

PRAISE FOR **FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD**



‘Ahmed Saadawi has wrenched a fable that puts a cherished Romantic myth to urgent new use... In their bicentenary year, Mary Shelley’s scientist and his creature will take plenty of contemporary spins. Surely, no updated journey will be more necessary than Saadawi’s... A nightmarish, but horribly hilarious, tale... Sinister, satirical, ferociously comic but oddly moving.’

Spectator

‘A darkly delightful novel... Detective story and satire as well as gothic horror, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* provides a tragicomic take on a society afflicted by fear, and a parable concerning responsibility and justice.’

New Statesman

‘Saadawi’s novel...is more than an extended metaphor for the interminable carnage in Iraq and the precarious nature of its body politic. It also intimately depicts the lives of those affected by the conflict [and] offer[s] a glimpse into the day-to-day experiences of a society fractured by bloodshed.’

Economist

‘In the 200 years since Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, her monster has turned up in countless variations – but few of them have been as wild or politically pointed as the monster in Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.’

New York Times

‘Helped by Jonathan Wright’s elegant and witty translation, which reaches for and attains bracing pathos, Saadawi’s novel mixes a range of characters and their voices to surprising, even jolting effect...a remarkable book.’

Observer

'[*Frankenstein in Baghdad*] is more than just a black comedy. It's as much of a crossbreed as its ghoulish hero – part thriller, part horror, part social commentary... Saadawi, slickly translated by Jonathan Wright, captures the atmosphere of war-torn Baghdad with the swiftest of penstrokes, and picks out details that make the reader feel, and even taste, the aftermath of the explosions that pepper the book.'

Financial Times

'*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is complex but very readable and darkly humorous; it has well-observed characters, whose back stories reflect the wider context. The monster is a metaphor both for the physical horrors of Iraq, and for the development of groups within that chaos. The translation by Jonathan Wright is first-rate.'

Times Literary Supplement

'[Saadawi is] Baghdad's new literary star.'

New York Times

'A fantastical manifestation of war's cruelties... Saadawi blends the unearthly, the horrific and the mundane to terrific effect... There's a freshness to both his voice and vision... What happened in Iraq was a spiritual disaster, and this brave and ingenious novel takes that idea and uncorks all its possible meanings.'

New York Times Book Review

'*Frankenstein in Baghdad* gives an intimate, tragicomic look at the Iraq War through the lens of a small neighbourhood in U.S.-occupied Baghdad... Come for the fascinating plot; stay for the dark humour and devastating view of humanity.'

Washington Post

'A bold literary conceit and executed with some aplomb.'

Mail on Sunday

‘One of the best novels to emerge from the catastrophe of the Iraq War... Extraordinary... Earthy and vibrant... There are striking continuities with the original Shelley novel... Saadawi’s monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a hybrid creature for our times. It is a desperate marker of the brutal violence that has taken countless lives in the wars unleashed in the region... But *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is also a sign that the imagination can still survive in these conditions, literary works flowering in the cracks of the rubble.’

Los Angeles Review of Books

‘This adroitly written literary fiction ingeniously blends absurdist horror with a mordantly funny satire about life in a war-torn city... Extraordinary in its scope and inventiveness.’

Irish Times

‘There is no shortage of wonderful, literate *Frankenstein* reimaginings...but few so viscerally mine Shelley’s story for its metaphoric riches... In graceful, economical prose, Saadawi places us in a city of ghosts, where missing people return all the time, justice is fleeting, and even good intentions rot... A haunting and startling mix of horror, mystery, and tragedy.’

Booklist

‘Painful and powerful.’

Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition*

‘Winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, this complex novel weaves the experiences of a diverse group of Iraqis during the chaos of internecine warfare. This Iraqi perspective is one that may surprise and challenge casual readers; highly recommended.’

Library Journal

'*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a quietly ferocious thing, a dark, imaginative dissection of the cyclical absurdity of violence. From the terrible aftermath of one of the most destructive, unnecessary wars in modern history, Ahmed Saadawi has crafted a novel that will be remembered.'

Omar El Akkad, author of *American War*

'Horrifically funny and allegorically resonant, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* captures very well the mood of macabre violence that gripped Baghdad in 2005.'

Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*

'Brilliant and horrifying, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is essential reading.'

World Literature Today

'Outrageously adroit... Saadawi's black sense of humour and grotesque imagery keep the novel grounded in its genre. Call it "Gothic Arabesque", but this haunting novel brazenly confronts the violence visited upon this country by those who did not call it home.'

Kirkus

'A harrowing and affecting look at the day-to-day life of war-torn Iraq.'

