

Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

It's a pleasure to welcome you all to join us for another magical event.

00:00:06 Speaker 1

It's something special about having Marilyn Booth bring to us the latest of her translated works.

00:00:13 Speaker 1

She knows how to pick them and she knows how to take them from the eloquent Arabic in which they were first written and to generate a work of literature in English.

00:00:24 Speaker 1

that does both honor to the original and delights the reader in the English world.

00:00:31 Speaker 1

And tonight is absolutely something I have been looking forward to all term for all the ways that what you're going to share with us tonight opens whole new horizons to us.

00:00:44 Speaker 1

But Marilyn Booth is, of course, familiar to me after decades of friendship and collegiality from when she was professor at University of Illinois Champaign.

00:00:54 Speaker 1

to her time in Edinburgh where she held the chair.

00:00:58 Speaker 1

It was then called the, what is it?

00:01:01 Speaker 2

The Iraq chair.

00:01:02 Speaker 1

It's Iraq chair in Edinburgh.

00:01:04 Speaker 2

When my colleagues wanted to rile me, they would call it the Bath chair.

00:01:08 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:01:11 Speaker 1

There are these chairs that have slightly compromising titles to them, but you glorified the Iraq chair until we were in a position to lure you back to Oxford where you did your doctorate jointly with

00:01:23 Speaker 1

our great illustrious predecessors, Albert Hirani and Mustafa Badawi, history and literature, the two fields in which Marilyn Booth has made her scholarship, and came to join us as our Al Saud professor, another name which, if pronounced in the wrong way, might feel slightly compromising, but in which we take great pride having our latest Al Saud professor here with us tonight.

00:01:46 Speaker 1

And

00:01:48 Speaker 1

All she does is bring luster to our community.

00:01:50 Speaker 1

We celebrated with such joy when she was awarded the Booker Prize, the International Booker, for her translation of Jochel Hadithi's *Celestial Bodies* and everything that you brought to us since.

00:02:03 Speaker 1

Tonight, we're going to be celebrating the first translation that I have heard of Alice Al-Bustani's *Saiba*.

00:02:11 Speaker 1

which will bring for the English readers, for the first time, the earliest known example of a novel written by a woman from the Arab world.

00:02:18 Speaker 1

Is that correct?

00:02:19 Speaker 2

One of the, it depends on how you define the novel.

00:02:21 Speaker 1

I'm going to let you do all the time.

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One of the very earliest, yeah.

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And pass the honor that to you.

00:02:27 Speaker 1

But we have copies of Sahiba over here.

00:02:30 Speaker 1

It's going for a very good 6 pounds of copies.

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So please remember the family that you want to do.

00:02:37 Speaker 1

birthday presents, Christmas is okay, not around the floor.

00:02:41 Speaker 1

And I know that Marilyn will be glad to sign the copies.

00:02:45 Speaker 1

It's not in Alice's hand, then certainly her own.

00:02:47 Speaker 1

And I will leave to Marilyn to share with you the honor and pleasure we have of having the descendant of Alice, her grandson, sending it with us tonight.

00:02:57 Speaker 1

But

00:02:59 Speaker 1

I hand over to you and welcome back, Marilyn.

00:03:01 Speaker 1

Thank you so much for bringing another fabulous book to our community.

00:03:04 Speaker 2

Well, thank you for that amazing, generous introduction and for hosting us.

00:03:09 Speaker 2

It's been a great delight to be able to celebrate these works by authors I care so much about and to see them come into English.

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And yeah, I mean, tonight is just really amazing because we have

00:03:25 Speaker 2

I couldn't bring you the author, at least Bustani.

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Her dates were 1870 to 1926.

00:03:32 Speaker 2

But we have her grandson, Samir Bustani, who didn't go into quite the same kind of intellectual work that Bustani family members of Saiba's generation and before went into, but has a doctorate in engineering and has had a long career in engineering and other works.

00:03:53 Speaker 2

And

00:03:54 Speaker 2

I'll be saying a bit about Samir's role in this project.

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And I'm delighted also that we have Laufi Busteni, Samir's partner here, and Christine Busteni, who is the author's great-granddaughter, and her partner, Kamran Rastagar, who also plays an important role in this story.

00:04:16 Speaker 2

So what we're going to do is I'm going to say a few words about the novel

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its history, what I think its significance is, and how I came to the project, why I think it's important as well as enjoyable.

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And then after my few words, I've asked Samir to say a few things about the family, about his grandmother, whatever you want to say, really.

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And then the two of us are going to read in Arabic and English a couple of

00:04:48 Speaker 2

short passages from the novel.

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After that, I'll say very few words about the challenges of translating it and what I particularly kind of focused on and what I found difficult.

00:04:58 Speaker 2

And then hopefully we'll have time for questions from all of you.

00:05:05 Speaker 2

So I came to this novel, which was published in 1891 in Beirut,

00:05:13 Speaker 2

I first came to it when I was writing a chapter on women and the emergence of the Arabic novel for a volume published by OUP on the Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions.

00:05:26 Speaker 2

I always have to write it down because I can never remember it.

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And during that I read this novel and I was absolutely gripped by it for a number of different reasons.

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And then since then, teaching here,

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I have taught it in my Nahta paper and students have really enjoyed it and have found it interesting and fun to read.

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And also there's a lot in it to talk about.

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And so then, but then it hadn't, and it did occur to me.

00:06:00 Speaker 2

I mean, also Rana Isa, who was at AUB at the time, was talking about republishing it in Arabic, which I thought was a fantastic idea.

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And it did,

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It did kind of cross my mind.

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this would be fun to translate.

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But it was only when Kamran and I started talking about it that this began to become a reality.

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Now, Kamran was a value colleague at Edinburgh.

00:06:25 Speaker 2

I knew you before that, but yeah, but it was really nice to be with him at Edinburgh.

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And I was trying to remember, I can't even remember when this first came up, but at one point Kamran wrote to me and very, very gently kind of said, well, what do you think?

