

### 3.1.10 Other UK publishers with Arabic titles

Other UK publishers with Arabic titles in English are:

Quartet

Comma Press

Viking

Serpent's Tail

Bloodaxe

Arc Publications

Telegram

Black Swan

Aflame

Lime Tree

### Websites

eXchanges, Journal of Literary Translation

<http://exchanges.uiowa.edu/hackwork/>

InTranslation at Brooklynrail.org

<http://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/>

New Arabic Books

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/newarabicbooks.htm>

Poetry Translation Centre

<http://www.poetrytranslation.org/>

Transcript — Europe's Online Review of International Writing

<http://www.transcript-review.org/>

Words Without Borders

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/>

## 3.2 Key publishing issues

### 3.2.1 Selection process

Almost without exception the writers, translators and academics interviewed for this study bemoaned the impact of the commercial imperative on the type of Arabic literature chosen for translation and publication by the major presses. Paul Starkey talks of 'an inevitable tendency among publishers to latch on to anything that looks like being the "flavour of the month", regardless of whether it has any literary (or other) merit. But then, they are in business to make money!' Marilyn Booth, the acclaimed translator and scholar of Arabic literature at Edinburgh University, rails eloquently against what she terms the 'orientalist ethnographicism' and 'memoir fixation' at play in the selection, promotion and reviewing of Middle Eastern literatures.<sup>10</sup> As translator Catherine Cobham underlines in an interview for this study, 'Readers as well as publishers tend to go for content above literary/poetic quality in the case of Arabic literature, and look for and comment on how the society and especially religion and gender relations are portrayed in the literature.'

In her essay 'The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Goes on the Road', translator Marilyn Booth says:

What little the mega-publishers have accepted from the realms of translated Arabic

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed, erudite and profound exploration of this notion and this phenomenon, see Booth's essay 'The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Goes on the Road', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6:3 (Fall 2010).

fiction has been strongly subject to the search for commercially successful works and to popular political pressures to produce information about certain identity categories often conflated in public discourse: Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners. Aesthetic grounds have rarely been the basis for choosing texts for publication; rather, domestic political concerns and economic interests have been paramount in this particular literary marketplace.

Because relatively little (though increasingly more) Arabic literature is available in English translation, especially from commercial presses with marketing clout, every choice to translate something—and every choice of how to translate it—is politically loaded.<sup>11</sup>

Interviewed for the British Council's New Arabic Books website in 2007, then Editorial Manager of Garnet Books and Ithaca Press Dan Nunn highlighted the challenges publishers face in the process of selecting, translating and publishing Arabic fiction. 'Because so little has been translated from Arabic to English the biggest problem was finding out enough about authors and their writing to be able to make a decision.'

Nunn describes receiving 'invaluable advice' from a team of academics specializing in Arab literature, who made recommendations about certain authors. '[Zakaria Tamer, Ibrahim Al-Koni and Miral al-Tahawy] already had work translated into English, so I was able to read and appreciate their work from the offset – although in future I hope to be able to also include authors who have not already been translated.'<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the publisher was in this case able to read the author in English before taking them on highlights the role of key players such as *Banipal* and the AUCP as ambassadors of Arabic literature to the UK publishing industry. Given that English is the lingua franca of the international publishing world and these publications are consulted as references by other publishers in this way, their editorial and translation quality takes on an even greater importance in this context.

However, when asked about AUCP's selection process for titles to translate, in the light of these concerns, Neil Hewison described a vigorous and careful selection process, using Arab readers with 'a very good sense of a Western readership', both to suggest titles for publication and to vet recommendations that have come via translators and so on. 'We listen very carefully to people like [the legendary translator and champion of Arabic literature in translation over the last 50 years] Denys Johnson Davies, or [award-winning contemporary translator] Humphrey Davies, but we still go to our local advisors for the final opinion.'

