

New Interview of Author Hassan Blasim, by Peter Molin

Hassan Blasim's 2014 short-story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* captured American readers with its harrowing portrait of an Iraq wrecked by authoritarian rule, oppressive Islamic custom, American invasion, and sectarian in-fighting. The stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* were Poe-like in their ability to combine story-telling prowess—often humorous—with unexpected and sensationally graphic violence. Especially for readers familiar with the growing body of works written by American veterans of Iraq, *The Corpse Exhibition* aptly portrayed the nightmare of recent Iraq history from the other side, while confirming the sense that however bad Iraq might have been for American fighting men and women, it was infinitely worse for Iraqis caught in the melee. Now comes Blasim's *God 99*, a genre-defying text from which signature-style Blasim short-stories emerge organically from a textual seedbed composed of memoir, auto-fiction, and transcribed emails. The narrator is "Hassan Owl," an Iraqi exile now living in Finland, who begins a blog titled *God 99* to document the experience of other Iraqi refugees living in Europe, but that conceit is only the start-point for a wide-ranging set of story-lines and thematic concerns. Roughly categorized, these include descriptions of Hassan Owl's early life in Iraq, where the dream of a peaceful life full of artistic creativity are blasted by political and religious persecution and violence, the many-year exodus that follows as Hassan Owl makes his way out of Iraq to Finland, the texture of everyday life in Finland in which quote-unquote normal existence is elusive for Arab refugees still touched by enduring conflict in the Middle East, and, finally, Hassan Owl's attempt to reconnect with a beloved family member now said to be living somewhere in the Middle East.



Author Hassan Blasim. Photo
by Katja Bohm.

That's a lot, and adding spice to it all are short interludes between chapters excerpted from a long email thread between Hassan Owl and a mentor, a fellow Iraqi émigré named in the novel Alia Mardan, who is based on the Iraqi expatriate writer Adnam al-Mubarek. Potentially intimidating, the hybrid mix is unified by Blasim's dazzling prose voice, which inflects descriptions of even mundane occurrences with funny and/or startling story-turns and moments of imaginative insight. *God 99* offers a profound sense of the connectedness of war in Iraq and contemporary European life, and, even more so, a superb self-portrait of an artist in exile—a 21st version of James Joyce, Henry Miller, and the other revered expatriate authors of 20th-century literature.

I had a chance to speak with Blasim about *God 99* and his current life in Finland. We spoke in English via Zoom, and I have condensed and clarified his answers.

Molin: Do you have a particular audience or ideal reader in mind when you write?

Blasim: I never imagine that someone's looking over my shoulder while I write. But because I write in Arabic, I do consciously try to play with classical Arabic style, mostly by incorporating street language, to make an Arab reader feel the uniqueness of what I'm trying to do. Mostly though the fight is with myself, and I don't consider what any reader might think—there's just not time or space for that. When I send the book to the publisher, it's pretty much finished—to include the design for the cover and the lay-out of the text. That's very important to me. The publisher may suggest changes, but I'm not usually very receptive. Some readers and reviewers haven't understood *God 99*; I think they expected or wanted

more short-stories since my previous book—a collection of short-stories—had been successful. I had more short-stories, but to publish them as stand-alone tales in a collection to me was boring. I wanted to incorporate the stories into a larger and more complex structure, which a novel allowed me to do.

Molin: How would you describe your reception in America and in Europe?

Blasim: I don't think world literature is popular in general in America, which means people aren't used to looking for Arabic books and probably don't understand real Arabic culture apart from what they get in the movies or the news, both of which are full of cliches. I especially don't understand the publishing market and the intellectual climate. When I first published in America, I was happy like any author would be. But you need someone with energy to promote you to readers and newspapers and critics, and I didn't know how that works. Unfortunately, my first trip to America was not enjoyable. It was a huge problem getting permission to enter the country, both in terms of obtaining a visa and then going through customs, which made me feel like a criminal. And without going into detail, some of the readings and writing events were unpleasant, too. I'm not in a hurry to repeat any of that. In Europe it's better for me because I've learned a lot over the years and become more recognized by readers and book people. My books are translated into many languages, they've been adapted to theater often, and every month there are one or two book festivals somewhere where I'm asked to read.

Molin: How about in Iraq and the Arab world?

Blasim: When I first began writing stories in Arabic after arriving in Finland, I sent them to many publications in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries. But no one was willing to publish them because they said they broke too many taboos and the language was too coarse. So my first publications were online and then later in print in Europe. Only after I was

translated into six languages in Europe did anyone in an Arab country publish me, even though I was already popular among young people who could read me online. But now with *God 99*, it's the same thing again. It's currently banned either officially or publishers won't touch it. I still feel my real work should be back in Iraq and helping Iraq understand itself better, but I'm not permitted to do that. It would be dangerous for me and my family still in Iraq to even try. It's still very easy to get shot by someone for expressing unpopular views.



Hassan Blasim and Peter Molin in one of the three Zoom interviews conducted for this story. Screen capture by Peter Molin.