00:06:39 Speaker 2

about translating this.

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And he got me thinking about it.

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And he introduced me to Samir.

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And Samir has been very supportive and enthusiastic about this project and has supported it materially as well as morally or mentally.

00:06:57 Speaker 2

And so I'm extremely grateful to Cumbra and Samir for their support and for their patience.

00:07:03 Speaker 2

This has been a very long project.

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you're probably all aware that translators often also have to act as agents.

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So it took me quite a while to find a publisher.

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But I'm delighted that Oxford World's Classics has published it because that really brings it into the sort of the sphere of world literature.

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It also means that it's available.

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It's on the bookshelf in Blackwell's and many other places and it's affordable.

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So I'm really thrilled

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that it's come out with Oxford World Classics.

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Now, what about this novel?

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Why is it important, and why did I want to translate it?

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is one of the first works that we can call a novel that we know was written by an Arabophone woman.

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Now, there may have been others.

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There may have been some who published things anonymously or used male pseudonyms that we don't know.

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There are a couple of earlier works, Aisha Taimur,

00:08:04 Speaker 2

allegory that came out in 1888 that some people think of as a novel and others don't.

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It's a fictional work.

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And I'm not really hung up on who is first, but I think this is definitely one of the first.

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And I think more important, this one is, while it is in many ways

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similar to, parallel to other early works of Arabic fiction.

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And we can think of Arabic fiction, short stories and novels kind of as we know them today, really getting going in sort of the late 1850s, again, in more or less mostly in Beirut and then in Cairo and then in some other places.

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And

00:08:44 Speaker 2

It is, I'll be saying a couple words about how it is similar in many ways to other works of Arabic fiction, but it is also really distinctive in some important ways.

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So being one of the first Arabic novels by a woman is in itself, I think, historically significant.

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But it's also distinctive in being an Arabic novel that is set in Istanbul and Salonika,

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among Turkish characters, implicitly Muslim.

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I mean, it's really interesting because she doesn't, the author doesn't make much of this.

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is not about religion, and I think that's one of the things that I find really quite interesting about it.

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And in fact, the characters' names are all names that could and would have been common to

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Arabs of all different faiths.

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So she's, who knows whether this was conscious, I like to think it was, but she's very canny, or the novel is canny about that.

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So it's set in Istanbul, Turkish-speaking characters, and we can speculate, I can, you know, I do speculate in the introduction

00:10:02 Speaker 2

about why I think maybe the author chose to do this, but I won't go into that now.

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The title, Sa'iba, is the name of the central character.

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And here's one way in which the novel is both parallel to and distinctive from other works of the time.

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Many of the early Arabic works of fiction, whether they were original or adaptations or translations or some combination of all three, many of them took their titles

00:10:28 Speaker 2

used as their titles, generally a sort of physical and sort of geographical description of a young woman.

00:10:37 Speaker 2

So we have titles like, you know, The Virgin of Koresh, The Lovely Young Woman of Berlin, the, I can't remember now, but, you know, The Young Lovely of Tokyo, that kind of thing, which was supposed to, I think, draw readers in, promising some kind of

00:10:57 Speaker 2

sort of love story, but also maybe some exoticism through the setting.

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But so Elisa Bustani uses the name Saiba.

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So she uses the name of the female character as her title, but she doesn't sexualize it.

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It's not a descriptive, it's a name.

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And furthermore, it's a name that means correct or astute, you know, well-aimed, literally.

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So this says something, it does say something,

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about the character.

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I wanted, because I translated this partly as a Victorian novel, I wanted to sort of Victorianize it by calling it Sa Iba or Verity.

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So I think Verity is a, you know, it's an English name that would perfectly suit the name.

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But Oxford World Classics wouldn't let me do that.

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So I didn't.

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Now the story pivots around

00:11:54 Speaker 2

Sawiba's relationships with her cousin Farid and her fiance and then husband Lutfi.

00:12:01 Speaker 2

Lutfi is a cultured, well-educated reading officer in the, you know, reads newspapers all the time, an officer in the Ottoman security forces, and he's also a property owner in Istanbul.

00:12:16 Speaker 2

Farid, you'll learn something more about when we read.

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There are also mothers, there's a sister, there's some very colorful accomplices of Farid in the novel, but it's this triangle between Saiba and Farid.

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that really structures the action.

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And I don't want to say too much about it, because I don't want to ruin the story.

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And I would also say, if you do read it, I would suggest reading the novel first, and then if you're interested, reading my introduction.

00:12:47 Speaker 2

But reading the fiction before you read the...

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I tried hard not to give everything away, but it's really hard when you're writing a 10,000 word introduction not to.

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So we have this panoply of Turkish

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Istanbulites at the center of the story.

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We could also really say, I think, that the late Ottoman state, and in a sense, sort of Ottoman modernity itself, is a character in the novel.

00:13:13 Speaker 2

And there's a lot, and again, I hope to give you a flavor of that in the reading, there's a lot about kind of what was going on in Istanbul, and including political turmoil, the whole question of brigandage and political resistance in the European parts of the empire

00:13:32 Speaker 2

are part of the story.

00:13:35 Speaker 2

So Sa'iba is a novel of its time in focusing on marriage choices and the rights of the young, the rights of both young women and young men to choose their own futures, their own lives in the face of a lot of family pressure and how social institutions from marriage to education to norms of sociability shape these choices and sometimes limit them.

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Of course, this was not a theme that was specific to Ottoman or Arabic fiction.

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One could say that this is the theme of the 19th century novel.

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And some of the characters as well, in fact, in my introduction, I compare Farid, the cousin, who's a young dandy.

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I compare him to a character in Anthony Trollope's novel, *The Way We Live Now*, Felix.

00:14:23 Speaker 2

Felix and Farid are, in some ways, quite similar.

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But the novel reflects debates specifically in the Arabic press and other polemics of the time on issues from girls' education to changing marriage patterns, new practices of dress, entertainment, and expenditure and the way that new forms of sociability are

very much linked to encroaching European commercial and political involvement in the Ottoman Empire.

