10.5 The Novel as Instrument: Sinan Antoon and Michael Allan (MAT)

Transcript

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast that brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work, and about how we work in relation to novels. We're sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies, and produced in partnership with *Public Books*. I am Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, one of your hosts for this season. For today's episode, we're delighted to welcome to *Novel Dialogue* the Iraqi novelist, poet, scholar, and literary translator, Sinan Antoon, in conversation with Michael Allan, a pairing that's especially exciting because Sinan and Michael have known each other for quite a long time. So to introduce our guest to the listeners, Sinan is the author of, amongst many other books, the novels *The Corpse Washer*, *The Baghdad Eucharist*, *The Book of Collateral Damage*, and the just-published in English, *Of Loss and Lavender*. This latest novel follows two Iraqi men as they make new lives in the United States. Sami, a retired doctor, and Omar, a soldier and deserter marked by the excision of an ear as punishment for his crime. Omar arrives in the U.S. in the 1990s, fleeing Saddam Hussein's regime, and yearns to shed his previous self. Sami, meanwhile, joins his son in Brooklyn in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the violence it unleashed, but quickly succumbs to the progression of dementia. These two storylines unfold alongside each other until the two men's paths cross. Sinan himself translated *Of Loss and Lavender* into English, having previously translated *The Corpse Washer*, as well as Mahmoud Darwish's *In the Presence of Absence*, which won a 2012 American Literary Translators Association Award, and Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*, which was long listed for the International Booker in 2025. Sinan is also a scholar of Arabic literature and associate professor in the Gallatin School at NYU.

Michael, for his part, is an associate professor of comparative literature and film studies at the University of Oregon, and a scholar whose work cuts across the Arabophone, Francophone, and Anglophone spheres. He is the author of *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt*, and, most recently, of *Cinema before the World: The Global Routes of the Lumière Brothers*, which, like *Of Loss and Lavender*, was just published in March. So, congratulations, Sinan and Michael, on these two new books being in the world, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*.

Michael Allan

Thank you for having us, Magalí.

Sinan Antoon

Yes, thank you for hosting us. It's lovely to be here with you.

MA

So, if it's okay, I can take off with the first question. And, Sinan, one, it's an absolute pleasure to get to chat with you today, and yet there's also something a little bit daunting, which is I've long respected you as a literary critic, and I, of course, admire your work as an author. And so, Margaret Atwood is kind of ricocheting in my head for her sort of cantankerous relationship to those who discuss her work and her presence. But I wanted to say, sort of in light of that, one of the things that's always impressed me about when we first met was back in, like, 2005, 2006, and you had finished your work as a filmmaker, co-director of *About Baghdad*, and I, of course, knew your work as a poet, as a scholar of pre-Islamic poetry. And then, in the intervening 20 years, you've clearly established yourself as a writer in the broadest sense, which is, you know, a poet, as well as a translator, as well as a novelist. And I guess to get us started today, I was curious to hear your thoughts about the move towards writing novels, and that is, what affordances does the novel as a form offer you?

SA

Thank you so much. First, it's a real pleasure because I highly respect your work, and I admire your work, and use your articles in my courses, so it's always a pleasure to be in conversation. I always think about why sometimes I move to poetry and why sometimes to novels, and I can't always find a satisfying answer. My cop-out answer is I think of these as two instruments, and I'm always playing the same music, and some genre affords a different type of projection. But I think it seems that primarily, not exclusively, but primarily I'm haunted by history, the history of dictatorship, the history of empire, history as a whole. And the novel allows for a more wholesome, in-depth confrontation with history in terms of a larger landscape, which poetry affords, but in spurts. And all my poems are very short. And I think the context of Iraq and the United States, and the specific situation in Iraq in terms of 30 years of dictatorship, with all that entails in terms of controlling the writing of history, then followed by sanctions that really destroyed society, and then followed by this regime that the U.S. created in 2003, there is such a huge gap and a huge chaos in terms of how to think of history. Which makes the novel similarly to Lebanon—you're familiar with that case—but other places, in this country, in the United States, I mean. I teach *Beloved* in a way, just the novel allows me to really engage with history, alternative history, and kind of create this alternative archive, and gives me a lot of freedom that I cannot find in other genres. And seems to, not to toot my horn, but seems to speak to readers in the Arab world, for whom, this is not just entertainment, this is other forms of history at a time when history and entire countries and entire societies are literally being destroyed.

