
History of Muslim Literature

Naguib Mahfouz: The father of Arabic literature

Modern Arabic Literature

Top 10 Muslim Writers and Poets



ISLAM & LITERATURE



A new tradition in Islamic literature—meaning literature by Muslim writers—has begun. This new tradition began with the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. ”

About the MWL

The Muslim World League is a non-governmental international organization based in Makkah. Its goal is to clarify the true message of Islam.

Crown Prince Faisal, the third son of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, founded the Muslim World League during the meeting of the general Islamic Conference on May 18, 1962, in order to fulfill his dream for an Islamic Ummah. The establishment of the MWL continued the vision of the Crown Prince to enlighten and educate the international Muslim community, which began with the founding of the Islamic University of Madinah in 1961. The Muslim World League has grown into a worldwide charity to which the Saudi Royal Family remain active donors.

Ascending to the throne as King Faisal in November 1964, the Saudi leader remained steadfast in his faith, proclaiming: “I beg of you, brothers, to look upon me as both brother and servant. ‘Majesty’ is reserved to God alone and ‘the throne’ is the throne of the Heavens and Earth.”



Contents

Volume 50 | Issue 11

1. Activities in Review	
Key Events for the Muslim World League	4
2. Letter from the Editor	7
3. Editorial Leaders	
History of Muslim Literature	8
The Quran: A Bedrock of Arabic Language and Literature	11
4. Feature Essays	
Naguib Mahfouz: The father of Arabic literature	13
Hassan bin Thabit: A Poet for Prophet Muhammad and Islam	16
Al-Mutanabbi Street	18
5. Historical Essay	
Modern Arabic Literature	22
6. Cultural Essays	
Top 10 Muslim Writers and Poets	24
Contemporary Novels by Muslim Authors	28



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Muslim World League

Recent Activities in Review



Dr. Al-Issa joined the former Croatian President and peace activist, Mrs. Kolinda Kitarovic, and religious, intellectual, parliamentary, and international leaders in a conference titled, "Strengthening Friendship and Cooperation between Nations and Peoples."

Dr. Al-Issa received a French delegation that included the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Christian Cambon, the President of the Defense and Armed Forces Committee, Françoise Dumas, and the Chairman of the NA Foreign Affairs Committee, Jean-Louis Bourlanges.



Dr. Al-Issa hosted the Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Sweden to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mr. Eric Salemgren von Schantz. A number of issues of common interest were discussed during the meeting.





Dr. Al-Issa met with the Ambassador of France for the Mediterranean region, Mr. Karim Amalal.

Dr. Al-Issa attended an event in Paris on the Paris Peace and Solidarity Agreement, where an action plan was discussed to promote peace and harmony among national societies. The delegation welcomed religious and academic institutions to the agreement



Dr. Al-Issa and Ronald Lauder briefed UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, on the important interfaith work being done by the MWL & the World Jewish Congress and further plans to promote tolerance & understanding worldwide.



Dr. Al-Issa met with American muftis, imams, and other leaders in Washington, DC, to discuss Islamic affairs and preparations to enact the contents of the Charter of Makkah within societal and official frameworks.

Dr. Al-Issa met with a delegation of American evangelical leaders in Washington, D.C., to review the contents of the Charter of Makkah and its purpose to establish community and global harmony.



Dr. Al-Issa was hosted by Yeshiva University in New York City, where he gave a lecture on several contemporary issues and described the provisions laid out in the Charter of Makkah. He was also honored for his efforts in spreading peace and fighting hatred.





There is a boom today in Islamic literature, and contemporary Muslim writers are producing works that reflect new experiences and new influences. The Muslim diaspora that began in earnest after the Second World War and has accelerated over the last 60 years has proven to be a rich vein, and young writers living in Europe and North America have mined it for literary gold. Some writers now reflect on life and experiences in Islamic societies after having lived overseas, and others are looking deeply into the experience of living in modern Muslim societies struggling with balancing modernism with traditional ways.

A new tradition in Islamic literature—meaning literature by Muslim writers—has begun. This new tradition began with the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. He is perhaps the father of the modern Muslim novel and is perhaps the most prolific Muslim writer of all time. Over the span of 70 years, he produced 35 novels, more than 350 short stories, 26 movie scripts and seven plays. All of his works were set in Egypt.

What is more astonishing is that novels and plays were not part of the Arabic literary tradition up to that time. Mahfouz changed all that, and today's young writers have seized the opportunity to tell that story.

That is not to say that there is no Islamic—or Arabic—literary tradition. There certainly is, but for centuries, Islamic and Arabic literature largely consisted of poetry. Prose writing was the province of Muslim scientists, mathematicians and administrators, who produced abundant works.

For all that time, Arabic-language literature was inspired, defined and even confined by the Quran. The Quran long has been considered the pure embodiment of Arabic linguistic expression, perfect in its execution and so

beautiful that it surely was the revealed word of God. No mere mortal could produce that perfection. It became the lodestar for Arabic and Islamic writing, inspiring writers to strive for something that was pure and ultimately unattainable, yet well worth the struggle. With the Quran as a standard, Arabic, Turkish and other Islamic writers produced many volumes of beautiful poetry over the centuries—histories, allegories and stories told in poetic form, philosophical explorations of love and life, and epic poems written over a lifetime.

Today's Muslim authors are seizing that tradition and the modern one that began with Naguib Mahfouz. But today's Islamic writing also reflects the Western tradition in story telling—novels and films produced in Europe, Asia and the Americas. In a very real sense, the Muslim novel fits well in an international tradition in which wisdom and experiences are shared, internalized and understood. Learning the experiences of others—as an eyewitness or through books and film—helps one understand one's own world, and that helps produce richer writing.

We may debate in the future what makes a novel "Islamic" or Muslim. Is it the author? Is it the subject matter? Need an Islamic novel even touch on religious themes if the characters are Muslims? Certainly, many of these modern Muslim writers who live in non-Muslim countries will be claimed as American, Canadian, British or French, which they are. We can also welcome non-Muslim writers who sensitively write of Islamic themes or create Muslim characters. The expanding world of Muslim literature embraces these trends as force that is bringing people together in understanding and compassion, which is how it should be.

The Editors



In Islam, The Quran is considered a sacred scripture and has the greatest literary value as God's word. In early times, its content was transmitted only orally.

History of Muslim Literature

The historical development of Islamic literature over the years is highly complex due to the vast area where literary works have been created. It is, therefore, an inexhaustible source of research by literary scholars all over the world.

Islamic literature evolved from the Arabic oral tradition of storytelling, which dates to before the 4th century. At that time, genres like melancholic qasidas celebrated daily Bedouin life in the desert. As Islam started spreading through the Middle East in the 7th century, poetry was no longer the dominant form of literary expression, and the Quran became the lodestar of Islamic literature.

Although today Muslim literature can be in any language, it was first written exclusively in Arabic, the official language of the Quran. Because Islam's sacred scripture was valued as the word of God and represented the manifestation of the most beautiful literary expression, the Quran was not translated to other languages, where it was believed meaning and beauty of expression would be lost. All Muslims had to learn to read Arabic to some extent in order to read the Quran. It is worth noting that the word "quran" means "recitation," so in early times, its content was transmitted orally. The first transcribed copies of the Quran were done under Uthman ibn Affan.



