

The prize is administered by the Society of Authors in the United Kingdom, alongside the other UK prizes for literary translation, from languages that include Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Swedish, as well as the Translators' Association prize for debut translation into English from any language. The prizes are awarded annually at a ceremony hosted by the Society of Authors.

The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize is wholly sponsored by the Saif Ghobash family in memory of their husband and father, the late Saif Ghobash (21 October 1932 – 25 October 1977), a man passionate about Arabic literature and other literatures of the world.

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

THE SAIF GHOBASH BANIPAL PRIZE ANNUAL LECTURE

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, and the fourth, on 7 November 2019 also at the British Library, was given by the internationally acclaimed Lebanese novelist and playwright Hanan al-Shaykh, followed by two years of online lectures during the Covid-19 pandemic, given by Liana Badr (2020) and Jonathan Wright (2021). The 2022 lecture was delivered in person at the British Library by Hartmut Fähndrich. The 2023 Lecture will be delivered by Khaled Mattawa at *A Celebration of Literary Translation* on 8 February 2024 at the SOAS Brunei Gallery.

MORE LINKS

about the prize, past winners, entries, judges, rules, administration, and any other details:

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

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

<https://societyofauthors.org/Prizes/Translation-Prizes>

<https://societyofauthors.org/Prizes/Translation-Prizes/Saif-Ghobash-Banipal>

Social media links: <https://www.facebook.com/SaifGhobashBanipalPrize/>

<https://twitter.com/banipalprize>