00:14:56 Speaker 2

And in particular, the power of education, tarabiya, moral training, education is really at the center of this novel.

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And that is something it shares with many other works at the time and earlier.

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But I think one thing that I really find very powerful about it is I think it goes beyond setting out these kind of social practices

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and looking at issues of marriage and young people's rights to interrogate attitudes towards masculinity and femininity, towards social relations of sexuality.

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What does honor mean in a patriarchal context where ideas about female sexuality and trust have not changed even as expectations of marriage have changed?

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And I think her novel really gets at these

00:15:49 Speaker 2

these important issues.

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When we think about those of us who think and write about this period of time, and this is true, again, I think not only in the Arabic context, but we tend to call these new marriage expectations that emerged in 19th century bourgeois societies companionate marriage.

00:16:15 Speaker 2

The notion that marriage is

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is something that should offer companionship and is not simply all the other things it is.

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But I've argued elsewhere that companionate did not mean egalitarian.

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I think we often tend to make that mistake and that in fact it was usually the women who were expected to make the compromises.

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And that as much as modern men wanted modern educated wives, they did not want to give up masculine authority in the family.

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And this is a, to me, it's a huge, it's sort of the elephant in the room in so much of the writing of this period.

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So the novel really confronts this whole complex of issues, you know, in the form of patriarchal gendered assumptions about men's and women's natures.

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And it especially does this by reversing the ancient notion, ancient and persistent notion of *caede* in this set, the wiles of women.

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It's the men in this novel who are full of *caede*.

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And so it asks questions about how can an educated woman in this situation, or I mean, education's actually maybe not the issue,

00:17:38 Speaker 2

maintain her integrity in a strongly patriarchal society even when that society looks like it's very modern.

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So it's a critique not only of old attitudes, traditional attitudes, but it's actually, I think, a critique of reformist assumptions, a critique of enlightened masculinity at the time that, again, as I said, embraced new ideas about women and marriage but couldn't step back from the patriarchal privileges of

00:18:08 Speaker 2

male authority.

00:18:12 Speaker 2

So another thing that is within this, this novel is unusual, I think, in the psychological depth that it achieves in terms of discussing the characters.

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So it's not just a sort of external discussion, but it's really interesting in terms of probing

00:18:37 Speaker 2

these characters, even as it does share with other novels of the time a certain didactic cast.

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And there is also the use of external description, a certain use of physiognomy.

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As I mentioned, with the name Sawiba, the name reflects something about the character.

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So these are quite typical things that it does partake in.

00:19:03 Speaker 2

But it's also

00:19:05 Speaker 2

quite different from many of the other novels of the time.

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In getting away from some of the hallmarks of late 19th century prose, I mean, these early novels often had, for instance, interludes of poetry in them.

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They relied on rhymed prose, et cetera.

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They were full of melodrama, some of it quite wild.

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And there is melodrama in this novel, but I think it's much more motivated by the characters.

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Now, the way that I talk about this novel in my introduction is that I call it an Arabic novel, an Ottoman novel, and a Victorian Gothic novel because I'm convinced that its critique of patriarchy is also voiced through a Gothic mode.

00:19:57 Speaker 2

There are a lot of dark dreams, hauntings, threatened incarceration, the notion of the home as a space that is actually not safe for women.

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It's also, it's highly intertextual.

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It embeds A French quasi-legendary tale, which had become popular throughout the world in translation in the 19th century, the tale of Genevieve de Brabant.

00:20:23 Speaker 2

And so it's got a lot of features in it, and I think that says something about Elise's own education.

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And just to finish up before I turn to Samir, what I say in my introduction in terms of this sort of combination of things is that this Arabic Ottoman Victorian Gothic novel draws on a Latin, German, French legend familiar to its Istanbul-based characters,

00:20:52 Speaker 2

reminds us of 19th century literature's global reach.

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And I think this really is in that sense very much a global novel.

00:21:01 Speaker 2

So having said that, would you like to say something about the family and Elise?

00:21:08 Speaker 3

Okay, you asked me to say something about the Boustani family.

00:21:11 Speaker 3

The Boustani family is a Lebanese, one of a large Lebanese family.

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They're all related to each other.

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They are known mostly for

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literature, not for being a big entrepreneur, but not for money, but for being a teacher of Arabic.

00:21:36 Speaker 3

You have many famous literature people like Marlin Bustani, who was the first encyclopedia, who did translate Iliad of Omer.

00:21:51 Speaker 3

No, I'm sorry, I'm confusing now.

00:21:55 Speaker 2

He translated Robinson Crusoe.

00:21:57 Speaker 3

Yeah, right.

00:22:00 Speaker 3

And so this is the Wustani family.

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As you know, many of the Lebanese immigrate.

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And so Alice

00:22:18 Speaker 3

immigrate with her husband to Egypt in I guess around 900.

00:22:24 Speaker 3

Okay, maybe you can say something about why, like who she married.

00:22:31 Speaker 3

She married my grandfather, who was a doctor, you know, a medical doctor, and okay, and he, you know, he was, they were in love for maybe 10 years or more.

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But

00:22:47 Speaker 3

her father, which was Marlene Boutros Boustani, did not accept my grandfather as a suitor because he was a Catholic Maronite and he was a Protestant, very strong.

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I mean, one of the strong Protestant in Lebanon.

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So it was only after he

00:23:14 Speaker 3

died, that they were able to get married.

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I mean, this is one of the few stories that my father accepted to.

00:23:23 Speaker 3

Otherwise, he would not talk to me about, he was very, I guess, sensitive about the death of his mother, and he would not talk about it.

00:23:33 Speaker 3

And so I know.

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So he was, so they immigrated to Egypt, and she died in Egypt.

00:23:45 Speaker 3

a few years later.

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What else you may want to know?

00:23:51 Speaker 2

So she published this novel long before she was married, which is interesting.

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That's right.