Islamic Literature was initially created only in Arabic. With the expansion of the Islamic Empire, Muslim literature was enriched by different cultures and languages. In the photo, a child is learning to read the Quran in a Mosque in Thailand.

Between the 7th and 11th centuries, significant works of poetry and prose were produced in Arabic. However, Islamic literature started flourishing in different parts of the world as the Muslim expansion progressed. The great Islamic Empire was ruled by three caliphates, which marked the following periods of Islamic literature: Rashidun Caliphate period (632–661), the Umayyad (661–750), and the Abbasid (750–1258).

Persian Influence and Asia

After Islam spread to Iran beginning in 640, Islamic literature became enriched by Persian influence. It developed new themes, forms and genres, including epic poetry mirroring the lyrical character of the Persian language. Some of the most prominent Persian writers of that time included Firdawsi (Abu al-Qa-

sem Mansur), Awhad ad-Din ‘Ali (known as Anvari), al-Biruni, Omar Khayyám, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, Sa‘di, and Amir Khosrow. Firdawsi’s (940-1019/1025) most famous work, the epic poem *Shahnameh* is widely considered a literary masterpiece that embodies the ethnonational cultural identity of Iran.

Persian culture, however, was stretching far beyond the borders of Iran and included today’s Pakistan and parts of India. By the 11th century, Delhi and Agra became literary centers of that region. Turkish-speaking people of Central Asia expanded Islamic works of literature. The area became part of the Muslim Empire after 711, and some of the meaningful works of Islamic literature were written in the Uzbek, Tatar, and Kyrgyz languages. Smaller fragments of Muslim content, in Chinese, were found in China and the Philippines.

Islamic influence is also reflected in the literature of Malaysia and some African languages, including Swahili.



Firdawsi was one of the most prominent poets of the Abbasid Period in Islamic Literature. He is known for bringing to Muslim literature the cultural identity of Iran.

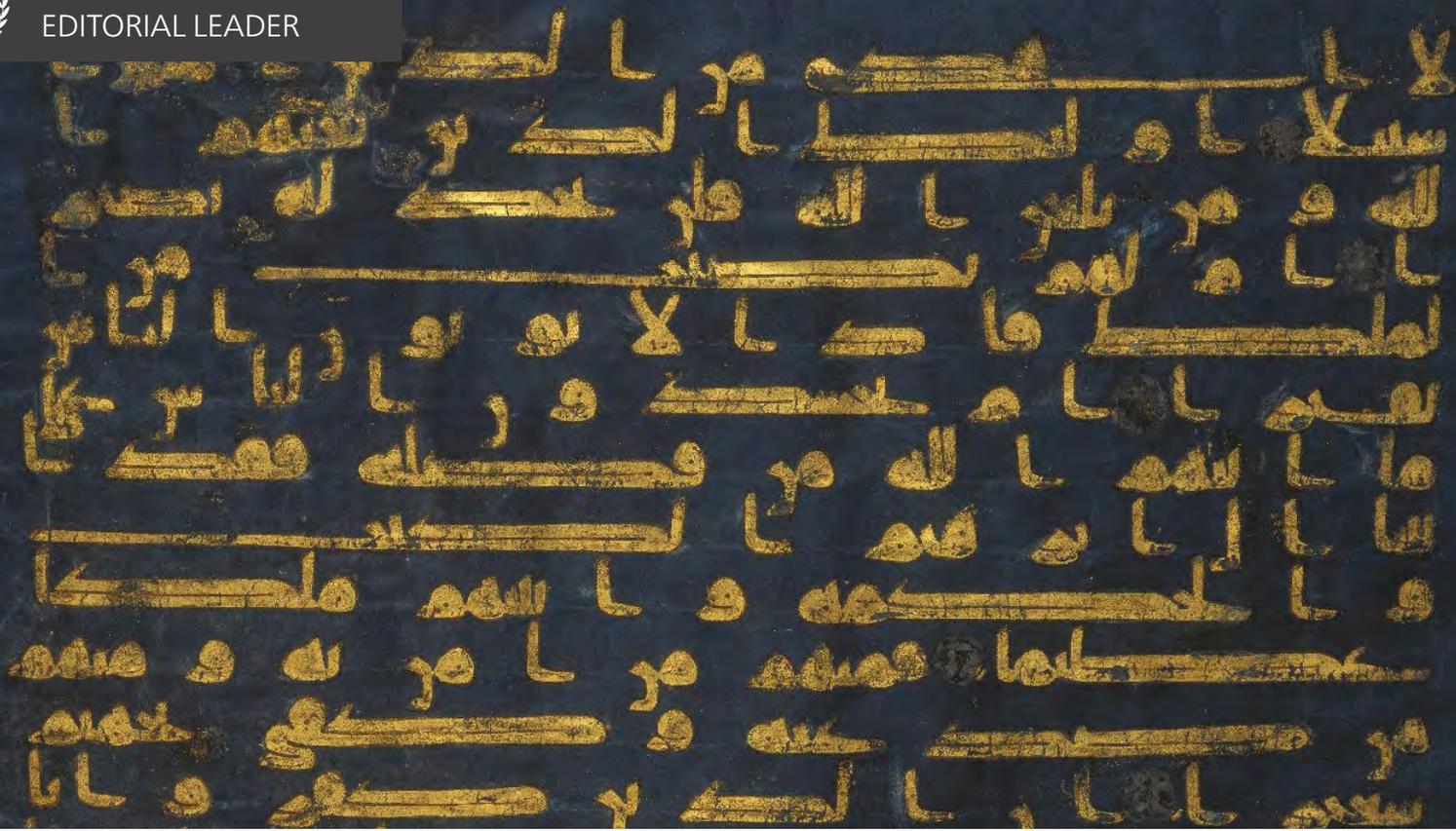
Spain to North and West Africa

The western part of the Islamic Empire was home to some of the greatest names in Muslim literature.

After the 9th century, Islamic scholars from North Africa made substantial contributions to scientific literature. Among them was the geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi (1100 – 1165), who created an advanced medieval world map titled *Tabula Rogeriana*. Moreover, his book *The Delight of Him Who Wishes to Traverse the Regions of the World* made history as one of the the great works of medieval geography and cartography.

A native of North Africa, Ibn Battutah (1304-1368/1369), is regarded as one of the most prominent travelers of his time. He explored the Far East, India and parts of Africa. It is estimated that Ibn Battutah traversed about 75,000 miles and visited almost every Muslim country. His voyages resulted in a book *Rihlah* (Travels), an unprecedented source of information about the medieval Muslim world.

Muslim literature continued to develop—and flourish—with the twilight of the Islamic Empire. Its sheer geographic and thematic vastness has made it difficult to categorize over the centuries, and Islamic literature defies unambiguous classification even today. The term can be understood as every literary work created by Muslim writers across the world. Therefore, its genres, types, and subjects vary tremendously and reflect their authors' life experiences and creative potential depending on geographic latitude.