BQFP are seemingly even more passionate about using Arab expert advisors when selecting titles for translation into English. BQFP English books editor Jehan Marei explains:

BQFP's Arabic-speaking advisors are a fundamental part of our selection process, and particularly when the titles under discussion are Arabic-language titles. We regularly consult Arab literary figures for feedback and advice regarding the selection of works to

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<sup>11</sup> Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 6:3 (Fall 2010).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-newarabicbooks-people-interviews.htm> accessed July 2010

be published in their original language as well as in translation, and also in the selection of translators themselves. They play, and will continue to play, a major supporting role in our decision-making process. In addition, the majority of the editorial staff at BQFP, in the Doha and London offices, are bilinguals or near bilinguals.

Haus Arabia Books are also gaining a reputation for being meticulous in their selection process and in their approach to writers. Harry Hall explains that it works in a very informal way as he outlines a model that should be adopted by the bigger corporate publishers.

The advisors are not required to draw up a list of recommended titles but rather will recommend something when they come across it. They're all fully briefed about the kind of books Haus Arabia seek to publish, and have a thorough knowledge of what's being published in the Middle East, literary trends and movements, as well as having an eye on what is being translated into other European languages from Arabic. Needless to say some advisors are more active than others, and we do not always act on their advice, but they provide an important source of information about what is available and which are the emerging talents.

### **3.2.2 Key influences on selection**

Serious concern was also expressed by many respondents – writers and translators alike – about the lack of curiosity and effort on the part of UK publishers when faced with the task of scouting for Arab authors to translate. Information is filtered selectively through certain sources without enough direct reference to native speakers of Arabic familiar with the Arabic literary scene of various countries. The highly acclaimed Lebanese author Hanan al-Shaykh shares her view on the matter of selection of titles to be translated:

I would like to know about a group of judges, a panel, who would choose the best novels to be translated. You seldom find mainstream UK publishers who are willing to use [professional] readers to tell them about books – they just go for something that has already been translated. The Yacoubian Building was already a best-seller in Arabic and doing well in its French translation before it was picked up in the UK.

The apparent reluctance of some publishers to use Arabic speakers as their main advisors on selection is of concern, as is the notion that only a British or American translator/academic is capable of judging whether a book is worthy of translation and suitable for publication, which still seems to have wide currency. The assumption that the Arab world is empty of savvy native literati has the sad consequence that they are not even searched out, and some corporate publishers prefer to approach inexperienced newly graduated British Arabists to give them feedback on Arabic novels they are considering. This is of course also the case with other languages, not just Arabic. Hanan Al-Shaykh is one of many Arabic literary experts who feel that even the judging of the IPAF (known as the Arabic Booker) is not being taken seriously enough and that the winners so far have not accurately represented the best of new Arabic fiction. She would like to see a jury panel established – ‘dignified and judicious, with no agenda’ – to compile an ongoing list of the best new Arabic books for publishers to consult. Despairing at the current

selection process, and the quality of the available resources for publishers to read in English, as discussed above, she says:

I feel like saying to publishers, 'Go and look properly for someone to advise you, and be serious about it — rather than being sloppy about it because it's foreign.' They need to forget about the stories behind the book, the story of the author and so on, and look for good literature! But it's very difficult to find genuine interest from publishers. They should be turning to someone really selective and dedicated to quality, for advice.

Tony Calderbank is one of the more pragmatic (or perhaps more resigned) of the respondents on the subject of the financial constraints under which publishers operate. 'I think the market can only stand so much, so much in translation generally and so much translated from Arabic.' He does mourn the fact that publishing is in the hands of 'global businesses that have ruined the whole concept of a host of good independent book shops with myriads of small publishers all doing their own thing'. He highlights the case of *The Yacoubian Building*, and the very complex process that the publishers went through before it was accepted, the number of people who had to be convinced that it was a commercially viable proposition. 'And then, it having been taken on, the hundreds of thousands that were put into marketing it. This is not going to be happening to many Arab novels in translation.'

However, in contrast to many people in the field, he is happy overall with the Arabic titles that are trickling through into English.