MA

No, but one of the things that's so incredibly compelling *Of Loss and Lavendar* is that it braids together two stories, that of Sami and that of Omar, and then each story is itself put into relief one against the other. So Sami, obviously suffering from dementia, leads to a certain mode of narration, a certain constellation of figures that Sami experiences in a particular way. Omar, who bears the scar of the Iraqi regime with his cut ear, has a very different relationship to the move to the United States and to his past in particular. I was curious, there's so much that's generative about how these two stories work alongside one another, well above and beyond their point of intersection at the end. And I was curious what that parallel model, that braiding together does in this novel, what that does for you that say, in *Baghdad Eucharist*, it's a triptych, there's three different stories. And so I just, on the level of craft, I would love to hear your thoughts about what the parallelism does that the sort of triptych doesn't, or were there certain things that braiding two stories together, how that worked for you versus working with three different plot lines?

SA

Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I see this one as very similar structurally to the *Baghdad Eucharist*, because although the omniscient narrator intervenes at the end of *The Baghdad Eucharist*, it is about these two characters who live, although they live in the same house and in the same city, because of their bodies, because of their gender, because of their generation, they live two different Baghdads. And that question has always haunted me. And history is always a contested landscape and a battle. And it goes without saying that when one speaks of an epoch or a period in a country, you know, it's a cliché, but it was the greatest time, it was golden for X group, but it was a horrible hell for others. Whether in this country we're living in now as wanting to make America great again, or in Iraq, again, because of the destruction of collective memory, which is something I'm also interested in. Not only the institutional, but all the different layers because of the kind of the sectarian institutionalization that happened after 2003. And also an ongoing debate that started in Iraqi circles inside Iraq and in the diaspora on social media is this form of nostalgia for this past, which exists in *The Baghdad Eucharist*. And then with the arrival to this country, it's the same story. And so this parallel allows me to juxtapose and contrast two visions and two memories of what it was like to live in Iraq in the eighties. And of course, as elsewhere, it's always inflected by class and how the trajectories of immigrants or refugees are also largely overdetermined by their class background and by fortunes and where they arrive. And then the different Iraqs that exist in the memory of people. So the parallel allows me to do that so well. And it's sometimes, I mean—there's a lot of planning, but sometimes even though I don't believe in the metaphysical or in an inspiration, but sometimes the form presents itself to you on a platter. So the initial character that I had in mind was Omar, but then, you know, Sami, I think is similar to Youssef in *The Baghdad Eucharist*, and so on and so forth. Unlike *Baghdad Eucharist*, there is no omniscient narrator intervening because I also wanted to leave it more open. And it's more haunting to me to have that confrontation and to not provide answers and to provoke very difficult questions for which maybe there are no clear answers.

MAT

I wanted to ask, I think in relation to this, so you have, right, triptych in *Baghdad Eucharist*, but the kind of diptych of Omar and Sami and *Of Loss and Lavender*. And we don't quite know when we're going to land with a character when we go from Omar to Sami or vice versa. And that there's moments of flashback and analepsis, I think more in the second half of the novel, but there's these small gestures of prolepsis that I found immensely affecting. So even something as simple as Sami realizing he loved the goats when he leaves for the lavender farm, but that hasn't happened yet, as we're moving in his timeline. And I think that's a feature even in something like *The Book of Collateral Damage*. So narrating time out of order broadly, but also when it is that we move out of the ostensible temporal progression and the kinds of, uh, narrative effects that has. So more so than two stories or three stories, really telling stories out of order, I suppose, is my question.