Publishers Weekly

'*Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi's part-fantasy, part-sci-fi war novel, is something of an exorcism of the evil spirits of an era not quite past. Saadawi's goal isn't to resolve the horror of war, but rather to thrust the reader into its midst so that they may question its senselessness... A scathing critique of the U.S. invasion by way of front-row seats to its disastrous, lingering consequences.'

LitHub

'Gripping, darkly humorous...profound.'

Phil Klay, National Book Award-winning author of *Redeployment*

FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

Ahmed Saadawi

Translated from the Arabic by

Jonathan Wright



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LIST OF CHARACTERS



Abdullah: Mahmoud al-Sawadi's brother, who lives in Amara

Abu Anmar: the owner of the dilapidated Orouba Hotel in Bataween

Abu Jouni: the janitor at the offices of *al-Haqiqa* magazine

Abu Salim: an elderly neighbour of Elishva and Hadi; the husband of Umm Salim

Abu Zaidoun: an elderly barber and ex-Baathist, held responsible for sending Daniel off to war in the 1980s

Adnan al-Anwar: a journalist at *al-Haqiqa* magazine

Ali Baher al-Saidi: a prominent writer, and the owner and editor of *al-Haqiqa* magazine

Aziz the Egyptian: the gossip owner of the local coffee shop

Daniel: Elishva's son, who disappeared in the Iraq–Iran war

Daniel (junior): Elishva's grandson, the son of her daughter Hilda, who lives in Melbourne

Elishva: an elderly Assyrian Christian widow living alone in Bataween

Faraj the estate agent: a small-time real estate manager who acquires properties in Bataween

Farid Shawwaf: a journalist who writes for *al-Haqiqa*

Hadi the junk dealer: creator of the Whatsitsname

Hammu: the receptionist at the Dilshad Hotel

Hasib Mohamed Jaafar: a hotel guard whose soul animates the Whatsitsname's body

Hazem Abboud: a news photographer and Mahmoud's occasional room-mate

Hilda: one of Elishva's daughters in Melbourne; the mother of Daniel junior

Father Josiah: Elishva's parish priest

Luqman: an Algerian man who lives in the Orouba Hotel

Mahmoud al-Sawadi: a young and ambitious journalist at *al-Haqiqa*

the Mantis: a gangster politician in Amara

Matilda: one of Elishva's daughters in Melbourne

Nader Shamouni: the deacon at Elishva's church

Nahem Abdaki: Hadi's late partner in the junk business

Nawal al-Wazir: a glamorous middle-aged film director

Ninous Malko: the head of an Assyrian family that stayed for a while in Elishva's house

Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid: the head of the mysterious Tracking and Pursuit Department

Sultan: Ali Baher al-Saidi's personal driver

Umm Raghad: the madam at a local brothel

Umm Salim: an elderly neighbour of Elishva and Hadi;
the wife of Abu Salim

Veronica Munib: a middle-aged Armenian woman who
cleans the Orouba Hotel

Zaid Murshid: a journalist at *al-Haqiqa*

Zeina: a prostitute with a superficial resemblance to Nawal
al-Wazir

Jangal Publication

Final Report

I.

With regard to the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, which is partially affiliated to the civil administration of the international coalition forces in Iraq, the special committee of inquiry set up under my chairmanship, with representatives of the Iraqi security and intelligence agencies and observers from US military intelligence, has come to the following conclusions:

a. On 25 September, 2005, under direct political pressure from the Iraqi side, the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department were partially suspended for the purposes of the inquiry, and the committee summoned the department director, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, and his assistants to testify. They briefed the committee on the nature of the work they had been engaged in since the formation of the Coalition Provisional Authority in April 2003 and up to the time of the inquiry. It is clear that the department had been operating outside its area of expertise, which should have been limited to such bureaucratic matters as archiving information and preserving files and documents. Under the direct

management of Brigadier Majid, it had employed several astrologers and fortune-tellers, on high salaries financed by the Iraqi treasury, not by the US authorities. According to Brigadier Majid's testimony, their only purpose was to make predictions about serious security incidents that might take place in Baghdad and surrounding areas. It is not clear to the committee to what extent these predictions helped avert security incidents or whether they had any practical benefits.

b. The committee established that a number of files preserved in the department had been leaked from inside. All those working in the department were subsequently detained for questioning.

c. Through an examination of the computers used in the department, it was discovered that documents had been sent by email to someone referred to as 'the author'. Upon further investigation, this person was identified and arrested at his place of residence in the Fanar Hotel on Abu Nuwas Street. No documents related to the Tracking and Pursuit Department were found in his possession. 'The author' was found to be in possession of the text of a story he had written drawing on material contained in documents belonging to the Tracking and Pursuit Department.

d. The story is about 250 pages long, divided into seventeen chapters. Experts from the committee examined the text and concluded that it does not violate any provisions of the law, but for precautionary reasons they recommended that the information in it should not be published under any circumstances and that the story should not be rewritten.