I do think that generally the books that are translated are the ones that are making noises in the Arab world, the controversial best sellers like *Girls of Riyadh* or *The Yacoubian Building* being so widely read in Arabic clearly deserve to be translated so they can be read in English. I don't believe that we should just be translating arty stuff that no one in the Arab world is reading. I also enjoy those arguments about how there is a conspiracy theory and that the West chooses to translate things from Arabic that put the Arab world in a bad light. There will continue to be much discussion about this and it will never be resolved. Every translator I know has choice about what they translate. Even if they don't choose the text themselves and someone offers it to them they still have the choice to translate it or not. I would also say that the novels I am aware of having been translated over the last ten to fifteen years are generally novels worth translating, by a wide range of Arab writers, men and women, of all ages from across the Arab world, representing a decent selection of the literary output of their community.

He acknowledges that it still seems as difficult for an Arab writer to get translated and published as it ever did, but he is hopeful that, if increased funding is made available for activities around Arabic literature in translation, things could improve. 'The recent initiatives like Beirut39 and the Arabic Booker (IPAF) have improved things, perhaps, from the point of view of showcasing Arabic literature. So has the work of the British Council and the Arts Council England with the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT).'

### 3.2.3 Sample translations for publishers

When dealing with previously untranslated authors, publishers are often forced to commission sample translations, a process which is in itself fraught with difficulty. This task should ideally be completed by an experienced translator who is either familiar with the writer's *oeuvre* already or is given the time and expenses to become so. In this ideal scenario the translator is therefore able, even whilst working on a dislocated portion of text, to do it justice. However, several of the writers and translators interviewed for this study have expressed concern that this job is in fact often done on a minimal budget, under great pressure of time, and not by the translator best equipped for the job. There are also very often editorial problems with the source texts due to the widespread lack of supportive editing for Arab writers, which exacerbates the challenge of dealing with texts at this point in their journey north. This aspect of the process of translation is ripe for development, so as to afford the writers a better chance of being accurately heard by their potential publishers, and the publishers a better chance of finding the next Alaa al-Aswany.

In order for these books not to be entirely grant-dependant, sales are obviously necessary. Hanan Al-Shaykh, whose books have not received any subventions: 'Any author, not only an Arab author, needs a little bit of commercial success – if you don't have that, they won't publish you again. So if you're not funded by the Arts Council or someone else, you must sell or you won't get published again. You must sell at least 2,500 - 3,000 copies of a book for it to be fully commercially viable.'

There are of course many titles translated from the Arabic that simply will not sell that quantity in the reality of the UK market and the prevailing cultural climate. Some of the tiny and heavily grant-dependent publishers may only sell 1,000 copies or less of any particular title. These are nevertheless important books and must continue to be funded, not only because those 1,000 copies have incalculable value for their readers, but because funding them is a gesture towards encouraging UK literary tastes to broaden and engage with different aesthetics and narrative structures. It is also important to note that these funded 'marginal' publications can turn out to be highly successful despite their humble beginnings. A good current example of this phenomenon is Hassan Blasim's short story collection *The Madman of Freedom Square*, translated by Jonathan Wright, (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009), and supported by English PEN's Writers In Translation Programme. Overlooked by the Beirut39 selection process and as yet unpublished in Arabic, Finland-based Iraqi writer Blasim was picked up by Comma Press's Lebanese literary advisor. He has since been called 'the best writer of Arabic fiction alive' (Robin Yassin-Kassab, in *The Guardian*<sup>13</sup>) and his book long listed for the 2010 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

### 3.2.4 Translator selection and editorial support

Bloomsbury's Bill Swainson is clearly proud of the intense work and thought that were put into the *Beirut39* anthology. He describes what sounds like an unusually thorough quality monitoring process, with clear echoes of the standards BQFP also apply. He describes spending 'six months working out with Hay and *Banipal*' who were 'the best translators in the field', and looking for 'translators who write really good English'. He also drew on his own knowledge of some of them, having been a judge for the *Banipal*

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/12/beirut-new-writing-arab-world>

Prize. It is worth noting here that Swainson was one of the judges despite not being an arabophone, something he shares with one of *Banipal*'s founding editors. While it could be argued that judging translation from a language to which the judge does not have access would be questionable in the case of European languages, Banipal Prize juries appear to balance knowledge of the source language and high standards of literary and translation erudition.