00:23:57 Speaker 2

She was only 21 when this came out.

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Yeah.

00:24:00 Speaker 3

And the book was had many, had about six or seven children, and they all were very active in literature and different, yeah.

00:24:12 Speaker 3

And I guess she was

00:24:13 Speaker 3

pushed by the family to be also to, her brother had written, also published a newspaper and wrote some books also, and she was, wanted to be equal to her brother.

00:24:34 Speaker 3

So I'm sorry, I don't know very much more about it.

00:24:38 Speaker 3

We had an unfortunate

00:24:42 Speaker 3

burning of all the documents of the family in a fire in Lebanon during the Civil War.

00:24:51 Speaker 3

And so I don't know more about it.

00:24:55 Speaker 3

Okay, what else would you like to know?

00:24:59 Speaker 2

That's great.

00:25:00 Speaker 2

I mean, as far as we know, the only other thing she wrote was a speech she gave in honor of her mother, who was also quite an incredible person, Rahil.

00:25:11 Speaker 2

She gave this speech

00:25:12 Speaker 2

to a girls' school audience, I think.

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It was a commemoration.

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And then it was published in a magazine.

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But other than that, we have nothing else published by her.

00:25:21 Speaker 2

And I just find that so poignant because to me, this is such an accomplished novel.

00:25:27 Speaker 2

And it's just, it seems to have come out of nowhere.

00:25:31 Speaker 3

But it must have been difficult here as a young woman being immigrated to Egypt, not knowing anybody there.

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not having a, at that time, not having a very successful career as a doctor, medical doctor in Egypt.

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So the other thing I'd like to do to say is how grateful I am for the great job that Marlene has done, and

00:26:10 Speaker 3

I've seen translation, and but this is a it's not just a translation, I think it's much more than that.

00:26:17 Speaker 3

And of course, I want to thank Kamran, because Kamran introduced me to Marlene, and maybe also Rana was helped a little bit in discovering her that book.

00:26:36 Speaker 3

So, thanks for

00:26:38 Speaker 3

Oxford Press and Oxford University to give that honor to my grandmother.

00:26:48 Speaker 3

So I thank you.

00:26:50 Speaker 2

Well, she deserves it.

00:26:52 Speaker 1

I was going to say, thank you for sharing your grandmother with Oxford.

00:26:56 Speaker 3

So we're glad to have come, you know, from the US, I guess, to be with you today.

00:27:09 Speaker 2

So shall we read?

00:27:17 Speaker 2

Why don't I first just introduce what we're going to be reading from the very start of the novel and the first scene.

00:27:27 Speaker 2

So read from the first chapter.

00:27:29 Speaker 2

And so

00:27:30 Speaker 2

Samir will read in Arabic and I'll read in English, and then I'll read a second passage also from fairly close to the beginning of the novel, just in English.

00:27:39 Speaker 2

And earlier today, Samir said to me, you didn't pick any of the dramatic parts of the novel to read.

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And I was like, yeah, you're right.

00:27:49 Speaker 2

The problem is

00:27:51 Speaker 2

If I did, it would take a lot of explanation and also it would give a lot away.

00:27:54 Speaker 2

But I did find, I was thinking maybe, I then thought of just another very, very short bit I could read that's a little bit more dramatic after that.

00:28:02 Speaker 2

So basically.

00:28:05 Speaker 2

this novel starts, and this is also very unusual for the time, this starts with a conversation between two women in a home in Istanbul, and it's described as a very sort of middle class, very elegant but sort of modest home.

00:28:26 Speaker 2

And the point is made that, let me just read this a little bit,

00:28:32 Speaker 2

Most especially with these rooms impress on visitors how careful, how judicious was the administration of the lady who presided over this house.

00:28:41 Speaker 2

Upon inspection, one could tell immediately that she was an excellent manager.

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After all, she had studied, she had learned her refinement in the schools of Istanbul.

00:28:51 Speaker 2

So that's, I mean, that's a very pointed introduction of 1 theme.

00:28:57 Speaker 2

So, would you like to read the...

00:28:59 Speaker 3

If you want to.

00:29:00 Speaker 2

If you want to.

00:29:01 Speaker 3

No, it's fine, but I think maybe I want to make it a bit shorter.

00:29:05 Speaker 2

Okay, just read whatever you want and then I'll...

00:29:10 Speaker 3

Well, first, you know, you have to excuse my Arabic accent.

00:29:14 Speaker 3

You know, I've been 60 years in America, so it's a bit, you know, I don't, I should read better.

00:29:22 Speaker 3

It's from...

00:29:24 Speaker 2

Do you want to start?

00:29:25 Speaker 3

Okay.

00:29:32 Speaker 3

OKOK.

00:29:32 Speaker 3

So this is now the two, the two friends getting together.

00:29:47 Speaker 3

OK and.

00:29:51 Speaker 3

Famaahiya in Tanawalat and added Fahima Labisal Farshiya Wa Lil Yashin, Wafiyadiya Kis Jildiyin, Tahmiluan Sayyidat and Khorujiyam Ilasouk, Fa Gelasat Bohatan in Tanzazaruna and Tafra Algeria, Minqadah, Baad, Hajad, Elbayt, Faatura Fikom.

00:30:19 Speaker 3

You will notice the grammar, you know, the second tense and following the correct Arabic grammar.

00:30:30 Speaker 3

Mahlahaz al nahar, ya sunniya, faina tabiya, fi rabi'aha, wa zahriha, wa'atriha, wa'wasa, fulkiha, tahjab al ofkar, shariya.

00:31:13 Speaker 3

.....

00:31:16 Speaker 3

Is the maid who came through, she closed the door after her and follow her and gets it followed.

00:32:10 Speaker 3

(()).

00:32:10 Speaker 3

Tawa jahat ilaihi anzar azama ibdawla wa for korabuha, korabuha.

