



Baghdad Noir

Samuel Shimon (Editor) , Muhsin Al-Ramli (Contributor) , Nassif Falak (Contributor) , Hadia Said (Contributor) , Ahmed Saadawi (Contributor) , Salima Salih (Contributor) , Roy Scranton (Contributor) , Hayet Raies (Contributor) , more... Mohammed Alwan Jabr (Contributor) , Dheya al-Khalidi (Contributor) , Hussain Al-Mozany (Contributor) , Sinan Antoon (Contributor) , Salar Abdoh (Contributor) , Ali Bader (Contributor) , Layla Qasrany (Contributor) ...less

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One of the world's most war-torn cities is portrayed through a noir lens in this chilling story collection.

Akashic Books continues its groundbreaking series of original noir anthologies, launched in 2004 with *Brooklyn Noir*. Each story is set in a distinct neighborhood or location within the city of the book.

Brand-new stories by: Muhsin al-Ramli, Nassif Falak, Hadia Said, Ahmed Saadawi, Salima Salih, Roy Scranton, Hayet Raies, Mohammed Alwan Jabr, Dheya al-Khalidi, Hussain al-Mozany, Sinan Antoon, Salar Abdoh, Ali Bader, and Layla Qasrany.

From “I Killed Her Because I Loved Her” by contributor Muhsin al-Ramli:

The neighborhood, timeless with its narrow, smelly lanes, seemed to have been forgotten since it came into being with the foundation of Baghdad in Abbasid times. The streets were pocked with potholes, noisy with the clamor of children playing and the clatter of peddlers' carts. On the pavement there were piles of putrid, smoldering garbage: the smoke mixed with the smell of spices, grilled meat, and other foods cooking. The houses were crammed with people and were built of old bricks and planks of wood. If they hadn't been leaning on each other, the only reason they didn't collapse was that there wasn't enough space on the ground between them.

From “Post-Traumatic Stress Reality in Qadisiya” by contributor Hadia Said:

What I'm telling you is that Baghdad is coming back. Yes. We've resumed the necessary insanity. Yes, yes, by God. We removed our suits and stripped to T-shirts and shorts—just like the old days. Exactly like the old days.

From “Getting to Abu Nuwas Street” by contributor Dheya al-Khalidi:

Baghdad's streets are desolate after midnight. The dark gathers in front of shops and alleyways. Wooden stalls for selling produce are laid down and intertwined like a broken-down train at a station. I'd always watch the cats chase each other, hiss and fight by the butcher's shop. But odd there weren't any stray dogs around, since I used to hear them bark in the capital every day. Maybe they sensed something grave that night, so they were hiding, putting off the hunt for another time.

Baghdad Noir Details

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Samuel Shimon (Editor) , Muhsin Al-Ramli (Contributor) , Nassif Falak (Contributor) , Hadia Said (Contributor) , Ahmed Saadawi (Contributor) , Salima Salih (Contributor) , Roy Scranton (Contributor) , Hayet Raies (Contributor) , more... Mohammed Alwan Jabr (Contributor) , Dheya al-Khalidi (Contributor) , Hussain Al-Mozany (Contributor) , Sinan Antoon (Contributor) , Salar Abdoh (Contributor) , Ali Bader (Contributor) , Layla Qasrany (Contributor) ...less

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From Reader Review Baghdad Noir for online ebook

Carol says

In yesterday's New York Times Book Review, Cynthia Ozick wrote the following in connection with a review of a William Trevor collection: "The novel in its spaciousness allows world enough and time for epochs to evolve, but the short story must seize in its thimble, all at once, crisis and its crux."

I had just finished Baghdad Noir when I read Ozick's quote and thought, yes, this. When short stories are most successful, they use each word efficiently, stay on point, and the reader is never tempted to see how many pages are left before one story ends and a new story starts.

Baghdad Noir is a new entry in Akashic Books' Noir Series. (Pub release date is August 7, 2018.) Each of the stories in the collection take place in and around Baghdad and, thankfully, a detailed map inserted at the beginning grounds the reader not familiar with this ancient city with its streets, distances, relationships between locations, et. al. The introduction that follows on the heels of that map strikes the perfect balance between too much and too little background information on both the history of Iraq, including Baghdad, and these stories.

