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A magazine of Arabic literature in translation

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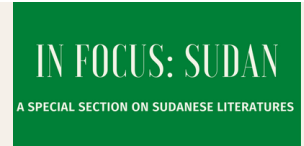
10 Years, 10 Books: The Changes to the Landscape of Kuwaiti Literature in English

SEPTEMBER 13, 2022 BY MLYNXQUALEY

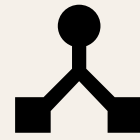
M Lynx Qualey, with others on Twitter

Yesterday, blogger Ann Morgan posted a [“Reading the World” memory](#) from 10 years ago, when she was looking for Kuwaiti literature in English translation. Morgan said she asked International Prize for Arabic Fiction administrator Fleur Montanaro for suggestions, and “Word came back that no prominent Kuwaiti authors had had anything more than the odd short story translated into English.”

Indeed, [as she writes](#), she ended up reading, “two self-published novels titled *The Chronicles of Dathra*, *a Dowdy Girl from Kuwait*.”



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ayearofreadingtheworld.com
Kuwait: the icing on the cake
Hearing that I was struggling to find a Kuwaiti book that I could read in English, Fleur Montanaro, administrator of the International Prize for ...

From Twitter

In the years since, the landscape of Kuwaiti literature written in English — or translated to



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English — has changed significantly. The change seems to start in 2013, the year Saud Alsanousi won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and in 2014, the year Mai al-Nakib's ground-breaking short-story collection *The Hidden Light of Objects* was published. Since then, there have been several Kuwaiti authors producing works in English, including gifted fiction writers Mai al-Nakib and Layla AlAmmar, as well as the accomplished memoirist Shahd Alshammari. A novel by the beloved Kuwaiti writer Ismail Fahd Ismail was translated by Sophia Vasalou, as *The Old Woman and the River*, and two novels by International Prize for Arabic Fiction-winning author Saud Alsanoussi have appeared in English, one translated by Jonathan Wright (*The Bamboo Stalk*) and another by Sawad Hussain (*Mama Hissa's Mice*). Both came out from larger publishers and were well-reviewed.

One novel by best-selling Kuwaiti author and literary phenomenon Bothayna al-Essa appeared in 2019, translated by Michele Henjum as *All That I Want to Forget*, and another is forthcoming in translation by supergroup Sawad Hussain and Ranya Abdelrahman, as *Guardian of Superficialities*. Author and founder of the major literary prize for the Arabic short story Taleb Alrefai's *Outclassed in Kuwait* has appeared in English translation, as has his *The Mariner*, translated by Russell Harris. A third



On Translation

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For Translators

Resources for translators working between Arabic and English.

translation is in the works for Banipal Books.

That's not to say there aren't many more Kuwaiti novels we'd like to see in translation. Although Abdullah al-Busais's excellent novel *The Taste of the Wolf* was translated in full, it doesn't seem to have found a publisher, nor has his *Qaf is a Killer*. We would also like to see Laila Al Othman's classic *Wasmiyya Comes Out of the Sea* in translation — preferably as translated by Layla AlAmmar — as well as Aisha Al-Mahmud's *Counterfeit Nation*, of which novelist Amir Tag Elsir said, "This novel tackles the question of identity and the countless number of migrants to Kuwait from different countries. It addresses the issue of how those who helped build the nation are still without a nationality and the same goes for their children."

Bothayna Al-Essa recommends Faisal al-Habini's *Sons of the End Times*, saying that, "No one resembles Faisal Al-Habbini; no one on the Kuwaiti or Arab scene writes like him. He is delightfully unique, and every corner of his stories carries a satisfying, artful, heartbreaking, and existential surprise. He writes with a nihilistic Sufi spirit, as if the oil and water were finally mixed!"

Contributor Ibrahim Fawzy recommends Khaled Nasrallah's *The White Line of Night*, of which he



Reviews

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From the Quarterly

Feature
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Quarterly*.

[translated an excerpt](#), and Margaret Litvin noted Kuwaiti writer Thuraya al-Baqsami's [In the Time of the Red Crescent](#) (2012), part of her list of Arab-Soviet novels.

This year saw works by American-Kuwaiti and Kuwaiti-American writers Zahra Marwan (children's picture book) and Chelsea Abdullah (adult fantasy). We'd also like to see more work from those who have different experiences of living in Kuwait, such as [Kuwaiti-Palestinian novelists like Eman Assad](#), and writers who don't hold a Kuwaiti passport but who call the country home.

To whit: Ibrahim Fawzy is currently at work on a country focus section on Kuwait, which we hope to see launched in the coming months, with a far more comprehensive look at Kuwaiti literature. Meanwhile

...