SA

To my advantage or disadvantage early on, even from the first novel, but when I even became more serious about reading and writing somehow linear narratives were not interesting to me at all. And I was always drawn into more complicated or more nonlinear. And as I read more, I realized that even not just aesthetically, but politically, I'm not satisfied with these typical narrative lines. And when it comes to memory also, we do not perceive or conceive of time and events in a linear manner. There is this human urge that we have to impose a linear manner and some kind of sensible narrative that would make sense of a logically nonsensical world or life, of course. So with this, with these two characters who are both traumatized for different reasons, it wouldn't make sense—to me also, this rhymes much better with the type of mentality and the type of mental space that I was trying to get across. So yeah, and this always becomes an issue with the editors because they, you know, I appreciate their work and whatnot, but—so they're like, well, is this supposed to happen? And I'm like, no, I mean, I want as much as possible, the reader, just as I did, to inhabit the mind and the body of the character. And so it's always tough because there is a thin line between a certain musical structure or chaos. And so I have to move parts back and forth until somehow it reads and sounds that it is not linear, but it's not too chaotic. But, but also, you know, I do believe and crave smart readers, and most readers are very smart and they don't need to be handheld. And just as I, as a reader, want to do the work or do some work with the author. So, and I must say, I mean, I enjoy shifting things back and forth and having them be so fluid. And again, the subject matter itself and the themes call for this type of fluidity and even disorientation.

MA

I love, Sinan, how in the story of Sami, I mean, we really do in a sense, through the framework of dementia, get very vivid reflections on memory. And so there's moments where there's explicit reflection on how dementia works, but also the sort of sensorium that Sami occupies. That's threaded, of course, alongside Omar, for whom the ear is a very physical reminder, a very physical memory that's inscribed on the body. And I was fascinated, largely, I mean, I just think the very resonant way that the two stories you're braiding together—I mean, that Iraq is

not understood simply as a geographical location somewhere on a map, but Iraq is a site that's lived through the memories and experienced through the traumas of these two characters in particular. And I wondered, I admire and respect your translation of Mahmoud Darwish so, so, so much, and memory and forgetfulness and nisyān, like the whole framework of forgetting and remembering in Arabic literature has quite a tradition. And I was curious, as a writer yourself, who's so cognizant of Arabic literary traditions, the Arabic language, and then also as a translator, as you are, the term memory and forgetfulness travels across those traditions in very different ways. And so part of my interest would be to hear your thoughts on whether nisyān is an untranslatable. [laughter] That is, is there something about it within the Arabic tradition that gets altered or transmuted when it comes into an Anglophone readership? And then the second, I might push a little bit further. So one could say that Iraq is a place of memory. And there's even echoes. I think, is it, there's an echo to Vietnam at some point where Iraq is for Sami what Vietnam is for another character. And it had me wondering whether there's a generalizability, that is to say, do the politics of Iraqi memory graft differently than say, Palestinian memory or memories of Vietnam? That is to say, are these translations across sites and places and memories generalizable, or is there something radically specific about the type of trauma that this nisyān makes thinkable here?

SA

About nisyān, yes. And you know, all due love and respect to English, but I've been increasingly in recent years thinking about it. That's why there is a line in *The Book of Collateral Damage* when Nameer is trying to translate an Iraqi blues song into English. And then he tells Mariah, you know what, some things are untranslatable. And then they are! Because certain semantic fields are so rich and have such a long history that one word or even two words or even a footnote is not going to do them justice. And, you know, then there's this dialectic between forgetting and remembering. And then that, you know, it's even proven scientifically that we also keep editing and changing our memories. Memories themselves are not static. But about the generalizability, I mean, that's a very important question, not just intellectually and philosophically, but even for activists on so many continents. This is the big problem that often cuts short the life of coalitions and, you know, polarizes people. But yes, I mean, I think for every country, there is something very specific and very peculiar, but this is also the history of empire. An empire, by and large, an empire built on settler colonialism and racial superiority behaves in the same way wherever it goes. And to me, I mean, this is a project that I don't know if I can work on. There's, there are very minor passing evidence of that. So when U.S. soldiers, occupying soldiers in Iraq and generals call Iraq Indian country, I mean, where does that come from? So of course, soldiers and officers and pundits come with their sense of white supremacy in Iraq. But of course, you know, there are no races in Iraq that gets translated into sects and all of these. But there are definitely parallels between Vietnam and Iraq and between the experience of war and the devaluing and denigration of black and brown bodies. And that's also, in a way, it relates to personal experience. When I started teaching here at NYU, where I'm sitting in 2005, when Iraq is being destroyed, it's the reality that out of 35 faculty members, most of whom think of themselves as leftists, the only two people who acknowledged that maybe being from Iraq and living in the belly of the beast as this beast destroys my country. So it was a