Swainson elaborates on the editorial process: 'The question is, how can the editor contribute to honouring the intent of the writer in that collaboration with the translator? We used two expert readers on the translations, one for prose (looking at tone and accuracy) and one for poetry (which is the same but more difficult, as there is a bigger gap between the English and the Arabic here). Then it went to an Egyptian in-house editor of ours, who works with BQFP and whose English is superb. So there were very thorough checks and balances right down to the last, in a very tight time period – six weeks.' Certainly this tight time period was of concern to some of the translators of the book in question, with several reporting having felt uncomfortable with the short time given for final drafts. Perhaps it would have been advisable to have spent slightly less time on the search for the translators, and given them more time to work. There was also some frustration expressed by several over lack of access to the authors of the pieces they were working on, which is somewhat surprising in the context of this huge investment by Bloomsbury in translation quality.

Investment is, of course, the key word here, as Swainson acknowledges, referring to being 'lucky' in terms of the 'strong resources' they were able to bring to the project, partly as a result of subventions from English PEN, ACE and the British Council. Clearly, given the extra cost involved in publishing a translation in the first place, funding is essential if publishers are to be able even to consider these elaborate quality control methods. Swainson stresses that publishers are 'beginning to wake up to the Arab world and want to translate it', with the implication that standards could rise, and that 'these procedures could become standard' – but that it depends on who can bring what resources to bear.

Neil Hewison says that AUCP tries to match translators to writers as much as possible – 'if there was an infinite number of them you could do it always!' An important point here of course is that younger translators without second careers are less likely to be able to afford to take on AUCP translations given their pay rates.

Interviewed in 2007 by the British Council, AUCP Director Mark Linz lamented the scarcity of good translators, and of training for them. He noted the lack of a 'tradition' of quality Arabic to English translation as exists in longer-established language pairs. 'We've faced an enormous task finding, encouraging and working with translators these last 20 years. And I'm happy to say there is now a reliable, though rather small, group of really high quality literary translators. Having said all that, we could easily provide up to a dozen more translators with regular work!'

However, with AUCP rates currently running at almost exactly half the Translators Association recommended level, this is clearly not regular work someone could base their career and income on.

### Translation process, editing and quality monitoring

Improving the quality of translations from Arabic can only be done by having more, and more experienced, translators. Peer reviewing and mentoring would no doubt help the younger translators develop their skills. When we translate books from European languages they often need very little editorial work, there's no reason why translations from the Arabic shouldn't be the same. (Harry Hall, Haus Arabia)

Several translators identify the tendency amongst writers to imagine, in their enthusiasm to get their work translated into English, that any translation is better than none. Whilst this perception arises from a fundamental misconception of the art of literary translation, it is a widespread one, and translator Marilyn Booth reports having frequently impressed on writers that it is better to remain untranslated than to be translated badly. Author Hanan al-Shaykh, however, is keenly aware of the importance of how her work is rendered into English, and values her relationship with her longstanding translator Catherine Cobham immensely. Not only does she rate Cobham as a writer in her own right – 'not a mere translator', as she unselfconsciously put it – but as a proof-reader and stylistic editor of her original Arabic texts, given the scarcity of editorial support for Arab writers.

AUCP are sometimes accused of publishing low-quality translations, but Neil Hewison describes turning down a lot of translators, based on their samples, to ensure quality. 'I don't like doing it, but I know I must.' He says that AUCP takes great care but 'of course we're not infallible.' He refers to several cases where AUCP translations have been criticized after translation, 'sometimes rightly so', and how they have worked on correcting errors at the next printing. Ultimately, he feels that the 'vexed issue of voice' and the fact that a translation is only ever an approximation, necessitate the publisher 'accepting that you'll lose something, and aiming to lose the minimum.'