10 Kuwaiti books (in English) from the last 10 years:

* **Mai al-Nakib's short-story collection *The Hidden Light of Objects* (2014).** It is really hard to describe this collection of interlinked short stories without using the word luminous, which is a bit silly with a book that's got "light" in the title. But the vivid imagery from the short stories, even eight years



Podcast

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after reading, remains etched in memory.

*** Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*, translated by Jonathan Wright (2015).** This novel won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and it follows a Kuwaiti-Filipino boy who is raised in Kuwait, but never really feels at home there. It tells the story of a young man questioning his identity and we particularly recommend it for older teen readers.

*** Ismail Fahd Ismail's short novel *The Old Woman and the River*, translated by Sophia Vasalou (2019).** This novel, shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (for which Vasalou was a judge), is an immensely moving tale that focuses on an older woman and her donkey, Good Omen, during the Iran-Iraq War. Although not set in Kuwait, like the other novels on this list, it's the only book in translation by the great Ismail Fahd Ismail.

*** Bothayna Al-Essa's *All That I Want to Forget*, translated by Michele Henjum (2019).** This book, an anti-romantic romance novel, follows a young Kuwaiti woman, Fatima, as she tries to establish her selfhood in a context that is trying to suffocate her with other people's ideas on who and how she should be. Also the satirical *Guardian of*

Upcoming Events

SEP
23
5:00 pm -
6:30 pm
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Toorawa**

SEP
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All day
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Superficialities, forthcoming in translation by Sawad Hussain and Ranya Abdelrahman from Restless Books.

* **Layla AlAmmar's debut novel, *The Pact We Made* (2019).** AlAmmar's first novel traces Dahlia's two lives in Kuwait: the one she lives in public, where she is competent and successful and in control, and the very different one she lives at home. Although it is not set in Kuwait, we also strongly recommend AlAmmar's beautiful, thoughtful second novel, *Silence is a Sense*.

* **Saud Alsanousi's novel *Mama Hissa's Mice*, translated by Sawad Hussain (2020).** This novel, by turns tragic and comic, is foregrounded in a dystopian future Kuwait. centers on three unusual friends — Katkout, Fahd, and Sadiq — during wartime. When the novel opens, our narrator, Katkout, is regaining consciousness; we must join him as he tries to figure out what has gone so wrong.

***Taleb Alrefai's *The Mariner*, translated by Russell Harris (2020).** This short, fast-paced novel lovingly tells the story of Kuwait's pearl-fishing industry through one particular, tragic day: February 19, 1979, when a national hero drowned at sea.

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*** Mai al-Nakib's debut novel, *An Unlasting Home* (2022).** This compelling, unsettling novel opens as Sara, a philosophy professor at Kuwait University, is being dragged through the press after she was reported by a student for her teachings. As this present-day story consumes Sara's life, the novel threads in the vibrant stories of Sara's ancestors; as in Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree*, the past opens us to greater possibilities.

***Zahra Marwan's *Where Butterflies Fill the Sky: A Story of Immigration, Family, and Finding Home* (2022).** A beautiful picture book that follows *ArabLit Quarterly* contributor Zahra Marwan and her family's immigration from Kuwait to New Mexico. Ages 3-8.

***Shahd Alshammari's *Head Above Water* (2022).** As I have written elsewhere, "A necessary and beautiful account of life with a sometimes-invisible and unpredictable disability, complicated by both patriarchy and racism, as well as a professor's love letter to the act of teaching and being taught."

Special mention:

***Yacoub Y. Al-Hijji's *Maritime Folklore of Kuwait*, translated by Yousef B. Al-Bader and**

Sayed Issawi Ayoub (2021). These folktales would go up above, although I'm not sure they're available outside Kuwait. Published by the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait.

Also read:

[Banipal magazine's "Kuwait" issue](#), which came out in 2013

And:

[An Excerpt from Bothayna al-Essa's 'Maps of Wandering'](#)

[An Excerpt from Laila AlOthman's Classic 'Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea'](#)

[Layla AlAmmar's "Book Banning in Kuwait: How, Why, & What Comes Next"](#)

['No Sun in the Closed Room': An Exploration of Kuwaiti-Palestinian Identity and Belonging](#)

[An excerpt of Khaled Nasrallah's IPAF-shortlisted novel, *The White Line of Night*](#)

[A Short Story by Mona Al-Shammari: "Black Kohl, White Heart"](#)

[A Short Story by Fatima Yousef al-Ali: "A Man's Staff"](#)