Puerto Rican colleague, an African American colleague who, you know, voiced that to say, hey, it must be really difficult and so on and so forth. So, yes, there are generalizable patterns of empire and of settler colonialism and occupation. And it's happening now as we speak in Lebanon and in Palestine, there are patterns and models that empire perfects or tries to perfect and then uses on other people. And there is this, it's tough to put it out, but there is this sense of unspoken and spoken solidarity between victims of empire from different epochs.

MAT

So there's the conceptual question about the translation, literally, but also translatability of certain historical experiences as a kind of principle or politics, but also thinking about them on the level of plot, right? So that's another transformation that would happen between seeing the resonances, maybe not quite parallels between Puerto Rico and Iraq, for example, but thinking about how they might work their ways into the plot of a novel and be in the flesh of your characters was something I was thinking about as these questions were also percolating for me while I read Of Loss and Lavender.

SA

A lot of these decisions in the narrative and in the writing come spontaneously, but I assume or I know that they are product of the way I see the world and the product of my politics as well. And then, I mean, in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in those moments of global solidarity and South-South. I mean, you all work on that. So it just comes comes naturally, I think. And I mean, there is on the one hand, I, at least like some others have been, trying to ward off this desire to write this kind of globalized novel that is successful commercially. So on the one hand, I'm very allergic, to be honest with you, when I read about these novels that are so, you know, easily translatable. So this, perhaps this is my response, and this is why it took me a long time, or I waited a long time, before writing a novel that takes place in the United States. You know, in the Arab world, they keep asking, I was like, why do you keep writing about Iraq? Why don't you write about the US? And I'm like, also, I don't want to be part of that trend. But also, I think it takes a long time for me, at least, to be able to understand a place with such a rich history and such a complicated history, then to write about it in a way that gives it the depth that it deserves. Some of the best parts of the novel, in my mind, were ones that were never really planned. But I think they come from intensely thinking about the characters and the novel. But I, for the longest time, I used to be bitter about being in academia, to go back to your initial question, Michael, because I thought that, you know, delayed my writing and whatnot. But then I realized that that made me a better reader, but also made me be wary and careful about what are the consequences of the way one writes a novel. So perhaps it's a hypersensitivity. But I think hopefully at the end of the day, it lends a certain type of depth, rather than superficiality, to these connections that exist, but that always there is this danger of flattening and being reductive when speaking of overlapping commonalities and similarities and so on and so forth.

MA

Could I ask, Sinan, so I'm curious, in the novel, there's sort of various modes of recognition and misrecognition that are at play. One is the—Omar essentially starts to proclaim that he's from Puerto Rico as a way of averting a set of for not having to relive time and again questions about Iraq. And, but then there's also on the level of language politics, incredible attention you afford to, you know, Syrian dialect, Yemeni dialect in these kinds of networks that Omar enters into ways of distinguishing regionalisms within the Arabic language, and yet a certain camaraderie among an Arab community living in the US. And as a self translator, I guess this is a question about craft, but I was curious how you, when you're thinking about the translation of Arabic dialect into the English version of this novel, what sorts of decisions did you make? There's many moments in the novel where you leave it untranslated, and the mark of the dialect is present in the transliterated form as it's printed in the novel. And then there's other moments where that seemed less important, and there's allusion to the fact that it's a Syrian or Yemeni dialect that is emerging. And so, um, given that within Arabic, the language politics and the pragmatics of language use would register for a reader, I loved when I was reading the English, that still registers. And so as a translator of your own work, how did you decide how to navigate that path?

