

The Hidden Light of Objects

'The most original first collection of short fiction I have read in years'
A. Manette Ansary

By Nada Faris

Mai Al-Nakib, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Kuwait University, will be presenting her debut collection of short stories 'The Hidden Light of Objects' on Wednesday. Though they are sometimes set against the backdrop of tense socio-political moments in the Middle East, they focus primarily on the personal lives of ordinary people and their preoccupations. For example, Al-Nakib writes about adolescent love, yearnings for independence, the fragility of marriage, and everyday pain. The Hidden Light of Objects investigates the ability of everyday objects to create and sustain extraordinary memories. I was fortunate enough to read the book a few days earlier in preparation for a brief Q-and-A session with the author.

Q: Can you share a little about your creative journey thus far?

A: I've been an academic in the field of literature for many years, and yet I've come to writing fiction relatively late. Focusing on critical writing and academic research about literature pulled me away from considering writing literature myself, though writing fiction is something I always thought I would do. My short stories have appeared in The First Line and Ninth Letter. "The Echo Twins" (one of the stories in The Hidden Light of Objects) earned Honorable Mention in Glimmer Train's August 2011 Short Story Award for New Writers.

Q: That's amazing! I read the book a few days ago and I find myself still thinking about some of the characters and their "objects." What I particularly loved about the collection is the way it weaves history, memory and fiction together. How would you describe your stories?

A: I think of my stories as experiments with memory. Why do we remember what we do? How do the things we remember—those sparks Virginia Woolf calls "moments of being"—inform our lives? As a writer, I am particularly interested in how such moments motivate writing but, beyond that, how they motivate people (and characters) to narrate their lives in highly specific and singular ways. My concern is not with the past as such but, rather, with the process of remembering the past and how that impinges on the present.

Mai Al-Nakib's book launch is this Wednesday (April 2) at the Contemporary Art Platform (CAP), 7pm.

Q: This brings me to another wonderful amalgam. You seem to blend the personal with the political. Would you say your work highlights one above the other? Or do you not perceive a division between the two categories?

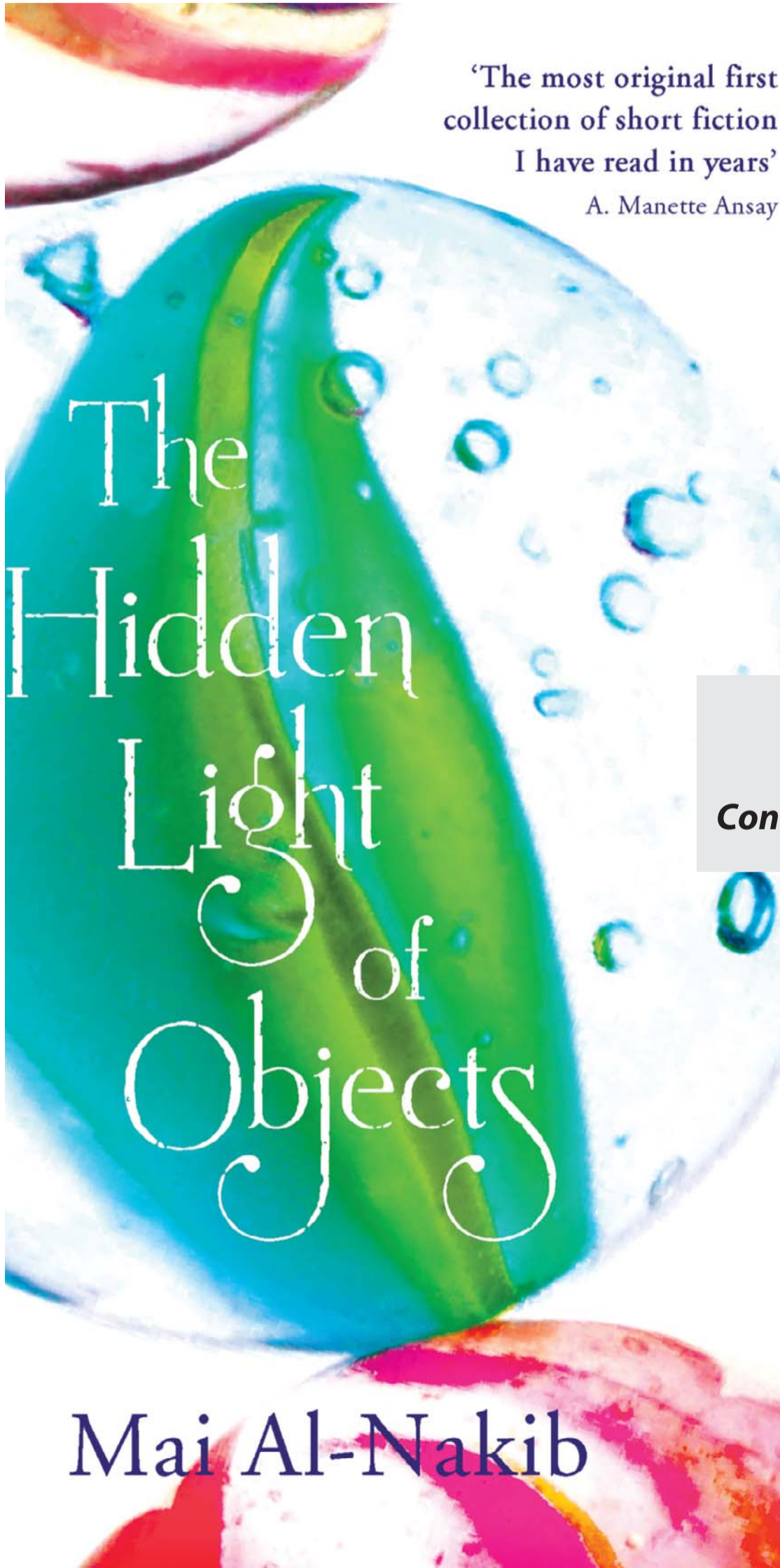
A: In most of my stories, we see characters grappling with specific aspects of their pasts, the pivotal, seemingly private moments that end up defining them, that turn out to structure their particular trajectories. As it turns out, the personal is always overwritten by much broader historical and political conditions. The intimate obsessions of the characters, the accidents of their individual lives, are linked, inevitably, to a wider geography—both temporal and spatial—which they cannot, despite their best efforts, outrun. My stories attempt to explore some of these paradoxes of the personal and the non-personal, the intimate and the public, toward a consideration of what such overlaps can do.

Q: In some of the stories, and especially some of the vignettes, I couldn't help but picture you as the young characters you write about. How and why did you apply fiction to unravel some of your personal memories and some of the broader historical moments that affected the public's memory such as, for example, the liberation of Kuwait or the transformation of its economy?

A: This is not an autobiographical collection, although aspects of my life and my experiences inevitably find their way into my writing. On the one hand, it's impossible to escape the historical traces that make us who and what we are and that shape our perspectives on the world. On the other hand, fiction allows us to flee the confines of these determining factors. Fiction makes things up, it invents worlds, experiments with settings and characters and episodes as far away from ourselves as could be. Fiction creates bridges between far-flung people and places and times. It allows us to connect in ways that might never be possible otherwise (as a result of geographical or temporal or linguistic limits). I hope this is something my stories will do for readers.

Q: What's next for Mai Al-Nakib?

A: I am currently working on a novel.



Mai Al-Nakib