II. Recommendations

a. The committee recommends that Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid and his assistants be transferred from the Tracking and Pursuit Department and that the department revert to its original work of archiving and documentation. Those employed as astrologers and fortune-tellers should be laid off. The question of the mistakes the department has made over the past few years must remain under review, and the documents relevant to the department's activities must be preserved.

b. The committee discovered that the personal information in the identity papers of 'the author' is incorrect. It therefore recommends that 'the author' be rearrested and questioned in order to learn his real identity and any other information relevant to the work of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, and also to identify the people in the department who cooperated with him to assess the extent to which this matter poses a threat to national security.

Signed: Committee Chairman

CHAPTER ONE

The Madwoman

1

The explosion took place two minutes after Elishva, the old woman known as Umm Daniel, or Daniel's mother, boarded the bus. Everyone on the bus turned round to see what had happened. They watched in shock as a ball of smoke rose above the crowds, huge and black, from the car park near Tayaran Square in the centre of Baghdad. Young people raced to the scene of the explosion, and cars collided into each other or into the central reservation. The drivers were frightened and confused: they were assaulted by a cacophony of car horns and of people screaming and shouting.

Elishva's neighbours in Lane 7 said later that she had left the Bataween district to pray in the Church of Saint Odisho, near the University of Technology, as she did every Sunday, and that's why the explosion happened – some of the locals believed that, with her spiritual powers, Elishva prevented bad things from happening when she was among them.

Sitting on the bus, minding her own business, as if she were deaf or not even there, Elishva didn't hear the massive explosion about two hundred yards behind her. Her frail

body was curled up by the window, and she looked out without seeing anything, thinking about the bitter taste in her mouth and the sense of gloom that she had been unable to shake off for the past few days.

The bitter taste might disappear after she took Holy Communion. Hearing the voices of her daughters and their children on the phone, she would have a little respite from her melancholy, and the light would shine again in her cloudy eyes. Father Josiah would usually wait for his mobile phone to ring and then tell Elishva that Matilda was on the line, or if Matilda didn't call on time, Elishva might wait another hour and then ask the priest to call Matilda. This had been repeated every Sunday for at least two years. Before that, Elishva's daughters had called irregularly on the landline at church. But when the Americans invaded Baghdad, their missiles destroyed the telephone exchange, and the phones were cut off for many months. Death stalked the city like the plague, and Elishva's daughters felt the need to check every week that the old woman was okay. At first, after a few difficult months, they spoke on the Thuraya satellite phone that a Japanese charity had given to the young Assyrian priest at the church. When the wireless networks were introduced, Father Josiah bought a mobile phone, and Elishva spoke to her daughters on that. Members of the congregation would stand in line after Mass to hear the voices of their sons and daughters dispersed around the world. Often people from the surrounding Karaj al-Amana neighbourhood – Christians of other denominations and Muslims too – would come to the church to make free calls to their relatives abroad. As mobile phones spread, the demand for Father Josiah's phone declined, but Elishva was content to maintain the ritual of her Sunday phone call from church.

With her veined and wrinkled hand, Elishva would put the Nokia phone to her ear. Once she heard her daughters'

voices, the darkness would lift and she would feel at peace. If she had gone straight back to Tayaran Square, she would have found that everything was calm, just as she had left it in the morning. The pavements would be clean and the cars that had caught fire would have been towed away. The dead would have been taken to the forensics department and the injured to the Kindi Hospital. There would be some shattered glass here and there, a pole blackened with smoke, and a hole in the asphalt, though she wouldn't have been able to make out how big it was because of her blurred vision.

When the Mass was over she lingered for an extra hour. She sat down in the hall adjacent to the church, and after the women had laid out the food they had brought with them, she went ahead and ate with everyone, just to have something to do. Father Josiah made a desperate last attempt to call Matilda, but her phone was out of service. Matilda had probably lost her phone, or it had been stolen from her on the street or at some market in Melbourne, where she lived. Maybe she had forgotten to write down Father Josiah's number or had some other excuse. The priest couldn't make sense of it, but kept trying to console Elishva, and when everyone started leaving, the deacon, Nader Shamouni, offered Elishva a ride home in his old Volga. This was the second week without a phone call. Elishva didn't actually need to hear her daughters' voices. It was partly just habit, but maybe it was something more important: that with her daughters she could talk about Daniel. Nobody really listened to her when she spoke about the son she had lost twenty years ago, except for her daughters and Saint George the Martyr, whose soul she often prayed for and whom she regarded as her patron saint. You might add her old cat, Nabu, whose hair was falling out and who slept most of the time. Even the women at church grew distant when she began to talk about her son – because she just said the same things over

and over. It was the same with the old women who were her neighbours. Some of them couldn't remember what Daniel looked like. Besides, he was just one of so many who'd died over the years. Elishva was gradually losing people who had once supported her strange conviction that her son was still alive, even though he had a grave with an empty coffin in the cemetery of the Assyrian Church of the East.