00:32:18 Speaker 3

Waqad waladet lahu ukti, afifa, waladayn, Zakarian male boys, tawafel talafin, tawfalin, summa waladet lahu baadi haima ibnate haim zoiba

00:32:40 Speaker 3

Fa ya ya ya tarabiha hammer hammer in fais fa takhasa lesoriba mordian kanat koda waladet ibnit.

00:32:57 Speaker 3

Wa tremblet bada zerigl biyah.

00:33:01 Speaker 3

Wa lemme estaghdamet havifa akhadit ibnitiha.

00:33:08 Speaker 3

The cannit, Ukhten, Waarofikan, Li Soiba, Waaf, Hia, Fi, Maha, Hilal Aim, Waalam, Baalakhet, Soiba, Sana, Sadi, Ser, Min, Lom, Ta, Wa, Fa, Waaliduha, Fi, Mahmorin, Waalam, Yet, Tukli, Aila, Sawa, Maha, Bada, Chuhu,

00:33:40 Speaker 3

So this is a so she her father, her husband dies and left with her very little money.

00:34:01 Speaker 2

Okay, thank you.

00:34:02 Speaker 3

Sorry.

00:34:03 Speaker 2

No, that's great.

00:34:04 Speaker 3

Sorry.

00:34:04 Speaker 3

Excuse me?

00:34:13 Speaker 2

As soon as Fahema had left Sania on her own in the sitting room, having gone to dress for their little expedition, Kaiseran, who served this household, entered with coffee on a tray.

00:34:24 Speaker 2

Saniya had time for only one sip before Fahema reappeared, swathed in her long farajiya, a yeshinak stretched across her nose and dangling over her lower face.

00:34:35 Speaker 2

In her hand was a leather bag of the sort that had become customary for ladies to carry on their visits to the souq.

00:34:41 Speaker 2

The two women sat together for a few moments as they waited for the jaria to conclude a few household tasks so that she might accompany them.

00:34:49 Speaker 2

What a perfectly lovely day it is, Sania.

00:34:51 Speaker 2

Look around yourself, see the fine prospect that nature supplies, clothed in her springtime youth.

00:34:58 Speaker 2

These blossoms, their fragrances, the purity of lady nature's sky, how it all does stir up one's sense of poetry.

00:35:06 Speaker 2

Do you not see this happy swell of people?

00:35:08 Speaker 2

How they move about so briskly, finding something to entertain them at every turn in the brilliance of this day, eager to bask in its glow.

00:35:16 Speaker 2

I have no doubt that we too will find our proper share of joy and good fortune on this morning.

00:35:22 Speaker 2

Let us go on then, and I will tell you the story of my sister and her daughter from beginning to end.

00:35:28 Speaker 2

Ho there, follow us, and will you shut the door tightly behind us and secure it?

00:35:33 Speaker 2

Here, Sannia, at long last, listen to what I have to tell you.

00:35:37 Speaker 2

Afifa, my sister Afifa, married five years after I did.

00:35:41 Speaker 2

The man who married her was Bahjat Bey, Defterdar of the governorate of Salonika.

00:35:47 Speaker 2

As a treasury official responsible for record-keeping, he was the most intelligent, honorable, and resolute man.

00:35:54 Speaker 2

Because of these qualities, he excited the rising attention of senior men of state, and they brought him into their circles.

00:36:00 Speaker 2

My sister Afifa gave him two sons.

00:36:03 Speaker 2

Both boys passed away in their childhood.

00:36:05 Speaker 2

Then she gave birth to her daughter, Salua.

00:36:08 Speaker 2

But dear Afifa was badly distressed by the childbirth fever.

00:36:12 Speaker 2

In her ailment, she was obliged to find a milk nurse for Saliba.

00:36:15 Speaker 2

She chose a woman who had recently given birth to a girl child, but was widowed within days after the baby's birth.

00:36:22 Speaker 2

When my sister employed her, she took in the woman's daughter as well.

00:36:26 Speaker 2

That girl became a sister to Saliba, a constant companion.

00:36:30 Speaker 2

They've been together inseparable ever since.

00:36:34 Speaker 2

It was not long after Saliba's 6th birthday

00:36:36 Speaker 2

continued her aunt, that her father died while on a work assignment.

00:36:40 Speaker 2

All he left for his family was an income of only a few months duration.

00:36:45 Speaker 2

So my sister Hafifa, consumed and worn down by the grief she felt over her late husband, fell into a state of worry and despondency to the point of suffering grave depression.

00:36:56 Speaker 2

Her husband had amassed no wealth apart from his salary with which she could assure a livelihood.

00:37:03 Speaker 2

It is true that he had held several weighty administrative positions in his time, but he was a fiercely principled man, rather proud and self-denying, who refused to take even one potter above his regular salary.

00:37:15 Speaker 2

He spent most of what he acquired on his household, and whatever remained he gave to the poor.

00:37:21 Speaker 2

But the state, those who had witnessed his worthy comportment and who knew that his family had not this means to keep itself alive, assigned a stipend to the bereaved woman and ordered the disbursement of funds sufficient to provide Saliba and her milk sister Soraya with a goodly training, indeed a considerable education in of one of Istanbul's most excellent and refined schools for girls.

00:37:45 Speaker 2

When Nafifa returned to Istanbul from Salonika, following her husband's demise, a house was designated for her, and to this day, that is where she lives.

00:37:56 Speaker 2

As Fahima was speaking, the jaria broke in, wanting to draw her notice to a certain shop.

00:38:01 Speaker 2

That one surely stocks the fabrics you're looking for, said Kheyseran to her mistress.

00:38:06 Speaker 2

Good, good, then lead us there, Kheyseran, said Samiya.

00:38:10 Speaker 2

Let us go and see what this merchant has to offer.

00:38:13 Speaker 2

Amongst all of Istanbul's shops, this establishment enjoyed particular popularity.

00:38:19 Speaker 2

It was known for its fine quality stuffs and reasonable prices, and the ladies made some purchases.

00:38:26 Speaker 2

As they were leaving, their eyes fell on a comely young man whose presence could scarcely be ignored, of a light complexion and blue-eyed.