Molin: What about fiction attracts you?

Blasim: It's important for English and American readers to know that I don't only write fiction, I write poetry, criticism, plays, and essays, too, that haven't yet been translated into English. I also write a lot in support of refugees, gay rights, and Iraq and the Middle East. But as for fiction, it's what I have loved most all my life, from the time I was a boy. I always liked the way stories could contain extremes and opposites, such as how a story could be both a love story and a horror story, a funny story and a sad story, both tender and violent. Fiction is serious for me, but it's also play and pleasure. In my writing, I enjoy trying to make all these parts come together. A lot of my sense of how to write fiction comes from my love of movies, from which early on I was impressed by how easily they switched between different types of scenes and moods. In my stories I want that same effect, something unexpected happening, something changing all the time. That's how I try to write, too, I don't plan anything ahead of time, I just enjoy the rhythm of

writing and the chance to play. I open my laptop and I type...

Molin: *God 99* pays tribute to many writers and movie-makers who have inspired you, both Arabic and Western. As a youth in Iraq, what attracted you to European and American art, film, and literature?

Blasim: When I was growing up, my friends and I loved European and American movies, art, music, and books, me probably most of all. It seemed so free—there were no taboos and everything was possible. A lot of it was easily available. Even after the first Gulf War, for example, in the early 90s, we were still reading Raymond Carver and Richard Ford stories. When economic sanctions were put in place by the US that limited imports and forced us to restrict the use of electricity, we would still gather in apartments and have parties while watching Oliver Stone movies. We loved Arab writers and artists, too—we celebrated all art and artists, especially contemporary ones—they were heroes to us.

Molin: One writer referenced frequently in *God 99* is the Italian author Italo Calvino. What do you like about Calvino?

Blasim: Calvino is very popular in Arab countries generally. For me, I love him because he is my opposite. I'm very loud in my writing, like an Oliver Stone or Quentin Tarantino. But Calvino is so cool, and you can tell he's a slow and deep thinker, in a good way. I'm jealous of people who can sit and consider things without getting excited, because that's not me, nor is it like Iraq, which is so passionate and excitable, like heavy-metal music. The part in *God 99* where I describe fleeing Iraq and traveling through Europe making my way to Finland with only book, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, is true.

Molin: That's important—the book you carry with you when you are fleeing from one country to another! Another writer you mention is Henry Miller. How is Miller important to you?

Blasim: I discovered Henry Miller in the 1990s and read six of

his books, all of which was a big shock for me growing up in a society where so much was restricted. He's a great fighter and he's honest.

Molin: When did your admiration for American and Western art become complicated by politics and war?

Blasim: From the beginning. As a teenager reading Western books and watching Western films, I learned many ideas about freedom—individual, cultural, religious, and political. My friends and I wanted to change culture and society as much as we wanted to be rid of Saddam, and we didn't like the restrictions of Islam either. Mostly we just wanted to do what we wanted, such as drink, which I started to do as a teenager. I quickly learned that books could be transgressive, too—many were censored and you could get in trouble if you read them. So in the beginning, my love of Western art placed me in opposition to the dominant attitudes in Iraq.

That continued in college where I studied film. From classroom discussions and making short films, I learned that it was dangerous to complain about the government, so I kept quiet about politics, but I still got into trouble. After I made a documentary about poverty in Iraq, for example, I was visited by Baathist officials who questioned my motives. My teachers always complimented my ideas and work, but it was clear that they were also warning me about being too radical and too outspoken. Within the college there were lots of rumors about spies, and one of my teachers warned me that if I didn't keep silent, the police would send for me after sunset, which was an idiom for being executed, being sent "into the dark"—we knew many people were being shot in those days. Meanwhile, members of my family were also in trouble with the government, which was constantly watching us. This is when I knew that I would eventually get into trouble if I stayed in Iraq and it was important to find somewhere freer and safer.

After the American invasion in 2003, the problem for me

changed. By 2004 I was in Finland, but I was hearing horrible reports from friends and family in Iraq and I could see things were going to get very bad. The sectarian civil war was breaking out, and the danger and violence were worse than ever. So now I began to speak out and write against the Americans and the religious violence the invasion unleashed.

So, my attitude toward America is complicated, like a crazy mystery. In terms of the culture and people, I don't know many Americans, but my Iraqi friends in America encourage me to visit again or think about moving there. They tell me the people are friendly and the living is easy, more so than in Europe. That wasn't exactly my experience on my first short visit, as I mentioned above, but the diversity of people, the literature, and the music all are appealing. The politics and the capitalism are not.

Molin: During the period you were trying to flee Iraq and then settling in Finland (2000-2004), how did you keep alive the dream of being a writer and artist?

Blasim: In high school I wanted write and make films, and I studied film in college. I was always writing, but then my life was unsettled for a long time, but when I got to Finland I began to write again, and I had some small jobs that allowed me to write and translate, but it was boring and not creative. But fiction and public writing happened after I finished work and was sitting at home. After I discovered the Internet everything changed for me. The Internet gave me an outlet and allowed me to build an audience, and then led to the print publication of my books.

