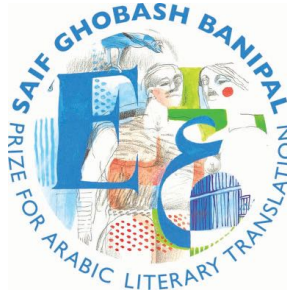
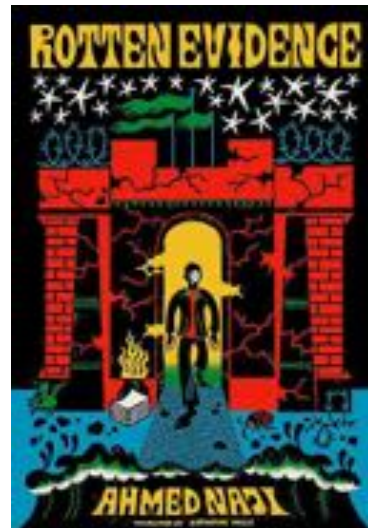


## The 2024 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation



**Announcing KATHARINE HALLS the winner  
for her translation of *Rotten Evidence* by Ahmed Naji**



**“A brilliant feat! A masterclass! Naji’s  
humanity shines forth!”**

The 2024 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation is awarded to Katharine Halls for her translation of *Rotten Evidence* by Ahmed Naji, published by McSweeney’s. Following the shortlist of six works that was announced on 2 December 2024, the judges have named Katharine Halls as the winner of the 2024 prize, to be awarded by the Society of Authors on 12 February 2025.

The judging panel of four comprised **Raphael Cohen** (Chair), freelance translator in the fields of literature (fiction and prose), politics and development, **Michael Caines**, editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* and co-founder of the *Brixton Review of Books*, **Laura Watkinson**, award-winning literary translator, mainly from Dutch into English, but also from German, Italian and Frisian, and **Nariman Youssef**, literary translator and translation consultant. For more information about the judges click [here](#).

## THE JUDGES' REPORT

Selecting this year's winner was not a straightforward task, given that three books were in close contention: Bothayna Al-Essa's *Lost in Mecca*, translated by Nada Faris; Iman Mersal's *Traces of Enayat*, translated by Robin Moger; and Ahmed Naji's *Rotten Evidence*, translated by Katharine Halls. While commending the narrative verve of *Lost in Mecca* and its powerful handling of many taboo subjects, the judges agreed that the two finest works this year were both works of reportage and (auto)biography.

*Traces of Enayat* and *Rotten Evidence* portray Egyptian society and the consequences of writing; in the former case during the first decade of the Nasserite dispensation and in the latter during the fallout from the events of 2011. Both works have been admirably translated: fluent, creative and literary. In the end, however, we considered that Katharine Halls's translation of *Rotten Evidence* deserved the prize. Halls not only gives a masterclass on the lexical and phrasal level; she also takes a scalpel to the structure of the original Arabic to produce a text that is more accessible to the English reader and less episodic than the original.

Judge Michael Caines commented, "Scathing, humorous, compelling: *Rotten Evidence* excels for its indictment of a broken political system but also for its visceral account of the author's interior life in prison. Katharine Halls's translation does full justice to Ahmed Naji's depiction of a world that few outsiders will know or understand."

Judge Laura Watkinson stated, "I particularly admire how Katharine Halls weaves elements of the Arabic into the text in a way that allows non-Arabic speakers to appreciate puns and to get a feel for prison slang. The style is fluent, colloquial and entertaining. Halls expertly renders the wide variety of registers in this book, from convoluted legal terminology to discussions about forbidden names for genitalia. A brilliant feat!" With reference to *Traces of Enayat*, Watkinson added that in any other year, it could have been the winner.

Judge Nariman Youssef added, "Halls seamlessly navigates culturally specific idioms and prison slang. Her bold choice to offer transliterations or literal translations of terms or phrases that might seem, at first glance, untranslatable – 'truth is a mango', '*shambara*' – is justified time and again by the deft elucidations that she weaves into the text with inimitable simplicity."

In *Rotten Evidence* Ahmed Naji writes, "James Joyce, who swore to express himself with the greatest degree of freedom possible – and never to serve home, fatherland, or church – said a writer had three weapons: silence, exile, and cunning. Well, Joyce, they put me in prison, and all I had left was laughter and rage." Both laughter and rage are present, but Naji's humanity shines forth.

## REACTION FROM WINNER KATHARINE HALLS

"It is a wonderful honour to have been awarded the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for my translation of Ahmed Naji's prison memoir *Rotten Evidence*, though a strange and difficult time to imagine celebrating anything. This past month has brought us joy and relief at the sight of former detainees walking free from prisons across Syria, where they have spent years in conditions of indescribable cruelty which so many others did not survive. It has also brought grief and despair, as our friend and comrade Alaa Abd el-Fattah, to whom a chapter of *Rotten Evidence* is dedicated, continues to languish behind bars in Egypt after more than a decade, while his mother Laila remains on hunger strike. It is impossible to forget, in these times of

resurgent fascism, that writing about and against prison will always be a revolutionary act. Ahmed Naji is a particularly brave, witty, and uncompromising writer, and I hope this accolade will encourage many more readers to pick up his excellent, indeed revolutionary, book.”

### ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

**Katharine Halls** is an Arabic-to-English translator from Cardiff, Wales. Her translation of Ahmed Naji’s prison memoir *Rotten Evidence* was also shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Memoir and Autobiography in the US. She was awarded a 2021 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant to translate Haytham El Wardany’s short story collection *Things That Can’t Be Fixed*. Her translation, with Adam Talib, of Raja Alem’s *The Dove’s Necklace* received a 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and was shortlisted for the 2017 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation. Her translations for the stage have been performed at the Royal Court and the Edinburgh Festival, and short texts have appeared in *Frieze*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Believer*, *Africa Is a Country*, *The Common*, *Asymptote*, *Arts of the Working Class*, *World Literature Today*, *stadtsprachen*, *Words Without Borders*, *Exberliner*, *Newfound*, *Adda*, *Critical Muslim*, *Perpetual Postponement* and various anthologies.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ahmed Naji**, born in Menyet Sandoub, Egypt in 1985, is a writer, journalist, documentary filmmaker and “criminal”. His memoir *Rotten Evidence: Reading and Writing in an Egyptian Prison* was a finalist in the 2023 National Book Critics Circle Award in the US. His novel *Using Life* (2014), whose English translation by Ben Koerber was shortlisted for the 2018 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, made him the first writer in Egyptian history to be imprisoned for offending public morality. He is the author of three other novels: *Rogers* (2007), *And Tigers to my Room* (2020) and *Happy Endings* (2023). Naji has won several prizes, including a Dubai Press Club Arab Journalism Award and a PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award. He was a City of Asylum Fellow at the Beverley Rogers, Carol C. Harter Black Mountain Institute in Las Vegas, where he currently lives with his family.

### ABOUT THE BOOK

*Rotten Evidence* by Ahmed Naji (Egypt)

Published by McSweeney’s, 17 October 2023

<https://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/rotten-evidence-reading-and-writing-in-an-egyptian-prison/>

Pbk ISBN: 9781952119835. £15.98 • E-book ISBN: 9781952119842 £12.99

In February 2016, Ahmed Naji was sentenced to two years in prison for “violating public decency”, after an excerpt of his novel *Using Life* reportedly caused a reader to experience heart palpitations. Naji ultimately served ten months of that sentence, in a group cellblock in Cairo’s Tora Prison.

*Rotten Evidence* is a chronicle of those months. Through Naji’s writing, the world of Egyptian prison comes into vivid focus, with its cigarette-based economy, homemade chess sets, and

well-groomed fixers. Naji’s storytelling is lively and uncompromising, filled with rare insights into both the mundane and grand questions he confronts.

How does one secure a steady supply of fresh vegetables without refrigeration? How does one write and revise a novel in a single notebook? Fight boredom? Build a clothes hanger? Negotiate with the chief of intelligence? And, most crucially, how does one make sense of a senseless oppression: finding oneself in prison for the act of writing fiction? Genuine and defiant, this book stands as a testament to the power of the creative mind, in the face of authoritarian censorship.

### **THE AWARD CEREMONY – 12 February 2025**

The Translation Prizes Award Ceremony, hosted by the Society of Authors, will take place on 12 February 2025 at the British Library, and will award eight translation prizes: the John Florio Prize (Italian biennial), the Premio Valle Inclán (Spanish), the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize (Arabic), the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation Translation Prize (Japanese), the Schlegel-Tieck Prize (German), the Scott Moncrieff Prize (French), the TA First Translation Prize (debut translation from any language into English) and the Vondel Translation Prize (Dutch triennial).

### **A CELEBRATION OF ARABIC LITERARY TRANSLATION – 13 February 2025 The Annual Lecture and the Winner of the 2024 Prize**

On Thursday 13 February 2025, from 6.00pm GMT, at the SOAS Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature will co-host, with the SOAS School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, the SOAS Centre for Translation Studies and the SOAS Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies, *A Celebration of Literary Translation* at which Prize-winner Katharine Halls will be in conversation with chair of judges Raphael Cohen, and professor and literary translator Margaret Litvin will give the Annual Lecture on the subject: *Translating Beauty and Revolt in Arabic Literature Today*. The event will be in-person and online, followed by a Q&A and a reception.

All welcome to this free event

Links to register for either in-person or online attendance will be available shortly at

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/lecture2024.cfm>

and <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/events>

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### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- For digital images of Katharine Halls, Ahmed Naji, the front cover of *Rotten Evidence*, and Prize logo and the Society of Authors’ logo, click [here](#):
- To arrange an interview with Katharine Halls, or for any other information, email [admin@banipaltrust.org.uk](mailto: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 Ghobash family generously extended their sponsorship to the establishment of an annual lecture to discuss any aspect of the subject of Arabic literature and its 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. Each year's lecture can be followed online on the Banipal Trust's website at <https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/lecture/>.

Professor and literary translator Margaret Litvin will give the 2024 Lecture, *Translating Beauty and Revolt in Arabic Literature Today*, at the SOAS Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre on Thursday, 13 February 2025.

## **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://x.com/BanipalPrize/>