Folio from the "Blue" Quran. Brooklyn Museum.

The Quran:

A Bedrock of Arabic Language and Literature

Beyond its spiritual, theological, and legislative guidance, the Quran is an anchor of the Arabic language and a touchstone in literature. Its lasting effects have reverberated throughout Arabic culture.

As the first book on record composed in the Arabic language, the significance of the Quran to linguistics is paramount. The advent of it was itself a catalyst for the proliferation of the Arabic language, and its spread would have sweeping effects on the status, content, structure, and evolution of the language. On one hand, Arabic provided a very effective medium for communicating the message of the religion. On the other, Islam helped Arabic

acquire a universal status that has persisted since the Middle Ages, culminating in its position as one of the principal world languages.

Before the rise of Islam, Arabic was mainly a spoken language with an oral literature of elaborate poetry. Memorization was still the most common means of preserving the literature. Pre-Islamic Arabs took great pride in oration, and eloquence was a requisite for social prominence. The art of the spoken word and the ability to compose articulate prose were a primary form of artistic expression in Bedouin culture. Poets enjoyed a prominent status as artists, entertainers, journalists, historians, and were the spokesmen for their tribes.

From a linguistic point of view, the revelation of the Quran was the most important event in the history of the Arabic language. There is consensus among past and present scholars that it is unmatched in elegance and precision. Al-Jawziyya, a noted scholar, said, "Whoever knows Arabic and is acquainted with lexicography, grammar, rhetoric, and Arabic poetry and prose recognizes ipso facto the supremacy of the Quran."

The eloquence of the Quran was so impressive and overwhelming to people at the time that it became a proof point in itself for followers of the new religion. It was considered so perfectly arranged and composed that it was beyond what any mere mortal could create. This explains why the Quran has been referred to as "Muhammad's miracle," or as the "miracle of Islam." The power of the Quran as a means of persuasion was admitted by the Prophet himself (PBUH) and was mentioned repeatedly in the Quran.

Another important aspect of the Quran is its linguistic impact on the form and content of the Arabic language. It was due to the desire to preserve the Quran that efforts were made to develop and refine the Arabic alphabet. It was within the same context that Abu l-Aswad al-Du'ali developed the dot system in the first century of the Islamic era in an attempt to lay the basis for Arabic grammatical theory. The Quran gave Arabic a form and precision, as well as new locutions, complex concepts, and meanings. The Quran enriched the lexicon of the language by bringing new vocabulary and expressions into use, including introducing loan-words from foreign languages. It also presented a firm set of linguistic standards and directions that were instru-

mental in the subsequent documentation of Arabic grammar.

In form the Quran is neither poetry nor prose, as it does not observe the meter and rhyme of poetry, and it is not composed in the same manner as prose. The Quran consists of verses that vary in length depending on their theme and the occasion for which they were revealed, and the selection of words results in varying reading speeds, which render the verses more effective. Another aspect of the novelty of the Quranic language has to do with its themes, which represent a clear departure from those that had been familiar to Arabs at that time.

The art of narrative style is another novel aspect of the Quran. The Quran's elaborate stories include theme, plot, well-developed characters and conclusion. Using illustrations, imagery and metaphors, the Quran presented novel themes through countless examples and figures of speech in place of simple words, all aimed at persuasion. The Quran is the first documentation of the sentence patterns of Arabic, and was instrumental in the documentation of Arabic grammar, which began in the first Islamic century. The strong interest in Quranic studies propelled an interest in Arabic language studies.

The revelation of the Quran in the seventh century CE helped the Arabic language acquire an international status that continues today. As the first book written in the Arabic language, it set stylistic precedents which influenced trends in subsequent generations. Beyond its intrinsic tie to Islam, Arabic has emerged as means of cultural and national revival across the Arab world.





Naguib Mahfouz in Cairo, 1989.

Naguib Mahfouz:

The father of Arabic literature

Naguib Mahfouz, a name that resounds across the Arab world, was widely regarded as the “father of Arabic literature” and the “Arab world’s foremost novelist.” In 1988, he became the first Arab writer to receive the Nobel Prize, and the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature was later established in 1996 to honor Arabic writers who had, and would, come after him. Mahfouz would go on to write 33 novels, 13 anthologies of short stories, several plays, and 30 screenplays before his passing in 2006.

Born in Cairo in 1911, Mahfouz was the youngest of seven children of a minor civil

servant. He had a humble upbringing and came of age in a time of intense nationalist activity. Mahfouz began to study literature in high school, where he devoured works by the likes of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Kafka and developed a passion for writing and a wide range of literary interests. Within a few years following his graduation from the University of Cairo, he had completed 80 short stories and soon published his first collection, *A Whisper of Madness*, in 1938. This first publication opened the door for him to explore other literary genres, and he always pushed himself to diversify his craft and attempt new projects.



Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy*, published in 1957.

His first novel, *Games of Fate*, essentially an allegory about the struggle against British occupation in Egypt, was published a year later. Mahfouz would go on to write several other historical novels, often set in ancient Egypt to circumvent the nation's censorship laws, but in the late 1940s he turned to writing realistic novels that would act as a mirror to his present society. These novels are the works for which he is best known, especially *The Cairo Trilogy*, whose three volumes took 12 years to complete.

His trilogy told the story of Egypt through the perspective of three generations of a middle-class Cairo family. The volumes take place during separate turbulent periods in Egypt, with the first two volumes being set during the two World Wars and the third during the 1952

coup that overthrew King Farouk. The tragedies the family endured and the fortitude they showed directly paralleled Egypt's struggle for political independence. Finally completed in the 1950's, *The Cairo Trilogy* is regarded as a masterpiece of the Arabic language to this day.

Mahfouz's works following the trilogy included *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *Chatting on the Nile* (1966), and *Miramar* (1967), which were experimental critiques of the political events that followed the Egyptian Revolution of 1952.

Mahfouz was passionate about writing novels and stories that reflected Egypt's political landscape. He was the son of a civil servant, but he too also worked for the government. Throughout his entire literary career, from



Naguib Mahfouz won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, the first Arab to be awarded the prize.

college until 1972, Mahfouz was also employed as a civil servant who first worked in the Ministry of Mortmain Endowments, then as Director of Censorship in the Bureau of Art, as Director of the Foundation for the Support of the Cinema, and finally as a consultant on Cultural Affairs to the Ministry of Culture.

The Arab world has always had a rich tradition in poetry, but Mahfouz is widely attributed to making prose, or the novel, accessible to Arab readers. His readership continued to expand and reached beyond the Arab world when he became the first Arab novelist to have his works translated into French, Swedish, German and English. His body of work earned him the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first Arab to receive the award, and Mahfouz donated more than half his prize money to

charity. Although he struggled financially throughout his career, despite the popularity of his novels, Mahfouz did not desire the fame and riches that came with success. He was often regarded as a shy, humble man who believed he was “a fourth- or fifth-class writer.”

Naguib Mahfouz will be remembered as a brilliant storyteller who contributed enormously to Arabic literature and Egyptian culture. His memory lives on through the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, which is awarded annually to the best contemporary novel written in Arabic and not available in English translation. The winning book is then translated into English and published by the American University in Cairo Press so more of the world can access the rich stories of the Arab world.