SA

Yeah, that's an excellent question. Because in all my novels, the dialogue is always in the various dialects, whether inside Iraq or outside. And that's, I'm sure, you know, a huge debate in the Arab world, because there are a lot of novelists who write their dialogues in standard Arabic. And to quote our late friend, Elias Khoury, is like, you know, the doorman and the philosopher and the academic, they all speak the same language, which is ridiculous. But there is something that's really untranslatable, because I cannot render the differences of the Arabic or Iraqi dialects in English. I mean, what can I do, put a Southern dialect or a New England dialect, that would completely change the entire novel. So the solution is, which I always insist with editors, is to leave a few words in that dialect, just transliterated to give an indication that this is something different. That's the least that I could do. And that's the choice to mark, if it's not even said in the narrative itself, or sometimes it is, when he says he heard the Yemeni dialect, so that already indicates it to you. But something that I was able to do in the English, which I couldn't do in the Arabic is that, Omar's English is, of course, not that good when he arrives. And it takes him a long time for it to become really good. And that was not reflected in Arabic. So when I translated his speech or the speech of some of the other characters who are not native speakers of English, I made sure that what they would say would sound exactly like how they would say and the typical flaws that Arabs or Mexicans would have in English. So that is something that is not in the Arabic that I added because I'm self translating to give it, to just make it sound—it's a cliche, but, you know, these characters are real for me and they have to sound really real. And whenever my students use the word authentic, I raise the red flag and, but, you know, they would sound real and believable. So that's what I did. When I'm asked about loss, yes, that's the only loss, because since I was a kid, I really enjoyed listening to the different, and identifying the different, dialects in Iraq and here in the US as well. I actually play this trick where I asked the person from their dialect from the first sentence where they're from,

because I really love and cherish this variety that we have and all of these different iterations than the music. And so I enjoy writing in Arabic when in English, it doesn't come out except for using these expressions, which might turn off some readers because there is too many songs, there's too many italics, there are too many barbarous words. But hey, that's how it is.

MA

So do you think Sinan, there's a difference between say the racial politics of Puerto Rico and Iraq being blurred around the sort of idiom of brown bodies in the US and the language politics of dialect that play out. And I wonder, if you were to think between a US readership and a readership of the novel in the Arab world, whether race and language would translate in similar ways, or do you have any thoughts about how you see those categories playing out differently in different parts of the world?

SA

On the part of readers or in general?

MA

I guess—so, where the question's coming from a little bit is, you know, obviously, I'm thinking within say Quebec French, and there's ways that the Quebec novel mediates questions of class and political situations on the basis of the register of French that's spoken. And there's just an attention to the immediacy of language politics in a place like Quebec. And that's true in many places in the Arab world as well, where the politics of language are immediate and resonant. And, moving to the US, I found that there's an attention to racial politics in a certain way, talk about the sort of epidermal schema of race in the US, but that the language politics question here translates or doesn't translate in the same way at all. And so, as I read and engage with your novel, I notice, wow, that's it's so alive on the linguistic dimension. And it's also alive in staging questions of racial politics, in an idiom that was more recognizable to me as a kind of US way of understanding how racial solidarity can work.