00:38:34 Speaker 2

He was clothed in the latest of fashions, and his figure exuded an elegant perfume.

00:38:40 Speaker 2

His swagger told the onlooker that he was well satisfied with the dandified spectacle that his person offered.

00:38:47 Speaker 2

Do have a careful look at that young fellow, said Fahima to her companion.

00:38:51 Speaker 2

He's had a rather major involvement in my sister's story.

00:38:54 Speaker 2

I will tell you all about him when we have finished our errands.

00:38:58 Speaker 2

So I think that sets, hopefully sets the scene.

00:39:02 Speaker 2

it shows you how much Istanbul and what's going on there and the state and the pensions that were given and so forth, as well as the fine girls schools are part of it.

00:39:16 Speaker 2

Now, I was going to read you more about Farid, who meets with his companion, Bullas, Bullas Amin,

00:39:29 Speaker 2

We do have stereotypes in this novel.

00:39:31 Speaker 2

The Greek, the Greek card player, who schemes with Farid when Farid is disconsolate about the fact that Saiba is not willing to marry him.

00:39:44 Speaker 2

I think instead of doing that, I'm just going to go to this one later paragraph because I don't want to spend too much time reading and read a little bit of a more dramatic, slightly more.

00:39:58 Speaker 2

dramatic scene.

00:40:02 Speaker 2

So at work, Lutfi gets a letter, unsigned letter, one in a series of letters he's gotten.

00:40:09 Speaker 2

And the letter says, at 4:00 in the afternoon, Saiba will meet Farid at the hunting lodge.

00:40:16 Speaker 2

As he read this sentence, Lutfi felt himself exhausted.

00:40:19 Speaker 2

His forces depleted.

00:40:21 Speaker 2

His entire body broke out in a cold sweat, and he took several gasping breaths.

00:40:26 Speaker 2

Looking at his watch, he saw that the time was already near 4:00.

00:40:29 Speaker 2

He catapulted from his seat as if dislodged by a shock and went for his horse.

00:40:34 Speaker 2

Saddling it quickly, he rode towards the forest.

00:40:38 Speaker 2

He made his way through the trees, remaining hidden from sight, while maintaining a path that permitted him to see everything around him.

00:40:46 Speaker 2

He did not have to wait long.

00:40:48 Speaker 2

Somewhere behind him, he heard two gunshots.

00:40:51 Speaker 2

It was not 5 minutes before he saw Sa'iva and the Jaria in the chase.

00:40:56 Speaker 2

And then he saw Farid on horseback, close behind him.

00:40:59 Speaker 2

His blood seemed to freeze in his veins at the horror of what he was witnessing.

00:41:04 Speaker 2

He felt himself sink into utter despair.

00:41:06 Speaker 2

He could scarcely believe his eyes.

00:41:08 Speaker 2

His trust in Sa'iva had been so strong.

00:41:11 Speaker 2

But alas, now his own eyes had vanished all doubts.

00:41:15 Speaker 2

Although he was a man of great self-control, constitutionally discreet, and not prone to quick reaction, here in the forest he felt as though the membranes of his heart had split apart.

00:41:27 Speaker 2

He made-up his mind to go home immediately and to leave Saliba behind in Istanbul when he went to his new assignment.

00:41:35 Speaker 2

So there you have two very different scenes from the home.

00:41:46 Speaker 2

So let me just say a few words about translating it and then we can open it up to questions.

00:41:53 Speaker 2

That sounds good.

00:41:55 Speaker 2

Yeah, obviously every translation has its own challenges and two particular ones in this one were the question of names and languages.

00:42:09 Speaker 2

So here we have Turkish characters in an Arabic novel.

00:42:15 Speaker 2

This is not maybe so much a matter of translation, but it is a matter of how you present the Turkish and the Arabic.

00:42:24 Speaker 2

So, the question came up, should I use Turkish spellings of the names in the novel?

00:42:32 Speaker 2

So it would be Saba, S-A-E-B-E, instead of Saliba in Arabic.

00:42:39 Speaker 2

Lutfi within umlaut.

00:42:42 Speaker 2

And then there were other, there are names of certain institutions like Doris Shafaka, which is the school, famous school that the girls go to and so forth.

00:42:53 Speaker 2

And so it was, it was kind of hard to know what to do.

00:42:57 Speaker 2

How Turkish should I make this novel?

00:43:01 Speaker 2

And also what about the use of terms like you saw in this first scene?

00:43:07 Speaker 2

Fahima goes off to put her outdoor clothes on, so she's wearing a farajiya or farache in Turkish, and they're in farajiya in Arabic and a yashmak and over her face.

00:43:19 Speaker 2

So again, what kind of, I wanted to use those terms.

00:43:23 Speaker 2

I didn't want to just simply translate them, but should I use the Arabic or the Turkish?

00:43:29 Speaker 2

So I ended up deciding on kind of a hybrid thing where I decided I really wanted to keep the characters' names in Arabic because after all, it is an Arabic novel for Arabic readers.

00:43:40 Speaker 2

And I didn't really feel right about using the Turkish.

00:43:46 Speaker 2

But for institutions, I thought it was important to keep the Turkish.

00:43:49 Speaker 2

So I just hope that it

00:43:53 Speaker 2

that it's not too confusing for readers.

00:43:55 Speaker 2

I have to say one thing that Oxford World Classics forces you to do when you do a book like this is to do lots of explanatory notes.

00:44:04 Speaker 2

So I think the explanatory notes are probably just about as long as the novel.

00:44:08 Speaker 2

But that's also because there are a lot of ways.

00:44:11 Speaker 2

Her portrayal of Istanbul is quite fascinating.

00:44:14 Speaker 2

I mean, like if I had read you that chapter on Farid, he is in

00:44:20 Speaker 2

which is a sort of new, very Europeanized quarter across the water from the old Istanbul, where the family lives.

00:44:28 Speaker 2

And the fact that he's in Beoglu in a gambling parlor, basically, just says a lot about his character.