Hassan bin Thabit:

A Poet for Prophet Muhammad and Islam

Hassan bin Thabit was an Arabian poet who lived from 563-674 and was one of the most prominent Sahaba, or companions of Prophet Muhammad. He is best known for his poetic verse venerating Prophet Muhammad, and

his work has had an unparalleled influence on Islamic and Arab literature.

Hassan bin Thabit was born in Medina and served as Islam's first poet, traveled widely during his lifetime to cities including Al-Hirah and Damascus. Before settling in Medina and accepting Islam upon meeting Prophet Muhammad, he had won acclaim for his poetry at the courts of Christian Arab kings in Syria and the kings and leaders of al-Hirah in Iraq. In addition to frequently utilizing language from the Quran in his poetry, his work also included references to historical events which have proven to be of great value to historians interested in reconstructing events during his lifetime and the first period of Islam.

Since poetry has always been a foundation of Arab culture, Hassan bin Thabit was effective in helping to spread the message of Prophet Muhammad far and wide within the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. In modern times, poets and Arab literary figures still regard his language and praise of Prophet Muhammad as the most beautiful reflection of his life and divine message of peace to help humanity. One widely known phrase attributed to Hassan bin Thabit is "When the clean forehead of the Messenger of Allah is seen in the dark, it looks like a lamp that sheds luminous light and eliminates darkness," referring not only to physical appearances but utilizing symbolism to describe how the message of Prophet Muhammad came to Arabs and all people as a beacon of light, hope, and salvation from ignorance and darkness.

According to historians, Prophet Muhammad and Hassan bin Thabit enjoyed a close rela-



An antique panel representing the Mosque of Medina in modern day Medina, Saudi Arabia, the historical birthplace of Hassan bin Thabit.

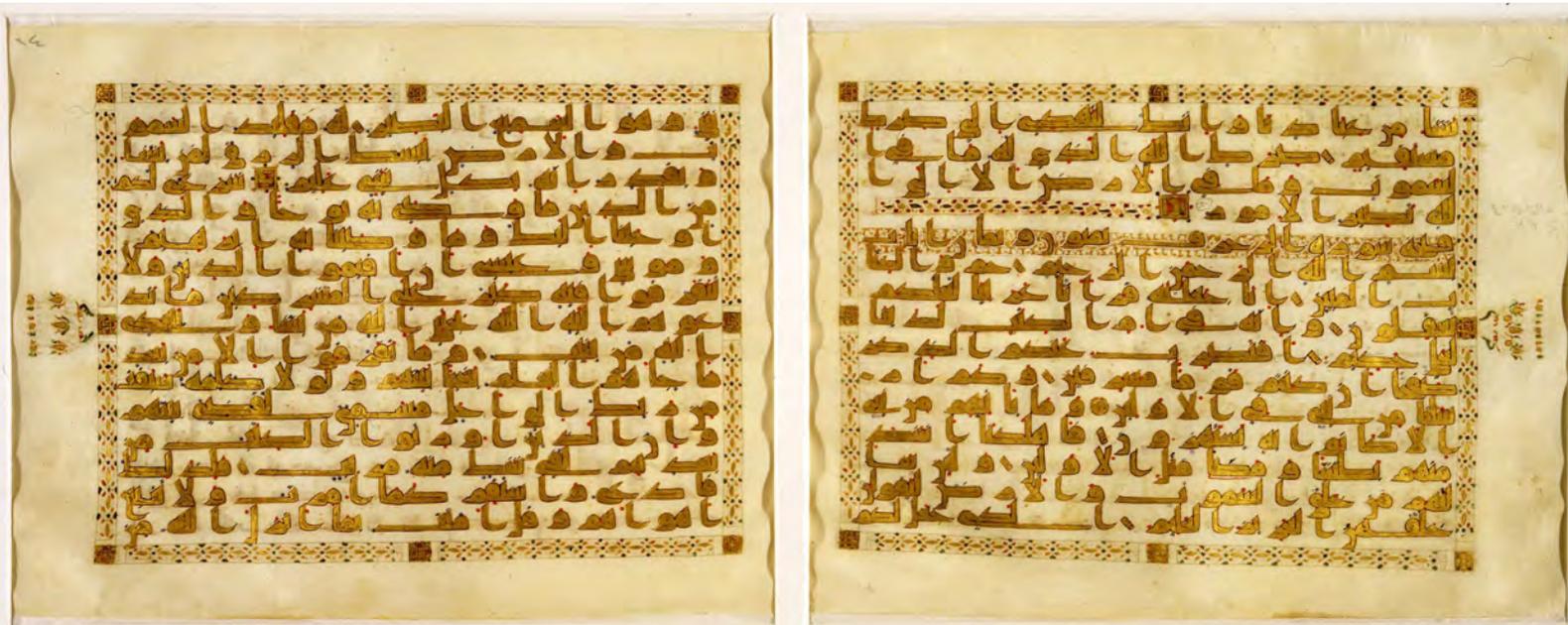
tionship, and in gratitude for his important poetry the Prophet ordered the construction of a special pulpit for the delivery and recitation of his work to new and established followers of Islam. According to historians the Prophet Muhammad said of Hassan bin Thabit that “Allah supports Hassan by the spirit of his almighty, whenever he frequently defends of the Messenger of Allah.”

During a historical period where many still believe in polytheism, and were critical of Prophet Muhammad’s monotheistic message, Hassan bin Thabit played a critical role in rebutting criticisms of Islam and Prophet Muhammad through satire of the critical poets. Although Hassan bin Thabit accepted Islam later in his life at age 60, once he became a believer, he was eager to assist in spreading the faith and is reported to have remarked to Prophet Muhammad “O Messenger of Allah! I am ready to help you with my tongue. I will overcome them through satire,” and went on to state that he would be able to satirize

offending poets of the Quraysh tribe in such a way that would not also criticize the Messenger of Allah, a fellow Qureshi. He is widely regarded as having had a distinguished impact for his role is championing true Islam and monotheism, with one verse referring to Allah proclaiming that “You are only having the whole creativity, blessings and the entire matter. We are only guided by you and thee (alone) we worship.”

Hassan bin Thabit is regarded as one of the most significant mukhadram, a class of poets whose lives spanned both pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. His literary impact would be reflected in later poetry created during the Abbasid caliphate.

His influence within and beyond Islamic literature continues to be felt today as readers experience his poetry and admire his distinguished, satirical defenses of Prophet Muhammad and poetic verse conveying and venerating the revelations of Allah.



An example of classical Qu’ranic verse. Hassan bin Thabit often incorporated passages from the Qu’ran in his poetry and defenses of Islam and monotheism.



Al-Mutanabbi Street

Starts Here – Celebrating Iraqi Literary Heritage

The morning was calm and warm. The city had just started awakening to life, but Al-Mutanabbi Street, home of one of the worlds' oldest book fairs, was already bustling. Nothing foreshadowed the tragedy.



Al-Mutanabbi Street was reopened at the end of 2008 to become a vibrant center of Iraqi culture again.