But do older translators from elite cultural backgrounds offer the ideal 'voice' for a young Arab writer who uses very contemporary urban slang and subaltern sociolects? This is an issue which has arisen a lot during this research, not only in the context of Beirut<sup>39</sup>, but of various AUCP titles. Marilyn Booth refers to the 'intersecting levels of the text [which] demand a translation practice that attends to the specificity of cultural usages in a globalized production scene, the clashing of languages (less a "clash of cultures" here than a "clash in culture"), and the myriad sources of youth speech'.<sup>14</sup> But this translation practice does not always seem to be forthcoming in print.

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<sup>14</sup> Booth, 'Translator v. Author (2007): Girls of Riyadh go to New York'. Translation Studies 1:2 (July 2008): 197-211.

### 3.2.5 Editing process

The role of copy-editors cannot be overestimated; yet translators often complain either about a complete lack of editing, or of over-zealous editing which borders on re-writing, without any substantiation, let alone consultation with the translator.

A good copy-editor (which in my view means someone who combines a 'light touch' with a good feel for the work in question) can be a tremendous asset. A bad one, on the other hand, can be a disaster. One of my translations was once given to a copy-editor who was neither an Arabic nor an English native speaker, and who proceeded to rewrite the work, including changing paragraphs around, in order to structure the work in a more logical, less modernist, way. I was not amused, especially as the translation had already been vetted by the author! (Paul Starkey, translator)

### Lack of Arabic editorial culture?

Translating and editing translations sometimes extends to editing the original. Hanan Al-Shaykh describes the collaborative process she has developed with her translator Catherine Cobham, who starts her translation by editing the original. This seemingly unusual practice is actually common in the Arabic context and adds an extra dimension to the task of the Arabic-to-English translator, who is very likely to be working on a text which has had no input beyond the author's. The translator therefore has to be on the look-out for problems ranging from the mundane – typos, omissions, repetition, mixed-up names, actions that do not quite add up – to the potentially profound questions of structure, pace, length, and so on. All of these are problems which might reasonably be expected to have been dealt with prior to publication of the original text. So should translators routinely be expected to have the skill and the time to do this as a normal part of their job? Indeed, are they even necessarily the best people to be editing the original Arabic text?

Lack of editorial culture is one of the problems that are being addressed by publisher training opportunities that have recently appeared in the Arab world, alongside other problems pervasive in the industry, such as copyright issues – *vis-à-vis* local and foreign authors, as well as translators into Arabic. Training for Arab publishers has been in recent years offered by various institutions and companies, both European (British Council, Goethe-Institut, Frankfurt Book Fair) and local, for instance training offered by Kitab, the company managing the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. The Goethe-Institut in Cairo has, for example, provided training aimed at future publishing trainers, while Kitab has established a series of training courses for publishers addressing wider questions of running a publishing business and marketing. Kitab and the Abu Dhabi Book Fair have also pledged to address the problem of piracy, still rife in Arab publishing.

## 4 Dissemination and reception

### 4.1 Print runs and re-editions



Publishers are usually loathe to talk to researchers about print runs in specific terms, as the numbers can be all too clearly indicative of their expectations of a book's success and of the press's financial clout, market share and distribution possibilities. This can also be a sensitive issue with authors, touching on contractual issues. Whilst this secrecy is entirely understandable, it does fan the flames of suspicion around grant-dependent titles not being properly distributed or allowed to go out of print. The vexed question here is, does being on a list of grant-awards and in a bibliography mean a title is actually available to the reader? This is a key point, connected closely to the issue of grant dependence, that is of serious concern. There is anecdotal evidence of subsidized books having minuscule print runs, quickly disappearing and not making it into library holdings. Closer scrutiny of subsidized books, their print-runs and distribution patterns is clearly called for, as is the development of measures supporting marketing and promotion.