SA

No, I mean, no, I'm happy to hear that. And I think, you know, it goes both ways, but I think nowadays readers from my experience in the Arab world, the young readers who are all young because we're not so young anymore, are, because of the technology and because of social media, they are more aware of all of these issues and through the media than I would have expected them to be. So they can read those differences very well, and they can understand the racial politics, especially that, to use a word that the liberals like to use, the US is *involved* in our countries, so, so viscerally. And, you know, US culture invades the world on a daily basis. So their frame of reference is *Breaking Bad* and all of these, and that goes to speak to the global capital culture and Netflix and all of that. So they, and in a way, because it's the periphery, and this is something else, the periphery has always more pressure and demand to understand the

center. I mean, my first surprise when I came to the US in ‘91 is that I knew about Whitman and I knew about Ginsburg and I knew about Italo Calvino and everyone, but the people in the MFA program somewhere in Virginia, they didn't know anything about our parts of the world, or even about the global South, or even about South America. Writing about race and class in the United States, you know, it's so important and so present, yet, a lot of times, which irritates me, you'll find that a lot of these novels, it's completely absent and it shouldn't be. I mean, so there is a—I tried hard to write it in such a way where that it's spontaneous and not, you know. I guess this brings me to another very important issue is for someone with very obvious politics that falls on one side of the spectrum, how to make sure that that is braided, to use your word, into the work in a very seamless way that does not at all turn any part of it into a platform, right? Which happens a lot. And you know, in one of my previous novels, in *The Corpse Washer*, a very dear friend who loves my work told me, you know, this section here is obviously where your rage comes out and takes over the character's voice and gives a speech. But I mean, we don't have time to talk about it and I only have one lifetime, but it's amazing the connections, the South-South connections, but also all the overlap that crosses oceans and crosses continents. And it was a learning experience for me, actually, about Puerto Rico. But also there is another, I mean, we go back to the reality that—because someone asked me in the Arab world, why a Puerto Rican nurse? And I'm like, actually, you know, there's a disproportionate number that people of certain backgrounds are overrepresented in that profession, just like with the care industry in New York and so on and so forth.

MA

Well, it's also just to say, I mean, one of the things that's incredible in the novel is that the history with the Grand H is very present, obviously, but it also comes out differently. So we experience through Omar, a particular response to Saddam Hussein's capture, which is occurring in the novel through Omar's response to watching it on TV. And it's a section in the novel, it's subtle, it's very late in the novel, but there is a way that the permeation of the grand narrative, so to speak, exists, but it exists framed on a television and mediated for us as readers through Omar's response to it, which is this desire to shut it off, but also the cacophony of responses that really are just fundamentally unsettling. And I find that, in terms of what the novel offers us as readers as a reflection on the political stake, like this isn't just—it's not a historical account of this moment. In a sense, it really amplifies precisely how that moment ricochets to the present in a way that I find exceptional. The other lighter televisual moment, as someone living and working in Oregon, I always look for where Oregon is in the novel. I was very happy to see that the bear attack in Oregon on Oprah Winfrey—I was like, there it is. So Sinan, thank you for that. [laughter]

SA

Sure, anytime. [laughter]

MA

So Sinan, I asked a little bit, again, my love of your work as a poet and my love of your work as a novelist, and certainly on the level of style, on the level of figuration, on the level of the immediacy of your writing, you're a poetic novelist in the best way. But there's also a moment, and I hope this isn't super cringe, for me to read aloud your own novel to yourself, but there's a moment where you cite a poem in, almost in full, and you said,

“Sami forgot all the poetry he had committed to memory, except for a few verses he would still cling to in those foggy hours.”

And then you quote the part of the poem,

“Whenever epics had tussles over you, they shriveled, but you remained evergreen. The world passes by your sunny morning in darkness, your night's face is a full moon. Fates were cruel to you, but they were stunned that your grit was greater than theirs.”

And then the novel continues,

“He often repeated that last line, but addressed himself rather than the city he no longer lives in. Why did these verses survive? And even dementia could not uproot them, where there are roots deep within him. Perhaps grapes were the reason,”

and then there's a move on to grapes. I would love, again, just to hear your thoughts about the decision to stage the poem in the novel. There's also verses of Um Kulthoum singing that are woven throughout various passages, specifically around Sami, a very immediate way in which questions of memory, be it the lavender and the evocation of sense that's, you know, the scent of his deceased wife, music, and poetry. Again, sort of thoughts about things that spawn the memory. But thoughts about how, I mean, clearly, I mean, it's not to say why did you, but they, it's, you know, they function so beautifully in the novel, but it's also, I know in terms of studies of memory, you know, song and scent, and you even stage the studies on memory in the novel itself. But this poem in particular, is there a connection you have to it? I mean, certainly an epigraph of the book is a poet and what have you, but.