00:44:36 Speaker 2

So these things are all things that needed to be explained.

00:44:38 Speaker 2

So there was all of that.

00:44:40 Speaker 2

I did a lot of research on sort of 19th century Istanbul, and also the barracks where Lotfi goes, which barracks are those, as probably, you know,

00:44:49 Speaker 2

Where are they living?

00:44:50 Speaker 2

It's sort of interesting because even though there's a lot of detail about Istanbul here, I think it was an imaginative picture.

00:45:01 Speaker 2

I don't think she ever went to Istanbul.

00:45:03 Speaker 2

I don't know.

00:45:04 Speaker 2

I mean, her husband, Abdullah, studied in the medical school in Istanbul.

00:45:08 Speaker 3

And all his brothers.

00:45:09 Speaker 2

They all studied in Istanbul.

00:45:12 Speaker 2

There were a few times when I kind of was like,

00:45:15 Speaker 2

Yeah, I don't think so.

00:45:18 Speaker 2

So that was quite interesting, just the spatial aspects of it.

00:45:23 Speaker 2

And I had to think a lot about kind of how to deal with that.

00:45:27 Speaker 2

A bigger challenge, I would say, was the tone of the novel, what tone to aim for.

00:45:33 Speaker 2

You know, as I said, I mean, not only is this a 19th century novel, but I think it has some very specific debts to English and possibly French

00:45:45 Speaker 2

fiction of the time.

00:45:46 Speaker 2

And I'm not suggesting that she, borrowed heavily, but I think she must have read, she must have read works of, we know she knew English.

00:45:56 Speaker 2

And she must have read works of literature because, again, these Gothic, I mean, Gothic was not completely unknown in Arabic fiction.

00:46:08 Speaker 2

And also you could say that

00:46:13 Speaker 2

you can find antecedents for Gothic themes in medieval Arabic literature as well.

00:46:19 Speaker 2

So, you know, I'm not suggesting it's completely European, but there's some very specific kinds, excuse me, of images here that really I, you know, I mean, I love 19th century English and French fiction.

00:46:32 Speaker 2

So, you know, for me, I was just kind of wallowing in this.

00:46:36 Speaker 2

But it raises the question, well, then what kind of

00:46:40 Speaker 2

tone do I want to achieve?

00:46:42 Speaker 2

And as you may have seen, what I tried for was a sort of Victorian light, if I can put it that way, a kind of something that would give a sense of Victorian writing without wanting to completely make it, you know, displace it from its Arabic roots.

00:46:59 Speaker 2

I don't know if I was successful.

00:47:00 Speaker 2

I mean, readers are the ones to judge that.

00:47:02 Speaker 2

I'm not.

00:47:03 Speaker 2

But that's what I was trying for.

00:47:06 Speaker 2

And I, you know, I kind of, I did it and

00:47:09 Speaker 2

It also gave me an opportunity while I was translating to go back and read some of my favorite novels.

00:47:15 Speaker 2

I mean, I'm an Anthony Trollope fan and other, you know, Mariah Edgeworth, she did earlier, but still.

00:47:23 Speaker 2

And so I was, I had sort of 19th century British fictional style

00:47:33 Speaker 2

kind of in my head when I translated.

00:47:35 Speaker 2

And so I was trying for that, but of course you don't want to overdo it.

00:47:39 Speaker 2

And I struggled with whether I was getting the balance right.

00:47:44 Speaker 2

So that was, I would say, the biggest challenge for me.

00:47:48 Speaker 2

The third thing I'll mention is a smaller matter, a much more specific one, but it's definitely one that translators face all the time.

00:48:00 Speaker 2

depending on what languages you're translating into.

00:48:04 Speaker 2

And especially if you consider yourself, as I consider myself a feminist translator, the use of the so-called universal masculine, the use of he when it's not just referring to a male person.

00:48:20 Speaker 2

And I wanted to use, and Arabic has that, as English does.

00:48:29 Speaker 2

And

00:48:30 Speaker 2

I wanted to use their, which of course now is very common as a non-gendered pronoun.

00:48:36 Speaker 2

But I worried about whether that might sound anachronistic.

00:48:40 Speaker 2

Was that going to be a problem?

00:48:41 Speaker 2

I decided in the end, I used it a few times.

00:48:45 Speaker 2

I decided in the end that it was neutral enough.

00:48:48 Speaker 2

I think there might have been some other, I mean, you have to be careful about anachronism, especially in dialogue.

00:48:55 Speaker 2

You never want to sound too, especially a 19th century novel, you don't want to use

00:49:04 Speaker 2

sort of informal English from the 1980s or whatever, But I felt that in this case it was, it worked okay.

00:49:14 Speaker 2

It was neutral enough to use there, even though for some readers they may say,

00:49:19 Speaker 2

not very Victorian.

00:49:21 Speaker 2

So, it's just, I think, an example of how, as a translator, you're always making compromises.

00:49:28 Speaker 2

You're always weighing one thing against another.

00:49:31 Speaker 2

You can never get everything in that you want to.

00:49:35 Speaker 2

And I have to say, I really have always disliked reading my own translations after I published them because I will always see something.

00:49:45 Speaker 2

that I, hopefully it doesn't make me cringe, but at least something that will make me think, I could have done so much better.

00:49:53 Speaker 2

And that's just, I think that's just a professional hazard of translating.

00:49:59 Speaker 2

There's just no way around it.

00:50:03 Speaker 2

So I think I'll stop there.

00:50:05 Speaker 1

That's a brilliant place to stop.

00:50:06 Speaker 1

And I think that you've done such a great job in making us aware of, again, the art of the translator.

00:50:13 Speaker 1

I'm very struck by the way you went back to the 19th century novel to try and get a tone that was at the time of the work itself.

00:50:22 Speaker 1

And I do think that we are confronted with these issues of you don't want to abandon your feminist translators' views by falling back on the universal masculine or whatever.