PATCHWORK OF THOUGHTS AND IDEAS

Al-Mutanabbi Street is a historic bookselling center in Baghdad. It was named after the 10th century classical Iraqi poet Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn al-Mutanabbi. It is considered the heart and soul of the Baghdad literacy world, where for centuries Iraqi intellectuals have exchanged views and ideas over a cup of tea. Seen from above, the makeshift stalls stretching along the street resemble a colorful patchwork. This is how one can think about Al-Mutanabbi Street fair's book selection. Various literary genres and subjects from political theory, religious treatises, and even comic books reflect Iraqi society's diversity.

EXPLOSION

The morning of March 5, 2007, started as usual. Bookkeepers had already displayed their collections and immersed themselves in conversations, discussing new positions in their inventories. Local writers, intellectuals and tourists had gathered, hoping to catch recent publications and vintage books. Suddenly, at 11:40 AM, a car bomb exploded.

According to different sources, at least 30 people were killed and 100 injured. In seconds, the pavement was covered with blood, while scattered book pages hovered above and slowly drifted earthward, mixed with clouds of smoke. There was silence. The cultural heart of the city had stopped beating. After the attack, the area became everything that it wasn't before. Now covered with litter and unsafe, the neighborhood no longer invited its usual visitors. For residents of Baghdad, the unspeakable pain of losing their loved

ones and neighbors was compounded by the loss of cultural heritage.

AL-MUTANABBI STREET LEGACY

Although the writers and publicists could no longer gather at Al-Mutanabbi Street, they found another form of expression. Deema Shehabi, Kuwaiti-born poet and writer, and San Francisco-based bookseller Beau Beausoleil, called on fellow writers to share their reactions to the bombing. The initiative exceeded their expectations. They received

more than 130 submissions in various forms and media. The group of contributing artists called itself the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* Coalition. It included 100 contributors, including American-Lebanese author Yassin Alsalman and Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and correspondent for The New York Times Anthony Shadid. Their collective work became part of an anthology *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*.

The writers' work inspired others and easily transcended geographical and cultural bor-



The book fair offers a selection of various literary genres and subjects from political theory, religious treatises, and comic books.

ders, becoming an international art project. In 2013, the exhibition *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*, was displayed at the Columbia University Libraries in New York City. It featured book arts created by international artists from 26 countries.

The tragic event resonated even further. In 2016, The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., launched its own *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* project. The book-arts and cultural festival commemorated the 2007 bombing, celebrated Iraqi cultural heritage and aimed to edu-

cate the public on the value of intellectual power, art and culture. The Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery exhibition presented 250 books, 190 prints and 60 broadside prints as part of the project.

Additionally, Monroe Street in Washington recreated the famous Iraqi *Al-Mutanabbi Street* by inviting local communities to participate in interactive poetry readings, book exchanges, papermaking, calligraphy, bookbinding and printmaking.



Al-Mutanabbi Street has served as a gathering place for local writers, book collectors, and visitors.

In 2020, a new exhibition *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* was shown at the Columbia University Libraries' Faculty House. It showcased a newly acquired collection of artists' works. The show was held in conjunction with a two-day conference on Iraqi Studies.

The artworks created by the group *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* Coalition became a part of an archival collection at the Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis Library. It promotes awareness of the mission of the coalition and focuses on the lasting power of the written word.

The bombing of *Al-Mutannabi* Street in 2007 was a horrific act of terror that killed and wounded dozens of people. The event, however, didn't spell the end of one of the world's most famous book fairs. *Al-Mutanabbi* Street was reopened at the end of 2008 to freclaim its place as a vibrant center of Iraqi culture. Moreover, thanks to the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* initiative, it has gained long-lasting international appreciation and recognition.



One of the world's oldest book fairs enjoys long-lasting international appreciation and recognition. The exhibition *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* has been displayed at various venues in the United States, including Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.



Modern Arabic Literature

The often referred to “Golden Age,” which followed the astounding rise of Islam and establishment of the first Islamic state, also included an increase in cultural exchanges that would eventually go on to shape modern literature as we know it today. Literary Arabic became dated after the rise of the Ottoman Empire and it was largely owing to the determination of the small core who kept the language alive – especially in Egypt – that Arabic literature enjoyed a powerful renaissance in the late 19th century, ushering in what is now known as the era of Modern Arabic Literature. Simultaneously with a reaction against Western models in Arabic literature, the novel and the drama, forms that were never before used, developed.

The rebirth of Arabic prose is undoubtedly the best example of the advantages of transcontinental influence. Not only was it responsible for the numerous changes that Arabic literature underwent, but it also gave way to a common ground between the Arabs and the Europeans which is of course, literature. Most of all, it reasserted Arabic literature as a major part of Arab society.

Throughout the 19th century silk-screening in Arabic commenced seriously, based in Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus. Dailies, manuals, and books were published by Arab writers trying their best to describe, in Arabic, their sense of themselves and where they stood in the broader modern world.

The First Modern Arabic Novel:

Written by Muhammad Husayn Haykal in (1912), *Zaynab* is commonly acknowledged as the first contemporary Arabic novel. Arab literature was practically unfamiliar in the West, with fewer than five novels interpret-

ed into English by the 1950s, but curiosity in contemporary Arabic literature amplified after 1988 once Naguib Mahfouz earned a Nobel Prize in Literature.

It’s also important to remember Arabic text is comparatively fresh by prevailing canons. Currently, it is experiencing its contemporaneous era. This stage is perhaps the toughest to debate regarding the progression of Arabic writing. It is naturally more complicated than the previous periods since it is now more open



