

The book cover features a vibrant, abstract background. The top half is dominated by warm yellow and orange tones, with intricate, fan-like geometric patterns in a darker shade. Below this, a horizontal band of brown contains the subtitle. The bottom half of the cover is a deep blue, showing a view through a window with a decorative lattice railing. The overall style is artistic and evocative of Middle Eastern architecture and culture.

In a Fertile Desert

Modern Writing
from the
United Arab Emirates

Selected and translated by
Denys Johnson-Davies

In a
Fertile
Desert

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Introduction

In a short period of time the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged from obscurity to be recognized as a country to be reckoned with in various spheres. Literature, however, has not been one of them. When, therefore, I recently decided to compile a volume of short stories from the Emirates in English translation, I was of two minds about being able to find a sufficient number of stories worth translating. In the world outside the Middle East only one writer from the UAE, my friend Muhammad al-Murr, is known; he has specialized in the short story, of which he has put together some thirteen volumes, while two separate translators have selected stories by him for volumes in English. Were there another nineteen writers living in various parts of the UAE who could provide material for a whole volume? As with all the volumes of short stories I have published, I wished to avoid having any one writer represented by more than one story, which would, in my opinion, suggest that someone represented by, say, two stories was a better writer than one represented by a single tale.

So, with the help of friends in various parts of the country, I set about reading the few available volumes of short stories that had been produced since the genre first became known in this part of the Gulf in the last century. Until very recently, budding

writers of short stories had no outlets for publishing their work, instead using the Internet to post their writing, where they at least could have the satisfaction of seeing their stories in print and where fellow writers could follow what others were producing. It thus happened that in my search for short stories, I was told of a story entitled “The Old Woman” by a young woman writer that was to be found on the Internet. Having read and enjoyed the story I decided to translate it and use it in this volume. I had hardly finished translating it when another friend rang me up and told me triumphantly of a story that had just appeared in a local magazine. On looking through the magazine, I found that the story was no other than “The Old Woman.” This shows how quickly things are moving in this part of the world—and this takes in the field of creative writing.

The modern movement in Arab literature had its beginnings in the 1940s, with writers such as Egypt’s Naguib Mahfouz later achieving recognition worldwide. But the UAE, even before the area came out of British protection and the present federation of states was formed in the early 1970s, was not without an interest in creativity with language. I remember, when I went there in 1969 as director of the very basic local broadcasting station, going out one day with a colleague into the desert to record a local poet. The old man we met was blind and lived a harsh existence in a reed hut. At that time, the type of literature practiced was that of Nabati poetry, which was in the local spoken Arabic. The old man surprised me by reeling off at great speed several hundred lines of this poetry, and I was told that he knew by heart not hundreds but thousands of lines of his own and others’ Nabati verse. Today this form of literature is still widely practiced and held in high regard in the UAE.

It was only in the 1970s that the new genres of novel and short story, which had first made their way into Arabic literature

through such centers as Cairo, were discovered by readers and potential writers in the UAE. Thus, among the stories in the present volume, the earliest was published in 1974 and the latest a matter of a few months ago. Since I started this project, there has been increasing interest in the area for the arts and literature; these include major projects for the translation into Arabic of more of the world's masterpieces. At the same time new outlets are becoming available for the work of the creative writer. There are now magazines in which short stories make their appearance, and a short while ago the National Library in Abu Dhabi produced several volumes of creative writing, including poetry, volumes of short stories, also an accomplished novella. As more writing appears in print, it is to be hoped that the present first-ever selection of UAE stories translated into English will be followed in due time by yet others, and that local writers will become better known in the rest of the Arab world and will increasingly attract the attention of other translators.