00:50:39 Speaker 1

And so, I mean, I think that these are the kinds of issues that

00:50:44 Speaker 1

you do think about it and that do distinguish what works in the translation does.

00:50:47 Speaker 1

And I have no doubt we're going to read this and love it.

00:50:50 Speaker 1

We're all excited to do so.

00:50:52 Speaker 2

I hope so.

00:50:53 Speaker 1

I'm going to start the questions with just a little bit more about the publication history of the book.

00:50:59 Speaker 1

So

00:51:00 Speaker 1

You say it was published in 1891.

00:51:04 Speaker 1

where was it ever serialized?

00:51:06 Speaker 1

The length of it looks very much like the kind of work that might have appeared in a, you know, type format.

00:51:15 Speaker 1

Do we ever know if it was illustrated?

00:51:18 Speaker 1

So if you could just give us a little bit more of the publication record, was it reissued or was it a one shot wonder?

00:51:27 Speaker 2

Yeah, no, it's.

00:51:30 Speaker 2

one-shot wonder, as far as we know.

00:51:31 Speaker 2

I've never seen it.

00:51:32 Speaker 2

And you're right.

00:51:33 Speaker 2

I mean, at the time, serialized fiction was very popular.

00:51:37 Speaker 2

I mean, even in sort of, you know, political newspapers, Ella Haram for a while was serializing fiction.

00:51:43 Speaker 2

So that was a very popular thing to do, and it was a good way for journal publishers to sell copies, because, you know, but I have never found any indication.

00:51:53 Speaker 2

And, you know, there are quite a few people now working on 19th century material, and I don't think, I think if

00:52:00 Speaker 2

if that had been the case, I sort of, even if I hadn't found it, somebody would have.

00:52:06 Speaker 2

So as far as I know, it was never serialized.

00:52:09 Speaker 2

It was published by Khalil Sarkis, who was a major publisher in Beirut, but was also Alice's brother-in-law.

00:52:19 Speaker 2

So he was part of the Bustani.

00:52:20 Speaker 2

He had worked with Buttress Bustani, her father, as a younger man, and then he started his own, I think it wasn't it Darl Adeb?

00:52:29 Speaker 2

I've got it.

00:52:31 Speaker 2

I have a thing on the publishing history here.

00:52:33 Speaker 3

Yeah, he had married one of the daughters.

00:52:37 Speaker 2

Yeah, Al-Madbaa Al-Adabiya, the literary press.

00:52:42 Speaker 2

And the Sarquistas also had a newspaper.

00:52:45 Speaker 2

This is the other thing.

00:52:46 Speaker 2

I mean, they had a newspaper, Lissende and Hell.

00:52:48 Speaker 2

And so, if it had come out serially, I would think would have come out in Lissende and Hell.

00:52:55 Speaker 2

But I've worked a lot on Lissende and Hell and I've never.

00:52:58 Speaker 2

seen anything.

00:52:59 Speaker 2

One thing I do talk about, though, in the introduction is that it was noticed at the time.

00:53:05 Speaker 2

So there are a couple of articles in The Sin of the Hell that refer to it.

00:53:11 Speaker 2

And it's really, I think it's, at least I find it very interesting because this comes, these are articles trying to encourage women to write and also

00:53:22 Speaker 2

lauding the women of Syria.

00:53:25 Speaker 2

we now, we see we have these intellectual women and they're writing and we're really happy about this.

00:53:30 Speaker 2

And there's literally one that says, one writer has a subject, has a series on work and another writer has a series on this.

00:53:40 Speaker 2

And then we find another writer writing a novel called Sa'iba.

00:53:43 Speaker 2

What is also interesting about this is that he mentions the topics, but he never gives the names of the authors, even though they did sign themselves.

00:53:52 Speaker 2

we know who wrote those pieces.

00:53:54 Speaker 2

But so it's mentioned, it was also mentioned in, one feature in magazines and newspapers of the times was a section on new publications where usually it wasn't so much full reviews.

00:54:10 Speaker 2

It was usually very short notices, basically congratulating the author and saying, we think this is a worthy

00:54:21 Speaker 2

magazine.

00:54:22 Speaker 2

And there are several of those.

00:54:24 Speaker 2

And they're actually slightly longer than some of the other things.

00:54:27 Speaker 2

So people noticed this and they saw it as something new and good.

00:54:33 Speaker 2

There's one very, well, it's not meant to be funny, but I think it's the one in El Mukтата where

00:54:41 Speaker 2

the magazine writes basically saying, oh, this novel has come out by the daughter of the great Buttress El Busteni.

00:54:49 Speaker 2

And, you know, Buttress El Busteni could never let anybody precede him in anything.

00:54:55 Speaker 2

And now his daughter here, she's not letting anybody precede her.

00:54:58 Speaker 2

But it's all about the father in it.

00:55:00 Speaker 2

It's, you know, congratulating the father really more in a way than her.

00:55:04 Speaker 2

So we have that.

00:55:05 Speaker 2

So I do trace

00:55:07 Speaker 2

the mentions of this in the press.

00:55:10 Speaker 2

But as far as we know, it never appeared.

00:55:13 Speaker 2

It was never republished.

00:55:15 Speaker 2

We are trying to get it republished, hopefully in AUB Press.

00:55:22 Speaker 2

Because among other things, I mean, I'd just like it to be out again.

00:55:25 Speaker 2

People should read it.

00:55:26 Speaker 2

But it's also a great teaching text.

00:55:28 Speaker 2

I mean, I think anyway, for people teaching 19th century Arabic letters.

00:55:35 Speaker 1

As you have?

00:55:37 Speaker 1

we're grateful to the family and to the translator for sharing Alice Bustani Saiba with us all.

00:55:44 Speaker 1

I remind you that we have 15 copies here.

00:55:47 Speaker 1

They're going for six pounds of pops, so snap it up while you can.

00:55:51 Speaker 1

But before we break for you to grab your copy, please join me in giving the warmest thanks to Marilyn Boudi and Sanil Bustani.