AUCP's Neil Hewison, however, was happy to discuss numbers:

There's no need to be shy about it! Our standard print run is fairly conservative, 1,000 in hardback (unless it's a Mahfouz or al-Aswany title). Whilst we do let some titles in other areas of our list such as economics drift out of print, with literature our intention is to keep it all in print. So if the initial hard back print-run of 1,000 sells out in a year we might do another 1,000 hardbacks — with the marketing department carefully considering the market on a case by case basis. But if it takes a couple of years (or even five, as it can) to sell the first 1,000 copies, we go straight into paperback. And that would be another 1,000 initially, then after that we reprint when they run out.

In response to comments that titles are allowed to go out of print, Hewison says:

A few titles have gone out of print, but certainly not recently! In the last 10 - 12 years we haven't been letting things go out of print unless there's a contractual rights issue that prevents us from reissuing the book, as was the case with a Yusuf Idris volume we no longer had rights to, so it was out of our hands. But so long as we are legally able to, we keep things in print.

According to Saqi's sales manager Ashley Biles, the print run for a Saqi Arabic translation can depend on various factors such as the format, support from UK retailers, and the likelihood of sales outside the UK.

We recently published 1,000 copies of a Saudi title in trade paperback format, a small figure for us, but we did not have US rights and the book had been widely available in the Middle East in Arabic. More typically we might look at a print run of between 2,000 and 3,000 copies, the higher figure if we thought we could get UK retail support from the chains, or we had US rights, or we felt there were extra sales to be had in Europe or the Middle East. And there are books for which we expect low interest, but which we feel need to be in print. Naturally I am loathe to quote specific examples, but recent print runs are more likely to be around 2,000 copies, but as I say we would expect to sell copies in the Middle East as well as the UK on this kind of figure.

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It is interesting to note that Saqi's best-selling book in translation from Arabic, already into a second re-print, has been a bilingual volume of Arabic short stories (*Modern Arabic Short Stories: A Bilingual Reader*), which Biles says has been bought heavily in the UK and in US as a teaching aid in universities. 'We received no funding for this title at all. It can be done.'

Haus Arabia's Harry Hall was a little more guarded on numbers, saying that their print runs vary from '1,000 to 5,000, depending on pre-publication dues and promotions in Smiths or Waterstones'.

Small independent 'traditional' publishers can feel threatened by the rise of digital print and of print on demand (POD) publishers. In the words of the head of a small and precarious press, this enables some of his competitors to 'only bring out twenty copies at a time, enabling them to publish more titles per year, and look like much bigger presses as a result'.

Some titles have however gone into re-editions, for example Denys Johnson Davies's collection of short stories *Under The Naked Sky*. His unique reputation as a translator and as a selector of Arabic literature mean his work is, for many, the first and most reliable port of call. His translation of the seminal Sudanese writer Tayyeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* also continues to be reissued, having become established as one of the most provocative, arresting and challenging East-West fables in modern world literature.

*Memory in the Flesh* by Ahlam Mustaganami, a racy, accomplished Algerian novel and a best-seller across the Arab world, manages a skilled combination of linguistic experimentation and profound themes, whilst remaining accessible to a mass youth audience. Sexually explicit, politically daring, and lyrically written by a radical and charismatic young woman, it was significantly mistranslated by its first translator for AUCP, as acknowledged by Neil Hewison. AUCP then commissioned a retranslation by a senior British translator, producing a work which has in turn been criticized for employing an old-fashioned and inappropriate register for this very contemporary work. The book has survived all this, however, propelled presumably by the fame of the original and that of its female Muslim rebel author to sell well in English.<sup>15</sup>

Hanan al-Shaykh's *Only In London*, translated by Catherine Cobham, is a seminal Lebanese 'East-West' saga, depicting a multi-layered London with intersecting Arab and British lives, and featuring arguably the most complex portrait of a Western man by a female Arab writer ever. Masterfully translated by Cobham via an unusually dedicated collaborative engagement with the author and published by Bloomsbury, the novel has gained a substantial if elite British readership and gone into several re-editions.

