

## Interview With Hala Salah Eldin of Al-Bawtaqa Review

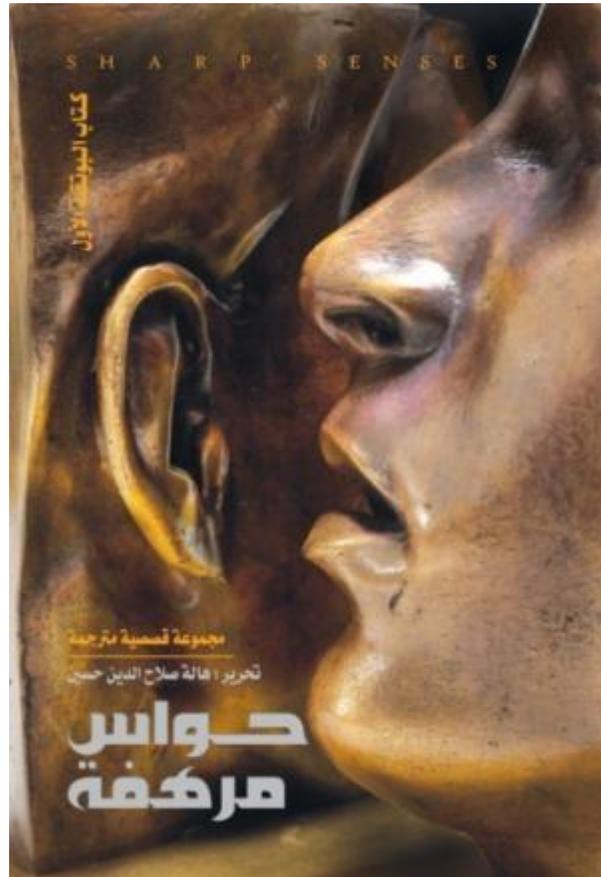
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AFAC talks to Hala Salah Eldin, the editor of Al Bawtaka, [the Crucible], an Egypt-based independent online quarterly magazine that translates contemporary English literature into Arabic. In the following interview, Hala reveals how, more often than not, funding for cultural projects in the Arab world goes hand in hand with censorship, or at least the imposition of an agenda. "I don't feel any kind of editorial pressure from AFAC," she said. "I feel as if I am working by myself, and the magazine is still completely independent. There have been no conditions imposed on the magazine by any funder or interference in the selection of the texts." With AFAC's support, Al Bawtaka has published issues 25, 26, 27 with issue 28 on the way, in addition to three printed editions featuring stories from the electronic issues. And the interview...

**Al Bawtaka's readers notice the intelligence, the keen literary sense, as well as the diversity in the selection of stories that are translated into Arabic.**

**How do you decide which stories to include?**

Despite the confines set foremost by loyalty to the literary text, I believe that the translator still enjoys a large margin of freedom when choosing to translate a text. I choose the stories that go into the magazine based on a standard, which allows for the most creativity, and each text must stand on its own. It should contain an element of surprise, and raise more questions than the reader can answer. The text should employ contrast, literary agility, clever technique, creative narrative and believable characters. The story speaks for itself as to why it was chosen. There are certain universal elements in each story, something that connects the people of a village in Asia with the people of Africa, white and black people, [a story] expresses the feelings and instincts shared by all mankind. The kind of story that moves me weaves together raw human emotions and exposes the suffering of others. I also look for stories that speak for the dispossessed, the marginalized, the foreign, the untouchables, those who do not fit in or feel left out. I also try to include genres that have not been popular in Arabic, such as horror, fantasy, self-help, and science fiction. I also look at works and authors that have not been translated into Arabic, such as the late Paul Bowles, and his contemporary, Kazuo Ishiguro, who have never been published in Arabic in print or online, except for in Al Bawtaka. In the end, I try not to print texts that are too similar and include different points of view, especially since I choose them all myself. I admit I have failed in this at times. In the end I am the one who chooses, and Al Bawtaka is perhaps a mirror of myself.



**On the first page of Al Bawtaka, there is an option to register an email address to receive the magazine. Has this helped increase the circulation of the magazine and do you communicate with readers via e-mail?**

Of course. I make sure to periodically send out the magazine to readers. They depend entirely on the newsletter. Some of them have never been to the homepage. They think that the design on the site is the design of the publication, and when the publication is late, they don't check the site, but they write in and ask for links to more stories. If one of them changes his or her email, and doesn't visit the site again, he or she will email me personally. And because the readers know that I never publish their letters, they often write me to make corrections, give encouragement, or even reprimand me!

**I also noted that the website says the 27th edition of Al Bawtaka will be published thanks to the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. What is the role of AFAC in supporting this publication?**

More often than not funding in the Arab world is tied to censorship or at least the imposition of some agenda. But I didn't feel any editorial pressure from AFAC, and I really felt like I was working by myself, and the magazine is still completely independent. There were no conditions imposed on the magazine by any funder or interference in the selection of texts. We published the 25, 26 and 27th editions and are working on bringing out the next one with AFAC's support, in addition to three printed books of stories that previously appeared in the online version of the magazine. On an editorial level, AFAC's funding helped increase the amount of material [we were able to make] available. Before I was busy trying to secure funding and it affected the size of the edition. Now I can dedicate more time to selecting material for each of the books we publish. And despite that fact that AFAC's funding was given only for the aforementioned projects, it indirectly encouraged me to found a publishing house--Dar al Bawtaka--and I self-published the paper edition without thinking of the financial loss. The publishing house has also printed the first book from Al Bawtaka titled, "Sharp Senses." We are preparing to publish two more with AFAC's support. AFAC undoubtedly provided vital support by allowing me to dedicate myself full time to the magazine, which in turn led to the publication of the first book.

**Is it possible to turn the electronic version of Al Bawtaka into a permanent paper edition by coming out with a book of translated stories that appeared in the magazine? What would it require to do this?**

As I said, AFAC gave us a very generous grant to publish three books. Dar al Bawtaka published the first one under the title "Sharp Senses: Al Bawtaka's first book" and we are planning on publishing two more in January and April 2011, also with AFAC's support. The proceeds from these books will continue to help us publish the online magazine, but I cannot go backwards, so we will continue with the online publication.

**What is the role of Al Bawtaka in supporting copyright law, seeing as it makes a point of prominently thanking authors who allow you to translate and publish their work in Arabic?**

I cannot claim something that is not true: For the first year and a half Al Bawtaka was publishing stories without obtaining the rights until I decided to create a small fund in order to [buy the rights]. I do not blame those who publish materials without permission. Getting the rights to translation needs its own budget and an army of employees trained in dealing with publishing houses and agents. It took many months for me to hone my skills in this regard. It was difficult to gain the trust of foreigners, especially as I am working alone, without institutional support.

Institutions are not used to dealing or signing contracts with individuals; they took a risk with me and I admire them for it, and I owe a lot to those authors for giving me the opportunity to work with them. But I still get rejected because agents are not satisfied with the amount I am offering, and sometimes they put me on the waiting list for many months. Al Bawtaka is the only periodical in the Arab world dedicated to regularly translating contemporary literature from English into Arabic. The first issue came out in April 2006, and in the 27 issues since then we have published 70 short stories, 62 biographies and one novel.