Molin: You must get asked about identity a lot—have you come to think of yourself as Finnish?

Blasim: It's funny because I'm a Finnish citizen, but I'm not considered a true Finnish writer because I don't write in Finnish and so am not eligible for Finnish literary prizes.

Still, I now have a lot of good memories from living in Finland for many years, and when I travel around Europe, it feels good to return to Finland, where I am comfortable. But I also still feel like an exile, which doesn't make me sad. Exile can be a gift for a writer, or for any human being. When you think about it, reading is a form of exile—when you read a book about New York or Tokyo, you go into a temporary form of exile that takes you out of the boring daily life of your own country and allows you to see things differently. I've learned not to become too attached to one place, so I treat any location I'm in like a hotel—one room is in Baghdad, another is in Helsinki, etc. That's also how I've come to think about my identity.

Molin: In *God 99*, it's written that Finns are very conservative except when they're in the sauna or at the bar. As someone who is one-quarter Finnish, I like the part about the saunas and the bars.

Blasim: Yes yes, I like it here a lot. The country is peaceful and the people respect free speech. That's good, very good.

Molin: In *God 99*, the chapters recounted by the narrator are interspersed with short interludes transcribing email conversations with a woman named Alia Mardan. In an Author's Note you explain that the emails with Alia Mardan are based on actual emails you exchanged with Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak, who lived for many years in Denmark before dying in 2017. Why is al-Mubarak important to you and how did you devise this form for the novel?

Blasim: As I began to write *God 99*, I had a lot of stories but no structure. I was also depressed about the death of al-Mubarak, who was my friend and mentor. When I was on the move from Iraq to Finland from 2000-2004, he would write me long emails full of talk about great artists, classical Arabian folklore, and philosophy. I didn't have any books or much time to read, and I was very desperate, so he was my best friend

and teacher, an angel really. Those emails meant so much to me even when I arrived in Finland and was working in restaurants and was even homeless for a while. We often talked about writing a book together, but never got the chance while he was still alive. When after his death I was lost emotionally and thinking about how to bring the pieces of *God 99* together, it occurred to me to use our email dialogue to frame the stories I had written. It might make things difficult for the reader at first, but it works for me personally and I think for the book, too. The emails in *God 99* are all real, though I cut them up and made a collage of the thousands of emails we've exchanged.

Molin: You change the gender of your interlocutor from a man to woman. Why?

Blasim: That's my ode to Scheherazade—the inspiration for a thousand stories!

Molin: Alia Mardan is interested in the 20th-century French-Romanian essayist Emil Cioran and writes frequently about her ongoing project to translate Cioran into Arabic, which seems to amuse the narrator. How is Cioran important for *God 99*?

Blasim: Cioran is not popular in Europe now, in part because he had a brief association with the Nazis, [an association he renounced and regretted]. Maybe he is just too dark for Europe, but he is widely loved in Arab countries. They love him so much it's crazy. It's his pessimism, his bleakness, his nihilism, his black humor. But I haven't read all his books, mostly I like his quips, many of which I got from al-Mubarak.

Molin: All right. Let's end with some bigger questions.

Blasim: Smaller questions are good, too. Just normal is best.

Molin [laughs]: OK, then, how about last thoughts?

Blasim: I wonder what your memories are of my visit to the

United States Military Academy at West Point, where you were my host. Did you often invite artists and writers?



Poster made by Peter Molin for Hassan Blasim's visit to West Point.

Molin: Yes we did, at least while I was there, and before and after, too, I think. We brought in mostly Americans, and not all military writers, a lot of civilian writers, poets and filmmakers, too, including Oliver Stone. I would say you were pretty far out there compared to others in terms of your background, but you were a trooper—you gave a great reading and talk and were pleasant with everyone, even though it must have seemed a strange thing for you, after the way war has wrecked Iraq. But you gave us our money's worth, and we all—faculty and cadets, including several international cadets from Arab countries—enjoyed hanging out with you.

Blasim: Some of my friends are surprised to learn I visited there, but I was encouraged to do so by my hosts in New York City, who knew West Point had a tradition of inviting writers such as Orhan Pamuk to visit. I just thought it was an interesting opportunity and was just taking things as they came.



Hassan Blasim at West Point. Photo by Peter Molin.

Molin: Well, I'm sure I was pretty inconsiderate about what it all meant for you—it couldn't have been easy. Maybe I was hoping for you to learn that we aren't all monsters or stupid idiots, at least not all the time. I mostly wish I could have given you a funner memory, like we might have gotten drunk in the barracks or something like that. You haven't written the visit into a story yet, for which I think I'm glad.

Blasim: No, no, that wasn't a bad day. Still, I hope that we can meet again sometime with that military stuff far behind us.

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Hassan Blasim, [*God 99*](#). Translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. First published in Arabic by al-Mutawassit, Milan, 2018. Published in Great Britain by Comma Press, 2020.