### **Sales, bookshop and library uptake and shelf-life, and attitudes towards Arabic fiction**

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<sup>15</sup> For an eloquently argued and illuminating exploration of the marketing of the celebrity Muslim woman author, see Marilyn Booth's forthcoming essay 'The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Goes on the Road' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6:3 (Fall 2010).

I think realistically the market [for Arabic literature in translation] is fairly small, although I hope that current world events will mean that there is also a more general interest from the wider public. Certainly the books from Garnet's earlier Arab Women Writer's series [...] did quite well! Perhaps you should ask me again in a year's time. (2007 interview with then Executive Editor of Garnet, Dan Nunn<sup>16</sup>)

In summer 2010 he assessed the situation as follows:

Unfortunately, I ended up being quite disappointed at how things went. As a small press we found it very difficult to get much attention from the press or retailers which would have helped bring the series to the attention of the wider public. Where we did get interest it tended to be from people who already had an interest in Arabic literature — such as Middle Eastern papers and journals, specialist bookstores, etc — so I ended up feeling like we were preaching to the converted.

Senior editor at Comma Press Ra Page on bookshop uptake:

Individual booksellers — on a shop by shop level — aren't usually allowed to decide themselves what gets bought in, these days anyway. The repping goes centrally to head office, and there all translated fiction (except for Larsson-lookalikes) gets treated as unsellable. Arabic fiction is no worse or better than French fiction, say, or Spanish fiction.

Ashley Biles confirms Arabic writing is not being singled out here:

There's no particular struggle with the promotion of the Arabic books over all, no particular prejudice against it — it's a general prejudice against all translated literature! Shelf life is determined by sales, so shops return the books to us if they don't sell quickly. To sell books we need a virtuous circle of coverage provoking interest provoking more coverage and so on.

Some of the publishers interviewed here acknowledge that the larger chains do cater to the constituency of a particular branch to some extent — so the Kensington High Street branch of Waterstones tends to stock more Arabic translations than Eastbourne, for example. There is a sense that the buyers need to be persuaded, case by case, and that although they always have to justify whatever they take on to their own manager, this can sometimes be done. Of course this is a greater challenge for the independent publishers — as Saqi's Ashley Biles puts it, 'We do get good access to shops, but as a small independent we are up against the huge marketing budgets of corporate publishers.'

What can the corporate publishers buy with their big marketing budgets? £200 plus VAT turns a book around from spine-on to facing in a shop; to get a book on a table, or in a '3 for 2' offer, or near a point of sale is much more expensive; and to get a book into a shop window is well beyond the independent

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-newarabicbooks-people-interviews.htm>

publisher's budget. Even Bloomsbury, publishers of JK Rowling and therefore seen by many of the smaller publishers as the archetypal big-budget house, turned to English PEN for marketing subventions for the *Beirut39* anthology. Part of the money they were awarded paid for a 3-page 'presenter' (promotional flyer for bookshops) for the anthology, which was a key marketing tool. Bill Swainson explains that, whilst an anthology of new Arabic writing would 'make most booksellers say, "Not for me," with this one they could see at a glance that here was something with serious backing — and so they supported it.' Building 'the whole thing as a package for the bookseller', is really, from this perspective, what publishing means, and 'we will go on publishing *Beirut39* very actively for the next two or three years.' The book will therefore have a 'life-span' of about 5 years, and for Swainson the subventions are therefore justified. While being quick to acknowledge that the project is 'not the be all and end all', he does see it as significant for boosting Arabic literature's place in the world market, for translation quality and so on. This view of funding money being well-directed in this case is of course not shared by all the smaller houses, hungry for funding to cover even basic publishing costs, and not even dreaming of producing glossy presenters for their publications. Neither is it shared by those in the field who were uncomfortable with the selection and judging process for *Beirut39* and the concentration of power in the hands of a few 'usual suspects' that it suggests. For the very small and highly grant-dependent publishers, competing in this market can seem impossibly challenging.