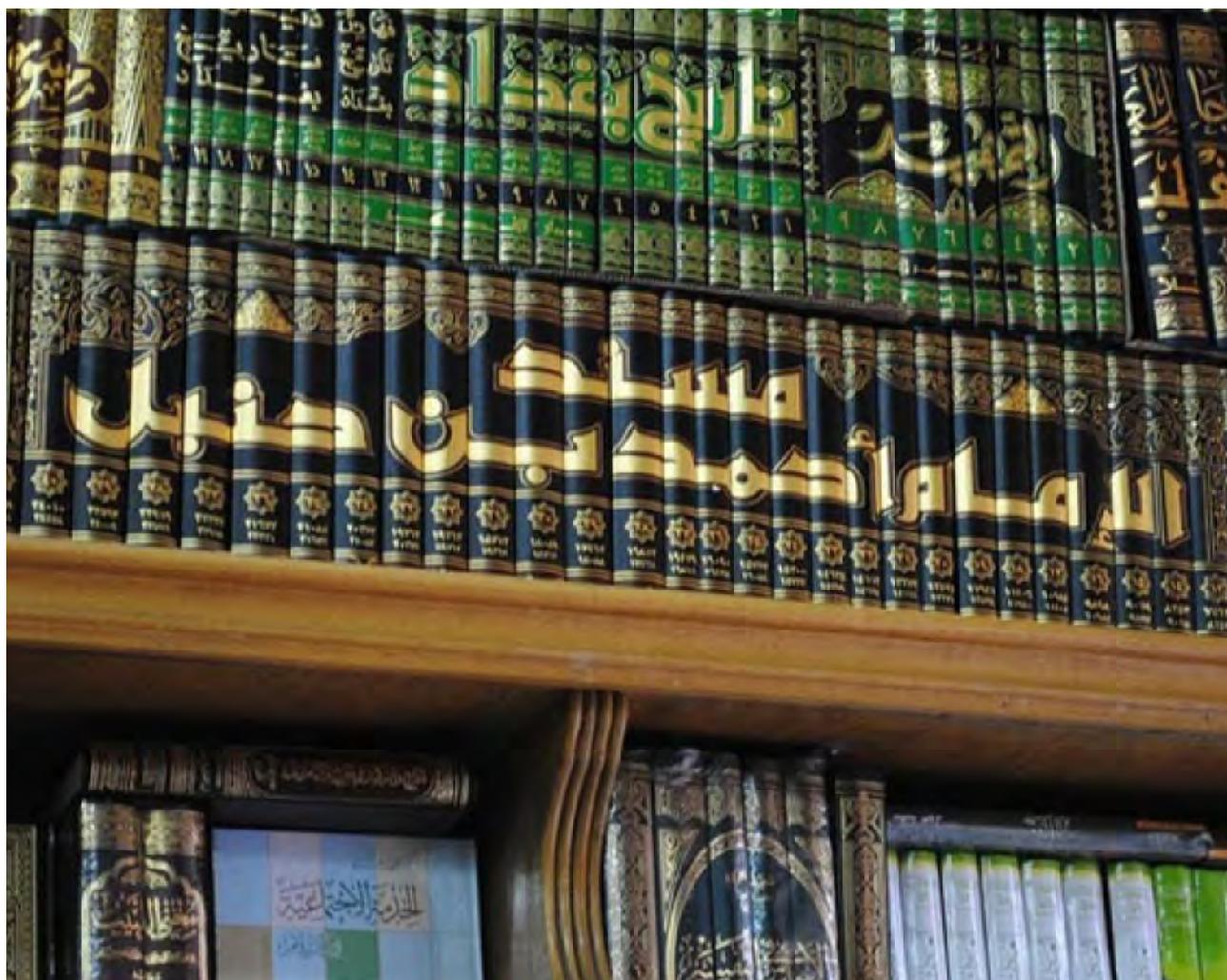
Photograph of Heikal.

to external influences. This is only natural in today's world wherein every nation is dependent on others for survival and almost everybody has become tolerant of foreigners. Thus, it is harder to pinpoint which foreign influence is actually responsible for the path that Modern Arabic literature is taking right now and for the direction that it is likely to take in the future.

Other distinguished 20th- and 21st-century writers in Arabic include the authors Ghasan Kanafani, Alaa Elias Khoury, Mahmoud Saeed and short-story writers Yusuf Idris and Mahmud Tymur.

Curiosity in Arabic novels has been inspired by the formation of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2007. This award meant at securing acknowledgement, circulation, translation, and publication of exceptional contemporary Arabic fiction is backed by the Emirates Foundation of Abu Dhabi and is fashioned after the Booker Prize.

While contemporary Arabic writing is still quite young by modern standards, it is the fruit of a quarter of a century's worth of progression and is still very much realizing the advantages of its revitalization which happened only a century ago.



Arab manuscripts in a bookstore in Damascus, Syria.



Top 10 Muslim Writers & Poets

Writing and poetry have been at the heart of the Muslim world for centuries. What is considered the first poem ever, The Epic of Gilgamesh, came from the ancient Mesopotamians in modern-day Iraq. Ancient writers and thinkers mastered many skills and areas of learning, and poetry offered these ancient philosophers, scientists and writers a rhythmic medium of expression. Because poetry can be memorized and recited, many of their ideas were transferred orally through generations and survive today, even when the writings were lost.

To be considered one of the best writers of all time is to have your words endure, and many early writers have inspired generations. One of these great writers is Imru al-Qais (4th Century BCE), who is known for his metaphor-

ical prowess and the beautiful narration of his desire to be a lover, warrior, maste, and wise man. Odes have a special place in Muslim poetry, and no ode seems to have achieved as much fame as al-Qais's "Mu'allaqat" or "Hung Ode," so named because it is said that they were once written in gold and draped around the Kaaba in Makkah.

Literature can be complex, but sometimes it is the simplest writings that reach the farthest. One great example of this is philosopher, astronomer, mathematician, and poet Omar Khayyam. Remembered as the simplest poet of the Islamic Golden Age, Khayyam's masterpiece is known as the Rubaiyat, consisting of four-line poems that have influenced and continue to influence writers all over the world to this day. Oscar Wilde considered the work to



Poetry has been deeply embedded in Islamic culture for centuries and its writers, both ancient and contemporary, continue to influence the literary world.



All the history of writing and poetry so deeply embedded in Islamic culture has provided contemporary writers centuries of influence to explore and build upon.”

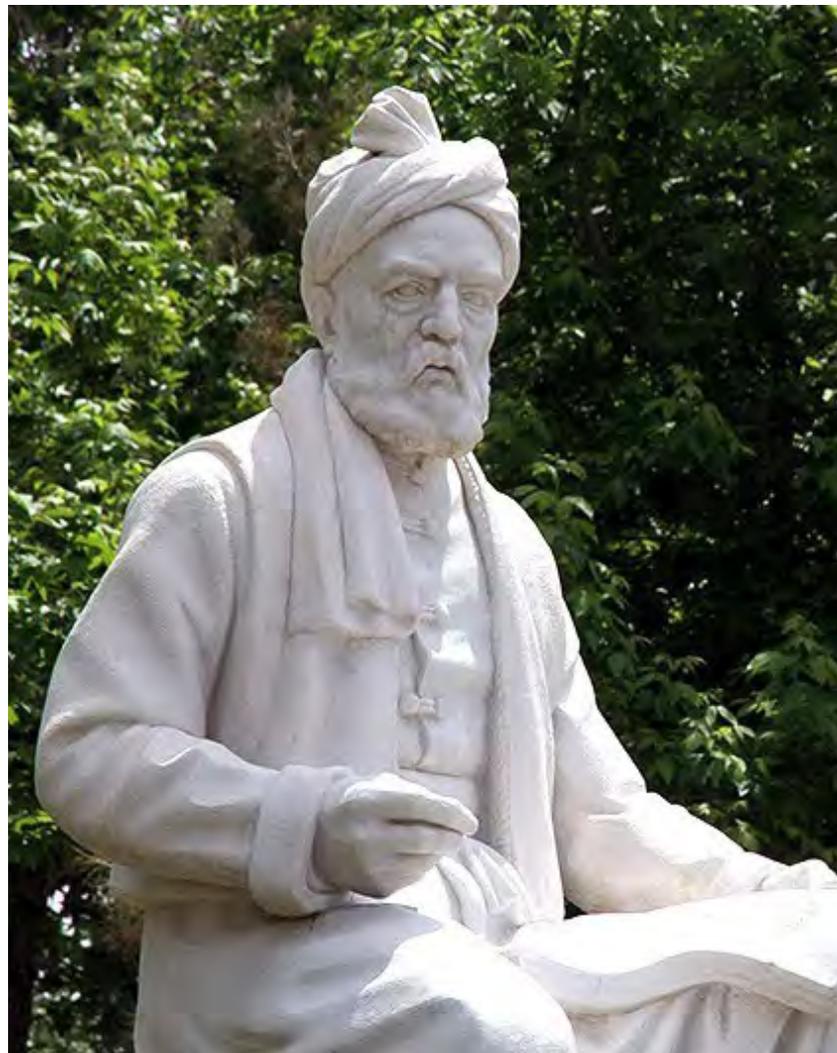
be so masterful that he put it alongside Shakespeare’s sonnets as one of his greatest literary loves. The Rubaiyat has inspired multiple translations and illustrations throughout history.

