

Books

Edited by **Becky Lucas** becky.lucas@itp.com

The Interpreter

Books

UAE national **Shihab Ghanem** is one of Dubai's long-time poetry pioneers. Over the past 10 years, he's written 18 books of verse, translated poems from Arabic to English and back again, and won shelf-loads of accolades. And that's just in retirement. During a sparkling engineering career he gained degrees from three different countries, held various high-profile positions in Dubai and won national prizes for research and scientific excellence. *Becky Lucas* caught up with the man who surely has more than one brain to talk about his latest collection of translated Emirati poetry, *Coffee & Dates*



How did you find the poems for *Coffee & Dates*?

I've followed Emirati poetry for at least 30 years and know most of the poems that I translate personally. They are from all over the

UAE. This is actually the sixth volume of UAE poetry I have published. They include *Pearls And Shells*, with a poem in local dialect by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, *Pearls And Dates*, which received the Sharjah Book Award, and *With Busters And Swans*, in which I translated UAE female poets into English and poems by British and American women into Arabic. But *Coffee & Dates* is different from all the rest because it includes stories and articles, as well as poems.

Were all the poems written in Arabic?

Yes, all in standard Arabic. I personally tend to write in Arabic and occasionally in English, although not often. More

recently, we have seen Wael Al-Sayegh [author of *A Poet's Oud*, Dhs70, available at Magrudy's] writing only in English.

Do you think we lose a lot of a poem's meaning when it is translated into English?

With any translation of poetry between languages you lose something. You lose the rhyme, rhythm, music, puns, and so on. Fortunately, however, you can translate most of the meaning and images.

How do you think Arabic poetry differs from English?

Themes and subjects such as love and humanistic experiences are common across languages. But each language has its own traditions, flavour and colour, so the focus on themes can be different. Arabic is a very rich language – lyrical Arabic poetry is extremely vast and goes back 1,600 years, even before Islam. Arabic has not changed much since then, so we can read older poetry without much difficulty, whereas it is difficult to read English poetry half as old.

Do you know of any poetry readings in Dubai?

There are frequent standard Arabic poetry readings in Dubai and the other emirates. Of course most of the evenings I hold are in Arabic, but in the past I have held a few English ones. Perhaps I am the only UAE national to hold readings in English.

Who are your favourite Emirati authors and poets, past and present?

Some of the better past UAE poets are Dr AlMadani, Sheikh Saqr Al Qasimi, Hamad Bu Shihab, and Sultan Al Owais. They have all published poetry books and I translated some of them. The quality of some of their work is quite good. I will not state names of living poets, but there are definitely some good poets.

Why not state their names?

Poets are sensitive and if you forget a name, that poet may feel hurt.

'...Despite our great wealth, without learning and morality we shall become nothing.'

This is taken from your poem, *Federation Day*. Does it have a particular message?

Yes, of course. I am a great believer in

unity, not only of the UAE but also of some form of Arab unity in the future.

Tell us more about this vision.

The UAE became important only after the federation, i.e. after unity. The Arab world can become a powerful block only after some form of gradual unity, which could start in the economic field, then expand to become a political federation or at least confederation. But all this must be well planned, like the Europeans did. In fact, there is already a linguistic, cultural, spiritual, historical and of course geographical common base in existence.

How do you write?

With poetry, you have to be inspired. You can't plan when to write. It may take minutes, or days, or you may start something and find yourself going back to it after months or years. But to write articles and poetry translations I work quite hard – many hours a day.

What made you get into poetry, when you had such an impressive career in engineering already?

I have loved poetry since my primary school days. But I also loved maths and science as well as literature. My dad (who was the first graduate in the Arabian peninsula and who was an educationalist and major poet) predicted when I was about 10 that I would become an engineer and a poet. I found through a computer psychometric test that I use both my right and left hand parts of the brain equally, exactly 50 per cent each. This is most rare. I have been writing poetry since my secondary school days before entering university to study engineering.

Has the impact of Western and Indian poetry on Arabic poetry been positive or negative?

For me, knowing Western and Indian poetry has enriched my poetry experience. In the past few decades, however, some Arabs, by blindly imitating Western poetry, have produced some deformed material. But this is not the fault of Western poetry.

You have received dozens of awards and accolades for both your poetry and engineering achievements.

Which are you most proud of?

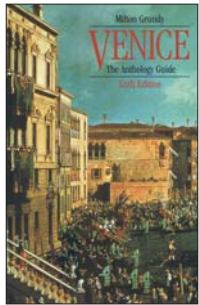
I am grateful to God for all these awards. But a poet is even more grateful to God for some of his poems, which he particularly cherishes, whether they receive prizes or not. ●

'Coffee & Dates', Dhs20. Available from Emirates Writers Union (06 556 5588), www.shihabghanem.blogspot.com.

Review

Venice: The Anthology Guide Milton Grundy

★★★★★
Giles de la Mare, **Dhs85**. Available to order from www.amazon.co.uk.



To say that Milton Grundy knows Venice, Italy's most unique city, like the back of his hand is a gross understatement. Back in 1971, he wrote his first anthology guide, and since then it's been lovingly and methodically put through a further five incarnations, each time significantly updated and revised. The premise, however, remains the same. Grundy calls upon the observations and opinions of many eminent writers and art historians, including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, Cecil Gould and Henry James, to chaperone you around the canalised city and highlight its finest paintings, sculptures and architecture.

Encouraging readers from the get-go to take the city at their own pace, get lost in the back streets and indulge in long lunches, makes this guide a welcome

relief to the 'must do everything, must see everything' mentality that so many of the others promote. It is, however, the attention to detail, rich historical perspective (look out for the juxtaposition of old images against new), gorgeous illustrations (taken from engravings and paintings) and stunning images, by revered photographer Sarah Quills, that make this book something to treasure.

