

up close and **personal**



MAI AL-NAKIB  
**THE HIDDEN  
LIGHT OF  
OBJECTS**

by bazaar staff



**With a career in academia, Mai Al-Nakib has always written professionally. Still, she didn't envision that her writing debut would arrive as a collection of short stories, let alone an award-winning book. For Mai, *The Hidden Light of Objects* marked a rediscovery of an earlier sense of herself as a creative writer.**

"It feels like I've come full circle." Mai told *bazaar*. Spending most of her childhood reading, writing and scribbling away in countless notebooks, when it came to *The Hidden Light of Objects*, Mai relived those special moments growing up; putting down her thoughts from pen to paper and exploring her ability to weave fiction into the social reality of a region that, to this day, is riddled with geopolitics. Published as a collection of short stories, *The Hidden Light of Objects* addresses moments that are often ignored in the lives of people living in Kuwait and the Middle East and tackles a wide range of perplexities that exemplify life in the region throughout the last 60 years. *The Hidden Light of Objects* won the Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award in 2014, the first short story collection to win in the history of the award. At the festival, the author participated in three panels, and also presented *The Hidden Light of Objects* on a panel about the short story with American author Tom Barbash. Also this year, Mai participated in the Amnesty International Imprisoned Writers Series, with a focus on the plight of Syrian writers. Amongst the 47 writers who were nominated for the First Book Award, readers chose *The Hidden Light of Objects* as the winner.

While Mai is currently busy writing her first novel, we were eager to discuss how this win is changing many perceptions about our region. For the first time in a long time, readers abroad are eager to learn about a version of our region that shows a stark difference from what is depicted in mainstream media. More importantly, we are finally witnessing how the literary scene has changed its views on Arab authors who write in English.

The Kuwaiti-born author left the country as an infant, and upon returning from living in the UK and the US at the age of six, her education at the American School of Kuwait along with her sisters, was considered as a rare phenomenon for a young Kuwaiti girl. From there, she went on to study English literature as an undergraduate at Kuwait University and completed her graduate studies in the US, also in English literature. Armed with a PhD from Brown University, Mai's seasoned experience from teaching postcolonial studies and comparative literature at Kuwait University defined her role and personality as an academic. Still, she's always envisioned herself writing creatively on some level. She said, "I do think that I always saw myself as a writer. In graduate school, I began to think of myself as more of an academic than a writer; though, of course, writing is one of the main occupations of academics."

It was Mai's personal experience that triggered her return to the creative realms of writing, and motivated her to write the short stories. Upon returning to Kuwait in a post-invasion [continued...]

## up close and personal

[...continued] and more precisely a post 9/11 era, the author was left with a sense of confusion, unfamiliar with the country's changed social dynamics. She explained, "Kuwait [became] a place that was completely different from the one I grew up in. It was more intolerant, more conservative, and much less adventurous than it had once been, and this felt incredibly disorienting and stifling to me. I needed to open a window onto something else – something I thought I remembered and wanted to bring to life once again, at least in writing. The stories provided me with that opportunity." While one could absolutely agree with the idea that personal history and experience will always affect a writer's work, to deem *The Hidden Light of Objects* an autobiography of any sort, would be incorrect. The series of short stories arrive as fictional enticing tales of life, hope, loss and the universal bond between man and land.

When Mai first began to write the stories that would make up *The Hidden Light of Objects*, she didn't envision that they would form a collection. As she continued to write, however, she noticed progressive recurrences; characters sometimes resurfaced, a series of objects, specific words, and a certain tonality. She added, "The trope of objects is, above all, what holds the stories together. The first-person vignettes, narrated by a recurring character named Mina, is another element that links the stories together. The stories consider how chance objects can trigger forgotten memories or sensations and how that recollection or experience can transform understandings of the past, present, and future. This occurs at a personal level for many of the individual characters, but has implications beyond the characters to society more generally."

The release of *The Hidden Light of Objects* further sparked the literary debate of writing about the Middle East, specifically Kuwait, in the English language, rather than Arabic. The author's first language happens to be English, so she didn't turn to Arabic to write these fictional stories and defining the audience wasn't her main priority at the time. It was the reception of the published collection that stimulated this debate, reflecting a clear change on how generations, both old and new, perceive culture. Mai received the generous support from the local literary scene, and the reviews from Kuwaiti newspapers and magazines, both English and Arabic, have been positive. Mai recently addressed this issue at Kuwaiti author and cultural critic Taleb Al-Refai's Cultural Circle, which she noted was an encouraging experience to open this dialogue between growing communities of Arab writers who write in English. Mai also personally affiliates with a group of Arab female writers who write in English, "These are writers I read, respect, even teach – writers including Ahdaf Soueif, Selma Dabbagh, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Fadia Faqir, and Diana Abu-Jaber, among others. Another group of writers I feel a great affinity with – Arab or otherwise – are those who express the singular

experience of inhabiting the in-between: writers like Kafka and Emile Habibi; Rushdie and Yasmine Zahran; Ghassan Kanafani and Assia Djebar. Postcolonial writers, diasporic writers, exilic writers – the writers I most admire, the writers who have shaped my life as a scholar."

Through this debut, Mai developed a sense for a very specific audience that is ever-present in Kuwait and across the region. She explained, "I had a sense that I was writing, at least in part, to a small group of people, both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti, who came of age in Kuwait around the same time I did. Having this particular group in mind did not affect the way I wrote the stories, but it did give me some pleasure to consider how they might respond." Mai found that *The Hidden Light of Objects* connected readers from different walks of life, relating to the universal themes presented through the short stories. At that point, language seemed irreverent, as nobody could, or rather should, dictate the parameters of what the public chooses to read.

Mai is currently considering having the collection of short stories translated as a means to speak to an Arabic audience. She said, "It's important to me, as an Arab writer, to have an Arabic-reading audience and a translation would ensure that. On the other hand, I think I would feel certain vulnerabilities about having the stories appear in Arabic. Firstly, because it would mean handing over the reigns to someone else, trusting a talented translator to capture the spirit of my book. Secondly, and more importantly, I'm hesitant about having the book translated because I sometimes worry that the content might sound jarring or incongruous to an Arabic-reading audience. Perhaps I'm overthinking it. In any case, there are plans for an Arabic translation, and we'll see how that goes."

Until Mai makes a decision with regards to translating her first collection of short stories, *The Hidden Light of Objects* will be released in the US in January 2015 and she is also planning a book tour in February before coming back to the region to participate in the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai.

## questionnaire

### What do you most value in your friends?

Kindness, generosity of spirit, confidence, humor, and loyalty.

### What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Lying on a beach in the late afternoon sun, not a care in the world.

### What is your greatest fear?

Time passing.

### What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

My capacity to obsess over time passing.

### What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Arrogance.

### Which living person do you most admire?

I have two: Fredric Jameson and Noam Chomsky.

### What is your greatest extravagance?

Travel.



### Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

"It's problematic."

### What is it that you most dislike?

Fanaticisms and extremism of all stripes.

### Which talent would you most like to have?

To run like Mo Farah.

### If you could have any job, what would it be?

Full-time writer.

### What would you consider your greatest achievement?

*The Hidden Light of Objects*.

### What is your most treasured possession?

That's a secret!

### What is your most marked characteristic?

I tend to be nostalgic. And then I tell myself to snap out of it, only to slip back in.

### Where would you most like to live?

Paris or Brooklyn.

### What are your favorite words to live by?

To paraphrase Hitchcock, there's nothing better than a clear horizon.

For more information, visit [www.maialnakib.com](http://www.maialnakib.com)