A legacy can also be forged through literary challenge, as was the case with the Persian poet Ferdowsi, who undertook the challenge of writing Shahnameh, or Book of Kings. The Shahnameh was also known as The Epic of Iran, one of the longest epic poems at 60,000 words, 990 chapters and 72 stories. He wrote for 33 years chronicling the tales of the various rulers, the culture shifts of the region and the prophet Mohammad. Ferdowsi was tasked to write an epic work by the Sultan, who promised him a gold coin for every word, but when the Sultan earned of the sheer enormity of the masterpiece, he instead sent Ferdowsi silver coins and then called for the great poet’s arrest. This work is given much credit for helping to preserve the Persian language.

Allama Muhammad Iqbal is another poet whose influence continues today. His advanced style, depth of exploration, and foresight have produced some of the most masterful Islamic works. He is best known for his deep-seated belief in the Ummah, and his works reflect this. Iqbal is credited as one of the principal contributors to the Islamic renaissance during the 19th century. He pushed

for a contemporary Indian Muslim society that maintained fundamental Islamic principles and is known for his guidance to the Ummah in Urdu, Persian and English. For his thought and literary leadership, he is Pakistan’s national poet.

Muslim writing was not reserved for men only, and many female writers have honored places in the history of Islam. One of these influential women is Tamadir bint Amr, or more commonly, Al-Khansa, considered the most influential female poet in all of Islam.



A statue of Ferdowsi, author of the Shahnameh or the Book of Kings, one of the longest epic poems of all time.

Her masterpieces consisted of eulogies to her brother and poetic investigations of love, sorrow, life and death.

All the history of writing and poetry so deeply embedded in Islamic culture has provided contemporary writers centuries of influence to explore and build upon. One of these great writers is Mahmoud Darwish, who passed away in 2008. Darwish is Palestine's national poet and is considered the leading light of his generation for his impassioned lyrics on Palestinian exile and the fickle human condition. Some of his notable poems, such as "Rita and the Rifle," "I Lost a Beautiful Dream," "Birds of Galilee" and "I Yearn for My Mother's Bread," have become the anthems for generations of Arabs.

The influence of so many previous writers over the centuries is very visible in modern works today. Maram al-Masri, a Syrian writer, takes the sorrow-filled eulogies from Al-Khansa and makes them her own as she writes war-fueled tragedies from her experiences in her homeland of Syria. Love, exile, and death permeate her works just as they did al-Khansa's. Another prominent female writer is Iman

Mersal, who has taken her literary skills to academia, where she teaches Arabic literature and history at the University of Alberta.

Some writers have been propelled by conflict propelled into masterful writing. Nouri al-Jarrah has spent most of his life in exile in London from his home of Damascus. He uses his

prize-winning poetry to project his criticism of his home regime, making him one of the most influential contemporary writers and activists. Some contemporary writers found success at a young age. Sudanese born and Saudi raised Mohamed Abdelbari achieved poetic influence as early as his twenties, with his works included in *The Modern Saudi Literature*, an anthology text that is part of the core syllabus in many Saudi universities.

There is a long line of influential Muslim writers through the ages, and they inspire contemporary writers who are shedding light on and influencing the Muslim experience worldwide in

today's shrinking world. From tragedy to love, religious guidance to political activism, all of the writers of the past have left their mark on Muslim literature, and they have created a tradition that is alive today and will endure and grow in the future.



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Ka'b ibn Zuhayr & Al-Mutanabbi

Two poets that cannot be left out of the conversation are Ka'b ibn Zuhayr and Abu at-Tayyib Ahmad bin Al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi al-Kindi, or better known as Al-Mutanabbi. Ka'b was a 7th century poet and a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad. Initially, Ka'b was skeptical about the new faith of Islam. However, after seeing his brother accept the faith and speaking with the Prophet himself, Ka'b embraced Islam and wrote the first Al-Burda (an ode praising the Prophet) titled Banat Su'ad (Su'ad has departed). In reciting this poem, The Prophet Muhammad was so moved that he removed his mantle and draped Ka'b in it. Ka'b's own father was a renowned poet of the time as was his son, but he was most remembered for his 'long poetry' which separated him from his kin. Not to be forgotten, Al-Mutanabbi is considered one of the greatest and most recognized Arab poets of all time. He has written over 300 poems which have been translated into 20 languages. His name means "the would-be prophet", a title granted to him which he used to promote his works. Al-Mutanabbi traveled extensively as a nomadic poet, researching tribes' doctrines and texts, and gaining knowledge. His status became so revered that his revolutionary poems helped incite a revolt in Syria. Al-Mutanabbi is most known for his beautiful and complex panegyrics (written verse used to exalt someone or something) in praise of the Syrian prince Sayf al-Dawla with whom he wrote for 9 years. These two poets' works have stood the test of time and inspired many Muslim writers who would come after them.



Al-Mutanabbi's statue pictured above was erected in 1960 in honor of the Muslim poet's timeless masterpieces.



Uzma Jalaluddin signs copies of her award-winning novel *Ayesha at Last*.

Contemporary Novels by Muslim Authors

Novels of contemporary life and experience touch us in a special way. They often unfold in a realistic and do not incorporate elements of fantasy. These novels may shed light on something from the author's everyday experience and allow readers to put themselves in the au-

thor's shoes and understand stories from their own points of view. Some of the stories may be politically motivated or designed to raise social awareness, while others are written purely for entertainment. For the last two decades, several Muslim authors have published outstanding

contemporary novels that focus on different issues that affect Muslims, including love, religion and family.

Four contemporary novels written by Muslim authors connect to different issues and themes that are experienced by Muslims all around the world.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini is a novel that depicts the lives of two different Muslim women. Hosseini is a New York Times best-selling author who moved to America in 1980 from Afghanistan. Khaled was appointed a goodwill ambassador for UNHCR in 2006.

In the novel, Mariam is an underprivileged young girl who is stigmatized in her community because she is illegitimate and is set to marry Rashid, an abusive and controlling man. A generation later, Laila, who was born privileged and had a comparatively better youth, is also preparing to marry Rashid. The two women then experience personal and political turmoil in post-Soviet and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Hosseini burst onto the literary scene with his debut book *The Kite Runner*, which was set in Afghanistan. All of Hosseini's subsequent novels were set in Afghanistan as well. Hosseini has remarked that he regards the *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a "mother-daughter story" in contrast to *The Kite Runner*, which he considers



Four contemporary novels written by Muslim authors connect to different issues and themes that are experienced by Muslims all around the world. "

a "father-son story" and a story of friendships between men. It continues some of the themes used in his previous work, such as familial dynamics, but instead focuses primarily on female characters and their roles in contemporary Afghan society.