Ashley Biles has a more measured take on this:

Compared to 20 years ago, Waterstones' buyers are not encouraged to take many risks. In their heyday they would take all sorts of risky books, and sell loads of them. And once you narrow the range a shop will take it affects all sides. There is a corporate approach to bookselling nowadays, with accountants in charge — Waterstones would rather sell 200,000 copies of a Jade Goody memoir than worry about carrying a huge range of books. So everything else suffers: poetry, translations, unusual fiction, and so on.

This built-in conservatism in stockists, he explains, is a reflection of the 'resistance to fiction in the wider market place', which he is keen to emphasize is not just the fault of the individual shops, rather that 'they fill shelves according to what sells.' As both Biles and Page highlight with the best-selling examples they use, memoir-fixation is not just at play in the selection of Arabic or Eastern works for translation, as we have seen, but in the wider mass literature market.

As Bloomsbury's Bill Swainson told the participants of the British Council Translation Workshops in Cairo in January 2010, during his session on pitching potential Arabic books for English translation to publishers: 'Avoid talking about the book as an intellectual and an academic would; you must beam it up onto the planet where people go shopping, and answer the question "Why does this matter to someone in Sainsbury's in Watford?"'

But the answer is that most of the books relevant to this study do not matter to that particular consumer. Which is why Bloomsbury publish only a handful of translations per year, why translated literature usually

does not make it onto the shelves of Waterstones, and why the small presses that make up the majority of our bibliography are so dependent on various forms of subsidy. Presumably this is also why the Bloomsbury *Beirut*<sup>39</sup> anthology was marketed with the support of English PEN's Writers In Translation programme: it is a book that remains on the 'planet' where people read foreign literature in translation, and as such, it is emphatically not a supermarket product.

#### **A middle way?**

We can see the two extreme ends of publishing on display here. On the one hand, the corporate model which finds commercial publishers so duty-bound to their shareholders that they take no risks. At the other end of the spectrum are the tiny and non-commercial publishers seeking to get their entire cost covered who, it is argued by many in the industry, need to become somewhat more commercial. It seems that a middle way is the ideal, as perhaps represented by Saqi, Haus Arabia and others. It is also important to reiterate that literature is a cultural, not a commercial, product.

Is then the 'market-led' selection process an immutable fact of twenty-first century UK publishing? Should our choice of world literature be dictated by notions of supermarket stock and a presumed lowest common denominator of literary taste? A refreshing perspective is brought to the debate by Caroline McCormick, the former Executive Director of International PEN and founder of the world literature festival, Free the Word! Today she is a consultant working on a glittering array of high-level arts projects<sup>17</sup> and is in the process of launching an Arabic literary translation initiative. McCormick rejects the way literature has been singled out among art forms in the UK for commodification: 'No other art form is as embroiled in its commercial side as literature is – so it is terribly underfunded compared to visual arts, dance, music, theatre and so on.' She also stresses the need for the industry to 're-brand the product' and stop referring to it as 'literary translation': 'Literary translation is an internal shorthand the industry needs to escape! We've got to start talking about 'the best in world literature' instead. Then the question to the public becomes, "Do you want to be able to read the best books in the whole world?"'

When McCormick set up the festival Free the Word! she brought together many venues across London and 'got them working together for the first time, and realized in the process that this is what can happen in a crisis – like minds come together and collaborate.' She is hopeful that the current funding crisis could lead to a new way of approaching world literature: 'Literature has backed itself into a corner financially ... [but] there could be a positive side to these lean times!'

#### **4.1.1 Theatre and radio productions**

Productions of foreign plays – whether on stage or on the radio – are rare in the UK and productions of Arabic plays even rarer. There is no database of translated texts produced on the radio or on stage, and all research for this section has consisted of anecdotal input. There were no reports of any radio readings or plays in our period, except a reading of *The Cairo Trilogy* by Mahfouz on BBC Radio 4 in 2006, on the occasion of his death, and a dramatization of the trilogy, recorded in Cairo with Omar Sharif, was broadcast in March 2011.

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<sup>17</sup> (see <http://beyondborders2010.com/about-beyond-borders/behind-the-organisation/> for a short biography)