

What to Read Next?

Within the world of Arab American literature, *The Corpse Washer* is fairly unique as a translation. Nonetheless, it fits into the corpus based on its attention to language and the interplay between aesthetic practice and professional vocation. The works below either explore these themes explicitly within the prose or call attention to these topics as a matter of craft – sometimes both.

AN UNNECESSARY WOMAN

By Rabih Alameddine
(Grove Press, 2014)

Reclusive Beirut resident Aaliya Saleh is divorced, childless, and godless. But she does have her books, which she devours, stockpiles, and translates into Arabic, and her memories. That is, until a crisis threatens to disrupt her quiet life.

THE NIGHT COUNTER

By Alia Yunis
(Crown, 2009)

Shifting between the U.S. and Lebanon, modern drama and magical realism, Alia Yunis' novel introduces a host of memorable Arab American characters through the eyes of family matriarch and master storyteller Fatimah Abdullah.

BREAKING POEMS

By Suheir Hammad
(Cypher Books, 2008)

Using “break” as a trigger for every poem, Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad deconstructs, constructs, and reconstructs the English language for readers to hear the sound of a breath, a woman's body, a land, a culture, falling apart, broken, and put back together again.

2014

ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

The Arab American Book Award is a literary program created to honor books written by and about Arab Americans. The program, managed by the Russell J. Ebeid Library & Resource Center at the Arab American National Museum, generates greater awareness of Arab American scholarship and writing through an annual award competition and educational outreach. Learn more about past and present winners at arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward.

The goal of the Reading & Discussion Guide project is to increase the audience for Arab American literature and stimulate discussion about the winning books' themes and topics.

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2014

ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

Fiction Award Winner



READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



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ARAB AMERICAN
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**The Corpse Washer**by Sinan Antoon
Yale University Press

SUMMARY

The Corpse Washer follows the life of Jawad, an artist born into a family of Shi'ite corpse washers in Iraq. For Jawad's father, for whom washing the dead is less a vocation and more a calling, the act is a way of amassing God's favor. Jawad attempts to follow his chosen vocation by attending art school at Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts. Though he falls in love and intends to wed, circumstance prevents him from fulfilling his dreams and his desire to live a life dedicated to art.

In the wake of rising death tolls in Iraq after the conflicts in the early 1990s and early 2000s, death feels like a persistent presence. Jawad seeks another way to earn a living that does not involve washing corpses at the *mghaysil*. However, he finds himself in the profession of his father, reckoning with what it means to prepare the dead for burial, and commune through them with the divine.

Sinan Antoon beautifully translates the English from the Arabic. His novel provides rapturous detail with an eye toward the way mundane life in a time of war can become the fodder for dreams and nightmares.

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

- 1. *The Corpse Washer* includes an incredible amount of detail. Do you think Jawad's intricate descriptions come from his training as an artist or a corpse washer?**
- 2. Much of the novel includes flashback as a narrative device. How does this complement the constant presence of death?**
- 3. Giacometti appears and reappears as a figure in Jawad's life and dreams. Why do you think Jawad gravitates toward this sculptor even when he is no longer working as an artist?**
- 4. The pomegranate tree appears as a reminder of death and of Reem's surgically removed breast. What do you think the pomegranates represent?**
- 5. How did the dream sequences affect your reading of the story? Why might the novel begin with one of them?**
- 6. Jawad cannot answer the *Ghayda'* when she asks him why he lets her go. What answer do you think is true? What answer does the novel suggest he has?**
- 7. Love and sex only surface tangentially in this novel and Jawad consistently loses loves. Discuss the way Jawad's intimate relationships with women influence the novel.**
- 8. *The Corpse Washer* is Sinan Antoon's own translation from the Arabic. Yet, he chooses to leave some words untranslated. Why do you think that is? What does it do to the novel?**
- 9. Some fans have written fictive endings for the novel. What alternative ending might you provide for Jawad?**

About The Author



SINAN ANTOON is an Iraqi-born poet, novelist, filmmaker, and Associate Professor at New York University. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Baghdad (1990) and graduate degrees from Georgetown and Harvard Universities.

He has written three novels and one collection of poetry. His film *About Baghdad* (2003) examines the atmosphere after the fall of Saddam Hussein and in the early months of United States occupation. He not only translates his own work, but also has translated Mahmoud Darwish, Toni Morrison, and Saadi Youssef.

He co-founded and co-edits *Jadaliyya*, an independent e-zine that provides "local knowledge, scholarship, and advocacy" for its global audience. He is also on the editorial board for the *Arab Studies Journal*.

You can follow him on Twitter at @sinanantoon.

Other Works by the Author

**THE POETICS OF THE OBSCENE IN
PREMODERN ARABIC POETRY:**

IBN AL-HAJJAJ AND SUKHF
(Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014)

YA MARYAM

(Dar al-Jamal, 2012)

THE BAGHDAD BLUES

(Harbor Mountain Press, 2007)

I'JAAM: AN IRAQI RHAPSODY

(City Lights, 2007)