SA

No, no, that's a great question. I mean, I should say that, in reading pre-modern Arabic prose, you know, and whether in Persian or in Arabic, I was pleasantly surprised that we have these books that are already multi-genre a thousand years ago, that the book would have—that you had to have some history, it would have the author's opinion, and that it would have poems. So to my mind, it's like, okay, this whole notion of expansive books that can have all different genres should always be there. So I tried it with *The Book of Collateral Damage*, but also to me, the novel is about, or literature culture is about life. And in life, people listen to music and hum them and recite poems everywhere, but especially in that part of the world. And I was recently in India for a poetry festival. And it was a great time because in India too, just like in the Arab world, after a good line, people respond, you know, they're like, oh, like the Allah. So the issue

of this nostalgia for the golden age of Baghdad, that, you know, it's different epochs for different people depending on their ideology and whatnot. But this poem, and I would understand because when I left Baghdad in 1991, the diaspora folks would say it was so melancholic and terrible to watch Baghdad being destroyed, but also Baghdad, because of what Baghdad was and is, evokes so much. But this poem in particular is very resonant with a lot of Iraqis, especially from an older generation, but recently with social media, with others. But specifically with people who knew Baghdad when it was a vibrant, promising city, despite dictatorship. And for those people to see what has befallen Baghdad now, it is just, you know, it is a ghost of itself. And it's really terrible. So, I thought that for someone like Sami, who was an upper middle class educated person from that period of Iraq, where we had this vibrant, promising, class of people who wanted to build a new modern country, like so many other places in the global south, that he would definitely remember this poem. And also, as we all do in a way, we inhabit the poem, and it's also the fusion of himself with the city when he's no longer in the city, which reminds me of something in Darwish, which happens to exiles and refugees is that, which Omar says too, is that you realize when you leave a place, your hometown or your home country, that you actually do carry the place within you, and that the place is much more than its physical space. And nowadays, with technology, you can actually live vicariously. I mean, I know people who only watch the satellite channels in the Arab world and for all intents and purposes are almost living there except physically. But that poem is also very powerful in Arabic, and poems, as you said, in a way can really encapsulate such complex emotions that can be retrieved right in one line. And one line, you know, can make you cry, can transport you to another place.

MAT

So at the end of another podcast episode, we ask every season a signature question of our novelists. And this season's question for Sinan is, who was your favorite teacher?

SA

My favorite teacher back at the University of Baghdad in the late 80s, when I was studying English literature, we had a professor who, this is—we're living in times of dictatorship, but a professor who throughout the lectures would say certain coded words that were quite radical back then. And then he was also someone who, when I showed him my first writings, encouraged me to write. And later I discovered that he was a communist and, but he left the greatest impression on me because of the way he took teaching very seriously and the way that he managed to transmit things to us about politics and about justice and equality in a very dangerous situation. And I've been remembering him in the last two years, of course, because we've seen, unfortunately, so much cowardice from most of our colleagues in a society where there is no dictatorship. So I remember him and I salute him because of what he taught me, how to be and so on.

MAT

Can you share his name?

SA

His name is Amjad Hussain and he still lives in Jordan, Amman, Jordan. He left Iraq.

MAT

Wonderful. Thank you for that. Well, at the very conclusion of another *Novel Dialogue* episode, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the Ric Edelman College of Communication, Humanities & Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out recent episodes of the podcast with Fernanda Trías and Heather Cleary, Omar El Akkad, Orhan Pamuk, and Cristina Rivera Garza. If you like what you heard, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thank you for listening.