Elishva no longer shared her belief that Daniel was still alive with anyone. She just waited to hear the voice of Matilda or Hilda because they would put up with her, however strange this idea of hers. Her daughters knew their mother clung to the memory of her late son in order to go on living. There was no harm in humouring her.

Nader Shamouni, the deacon, dropped Elishva off in Lane 7 in Bataween, just a few steps from her door. The street was quiet. The slaughter had ended several hours ago, but some of the destruction was still clearly visible. It might have been the neighbourhood's biggest explosion. The old deacon was depressed; he didn't say a word to Elishva as he parked his car next to an electricity pole. There was blood and hair on the pole, mere inches from his nose and his thick white moustache. He felt a tremor of fear.

Elishva got out of the deacon's car and waved goodbye. Walking down the street, she could hear her unhurried footsteps on the gravel. She was preparing an answer for when she opened the door and Nabu looked up as if to ask, 'So? What happened?'

More importantly, she was preparing to scold Saint George. The previous night he had promised that she would either receive some good news or her mind would be set at rest and her ordeal would come to an end.

2

Umm Salim was one of Elishva's neighbours who was convinced that Elishva had special powers and that God's hand was on her shoulder wherever she was. She could cite numerous incidents as evidence. Although sometimes she might criticize or think ill of the old woman, she quickly went back to respecting and honouring her. When Elishva came to visit and they sat with some of their neighbours in the shade in Umm Salim's old courtyard, Umm Salim spread out a woven mat for her, placed cushions to her right and left, and poured her tea.

Sometimes she might exaggerate and say openly in Elishva's presence that if it weren't for those inhabitants who had *baraka* – spiritual power – the neighbourhood would be doomed and swallowed up by the earth on God's orders. But this belief of Umm Salim's was really like the smoke she blew from her *shisha* pipe during those afternoon chats: it came out in billows, then coiled into sinuous white clouds that vanished into the air, never to travel outside the courtyard.

Many thought of Elishva as just a demented old woman with amnesia, the proof being that she couldn't remember the names of men – even those she had known for half a century. Sometimes she looked at them in a daze, as though they had sprung up in the neighbourhood out of nowhere.

Umm Salim and some of the other kind-hearted neighbours were distraught when Elishva started to tell bizarre stories about things that had happened to her – stories that no reasonable person would believe. Others scoffed, saying that Umm Salim and the other women were just sad that one of their number had crossed over to the dark and desolate shore beyond, meaning the group as a whole was headed in the same direction.

Two people were sure Elishva didn't have special powers and was just a crazy old woman. The first was Faraj the estate agent, owner of the Rasoul estate agency on the main commercial street in Bataween. The second was Hadi the junk dealer, who lived in a makeshift dwelling attached to Elishva's house.

Over the past few years Faraj had tried repeatedly to persuade Elishva to sell her old house, but Elishva just flatly refused, without explanation. Faraj couldn't understand why an old woman like her would want to live alone in a seven-room house with only a cat. Why, he wondered, didn't she sell it and move to a smaller house with more air and light, and use the extra money to live the rest of her life in comfort?

Faraj never got a good answer. As for Hadi, her neighbour, he was a scruffy, unfriendly man in his fifties who always smelled of alcohol. He had once asked Elishva to sell him the antiques that filled her house: two large wall clocks, teak tables of various sizes, carpets and furnishings, and plaster and ivory statues of the Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus. There were more than twenty of these statues, spread around the house, as well as many other objects that Hadi hadn't had time to inspect.

Of these antiques, some of which dated back to the 1940s, Hadi had asked Elishva, 'Why don't you sell them, save yourself the trouble of dusting?', his eyes popping out of his head at the sight of them all. But the old woman just walked him to the front door and sent him out into the street, closing the door behind him. That was the only time Hadi had seen the inside of her house, and the impression it left him with was of a strange museum.

The two men didn't abandon their efforts, but because the junk dealer wasn't usually presentable, Elishva's neighbours