The Unquiet Dead is a crime-fiction novel written by Ausma Zenat Khan. Khan is an American-Canadian novelist who is also Muslim.

The novel explores redemption, loss and the cost of justice. Esa Khattak and Rachel Getty are detectives working with predominantly minority-sensitive cases. The two detectives are working on the case of the death of Christopher Drayton, which appears to be accidental. In the course of their investigation, the two detectives discover a much more complicated and confusing situation, which they must untangle.

The Unquiet Dead was named Best First Novel by Arthur Ellis Awards and Barry Awards. Khan holds several academic degrees and has worked as an editor, lawyer and professor. She is also a fantasy writer, and her fantasy debut novel, *The Bloodprint*, which is the first book of a five-book epic fantasy series, has also received much praise.

Love from A to Z is a young-adult contemporary romance novel written by S.K Ali. Ali is an Indian-Canadian author who writes children's books as well as adult novels.

The novel follows the story of *Zayneb*, a straightforward and angry teenager and the only Muslim in her American class. She goes on a vacation to Qatar during spring break after she accidentally gets her activist friends in trouble. There she meets Adam, a boy with multiple sclerosis trying to leave behind a decent legacy of his mother for his younger sister. The two meet and embark on a journey that features both ordinary and extraordinary events.



Khaled Hosseini, the author of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is a New York Times best seller and a UNHCR ambassador.

Ali was the winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for her debut novel *Saints and Misfits*. *Love from A to Z* was a Today Show pick, a Goodreads Readers' Choice nominee, and on several best 2019 Young Adult readers lists, including Kirkus and Entertainment Weekly's top ten. *Love from A to Z* was the first young adult title chosen to be part of the Today show's "Read With Jenna" book club.

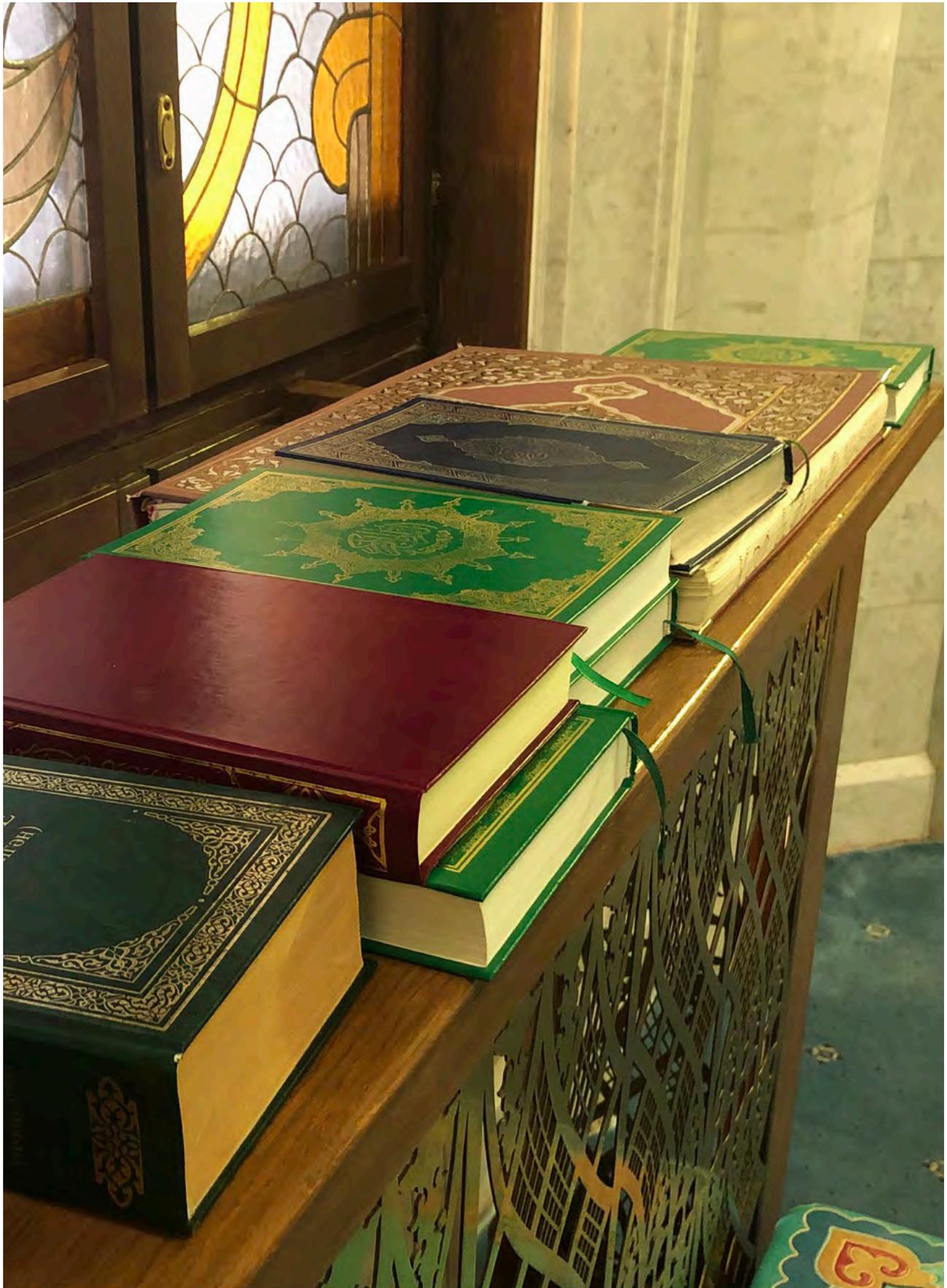
Ayesha at Last by Uzma Jalaluddin is a modern day Muslim Pride and Prejudice retelling. Jalaluddin is a Canadian writer who grew up in a diverse suburb of Toronto.

The contemporary romance novel is set in the Toronto Muslim community and follows the story of Ayesha, a young woman with a spectacular dream of writing poetry. Ayesha works as a schoolteacher to pay off her debts to her uncle, and she has to deal with her family endlessly comparing her with her younger cousin,

Hafsa. Although Ayesha is lonely, she doesn't want an arranged marriage. Then she meets Khalid, who is just as smart and handsome as he is conservative and judgmental, and things become even more confusing when a surprise engagement between Ayesha and Khalid is announced. Ayesha then must dig deep and figure out how she really feels and what she really wants.

Jalaluddin is a writer for the Toronto Star. *Ayesha at Last* was shortlisted for the Kobo Emerging Writers Prize and longlisted for the Stephen Leacock Humour Award, and Cosmopolitan UK named the novel their 2019 choice of the year. A major production company acquired film rights for the novel in 2018.

All of these novels touch on themes Muslims can relate to in some way, and also allow others to understand some of the different issues that can arise in Muslim households.



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