Centred on seven principle walks and three boat excursions, Grundy and his famous commentators guide you through Venice's maze of alleyways, and point you towards both old and modern masterpieces, and even places from which to find the most breathtaking and unique views. And, although the prose is significantly cluttered with incredibly precise directions, these are somewhat necessary if you want to stay on track – after all you wouldn't want to miss Jackson Pollock's *Eyes In The Heat* while perusing the Penny Guggenheim collection, or Titian's *John The Baptist in Accademia*. *Venice: The Anthology Guide*, might not tell you where to find the best restaurants and nightspots, but you will come away with a far greater understanding of its rich art and history than you'll get from anything else currently on offer. *Kate McAuley*

Top ten

Compiled from book sales across Spinneys, the Dubai Duty Free bookshops and Magrudy's every week.

Fiction paperback

- 1 **False Impression**
Jeffrey Archer
- 2 **Anybody Out There?**
Marian Keyes
- 3 **Half Of A Yellow Sun**
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- 4 **Like The Flowing River: Thoughts And Reflections** Paulo Coelho
- 5 **The Inheritance Of Loss**
Kiran Desai
- 6 **Chart Throb**
Ben Elton
- 7 **The Road**
Cormac McCarthy
- 8 **A Spot Of Bother**
Mark Haddon
- 9 **The Interpretation Of Murder**
Jed Rubinfeld
- 10 **Recoil**
Andy McNab

Non-fiction paperback

- 1 **The Great War For Civilisation**
Robert Fisk
- 2 **The Undercover Economist**
Tim Harford
- 3 **The Life And Times Of The Thunderbolt Kid** Bill Bryson
- 4 **Winning** Jack Welch
- 5 **Air Babylon**
Imogen Edwards-Jones
- 6 **For One More Day**
Mitch Albom
- 7 **Born To Be Riled** Jeremy Clarkson
- 8 **Failed States: The Abuse Of Power And The Assault On Democracy**
Noam Chomsky
- 9 **I Know You Got Soul**
Jeremy Clarkson
- 10 **The World Is Flat**
Thomas Friedman

TV

Wednesday June 27, 7am, *Good Morning Dubai*, City 7

More book banter on the box with Isobel Abulhoul. She'll be discussing books along a wedding theme, including an old one, *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, a new title, *The Cold*

Moon by Jeffery Deaver, a borrowed book, *Alli And Nino* by Kurban Said, and a blue book (that's the sea before you ask), *The Secret River* by Kate Goreville.

Radio

Saturday June 30, 10am-12 noon, *Talking Of Books*, Dubai Eye 103.8FM

Book of the week this week is *Triptych* by Karin Slaughter, while James Mullen, from Hill and Knowlton PR agency, is

the guest reviewer. Genre of the week is holiday books. Text in your favourite reads for more audience participation.

Expatriate Woman Book Club

Tuesday July 10, 10 am, Paul, Mercato Mall, Jumeirah Beach Road

A free group open to anyone (female, obviously) who enjoys reading and talking – no literary lingo required. July's title will be *A River Sutra*, a novel written by Gita Mehta, author of *Raj and Karma Kola*. The narrative is set on the banks of the Narmada River, one of India's holiest pilgrimages

sites, worshipped as the daughter of the God Shiva. The plot interweaves stories of the travellers who visit the site, exploring the universal themes of love, desire, pain, mysticism and religion. Check the What's On section of www.expatriatewoman.com for regular updates.

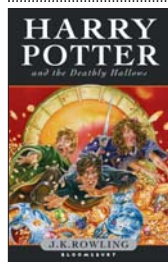
Kutub club

Monday July 2, 7:45pm, The Third Line gallery, Al Quoz

The Arabic book (and its English translation) set to be discussed at the next meeting is *The Inheritance (Al-Mirath)* by Sahar Khalifeh. If you're curious about

Dubai's only Arabic-English book club, now's the time to try it out: the group takes a hiatus during August and will meet up again in September.

Harry Potter pre-order



Magrudy's for a Dhs25 down-payment (and join the 4,000 others who've

For those of you who can barely contain yourselves about the bespectacled one's return, be calm. Either set aside a copy at Borders before July 21 and get a free owl toy, reserve your read at

already done so) or head to one of the Jashanmal stores and put your name on a copy for Dhs20. A small price to pay to stop those midnight cold sweats, dreading the day Dubai sells out completely. Among other locations, Jashanmal stores can be found at Mall of The Emirates (04 340 6789) and Uptown Mirdiff (04 288 8376); Magrudy's is at City Centre (04 295 7744) and BurJuman (04 359 3332); while Borders is at Mall of the Emirates (04 341 5758), and now DIFC (04 425 0371).

The Road From Sur by Louise Sheffield

Back from the tar sister,
Back to the coast!
The necklace of six mothers' ghosts
Clips your neck, but your finger no ring
will refine,
For the sea tears off fancies he finds

Back to your modesty
Sister, get down!
Let sense turn your eyes back around,
Where the sun snares your children's
wet skin like a shoal
As they wait for the boats'
homeward roll

Tread back on your last step,
Gather your pride.
Come, count out the grains of your tribe!
Remember the gills of the cliff guide
your breath
And the roof of your mosque is the sky

Feeling inspired? *Time Out's* looking for up-and-coming authors to publish here, on our books page. Simply send in your short stories, poems or general musings, no longer than 500 words, to becky.lucas@itp.com. Next thing, you'll be doing us out of a job.