By the way, there's nothing like a well-written Introduction to reveal the ignorance of a reader to herself. Facts I learned from Baghdad Noir which may, of course, be long-known to readers of this review:

- "Historically, Iraq has been one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries. In the more distant past, before Arab tribes emerged on the scene, it was the land of the ancient Sumerians and Assyrians. Then, as the center of the Islamic Caliphate for a thousand years, it attracted various commingling nationalities. Until relatively recently, marriage by Iraqis to Circassians, Turkmens, Kurds, and Iranian people was commonplace, along with intermarriage between these groups. If we add to this the many Mughal, Turkic, and Iranian conquests of Iraq, and the innumerable pilgrimages to the Shia holy sites by various ethnic groups over the centuries, we are confronted with a picture that makes it impossible to countenance the idea of a singular national ethnic identity."
- "The majority-Muslim population is divided between Shia and Sunni adherents . . . The robust Christian population within the country comprises a variety of origins and denominations, forming a large part of the population in the north, while the Yazidis mostly settled around Mount Sinjar."
- "... [T]he development of the modern novel is a relatively recent phenomenon in Iraqi literature. Most people consider Jalal Khalid by Mahmoud Ahmed al-Sayed, published in 1928, to be the first Iraqi novel. . . . The Iraqi novel became much more ubiquitous after the US invasion in 2003.... In less than fifteen years, close to seven hundred novels have emerged from the country (more than had appeared over the entirety of the twentieth century, including works that deal with contemporary topics such as the UN-enforced sanctions, the Iraq-Iran War, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, and, of course, the US invasion of Iraq."
- "The Iran-Iraq War was the beginning of the end for Iraqi civil society, with half a million soldiers and half a million civilians killed on each side, effectively wiping out an entire generation.... Cementing the destruction of Iraqi life was Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The seventeen days of bombs falling on Baghdad and other cities, dropped by the US-led military coalition in defense of Kuwait, and the subsequent thirteen years of crippling economic sanctions took Iraqi society back to the stone age."

Shimon commissioned 14 new short stories for this collection. The majority of them take place post-2003. Ten are written by Iraqi authors; four by non-Iraqis. All of the non-Iraqis (1 American, 1 Persian, 1 Tunisian and 1 Lebanese) have spent time in Baghdad and "know the city well." I wish I'd realized while reading each story that, at the end of Baghdad Noir, Shimon includes mini-bios and photos of each author.

If you either appreciate noir short stories or are intrigued by the fact that the stories in this collection are set in Baghdad, this collection is for you. If neither of those factors is a major plus for you, you might rate this as a 3 star read, instead of 4 or 5. As is typical of short story collections written by different authors, inconsistency is the word of the day, but the range is from good to great, not weak to great.

For the noir reader, all of the moral ambiguity, darkness, sense of being trapped with unappealing and dangerous options you love are present. Dead people abound. Amnesia. Waking up in an abandoned building surrounded by armed children. Attacks on family members. Attacks on others either out of revenge or to benefit family members. No flashes of moral revelation or character epiphanies. And the plots are everywhere in Baghdad – in the streets, the cafes, the aromas; in the darkness of prohibited curfew excursions, alcohol consumption (notwithstanding legal prohibition), in family relationships and family memories; in the suffering, the losses, the schemes, the abandoned hopes. The damage. The dreams.

For the reader interested in reading literature set in Iraq, Baghdad Noir provides the intense sense of place and culture we seek. These stories could only take place in Baghdad.

There are no axes to grind and no politics, per se. The experiences of these characters are what they are because of numerous political decisions, but their stories are the stories of people on the ground – the ones who live, breathe, dream, fight for their country, birth babies, marry and die no matter who is in charge. The same in Iraq as in all other countries.

The standouts? "The Apartment" by Salima Salih, "Jasim's File" by Sinan Antoon and "Baghdad on Borrowed Time" by Salar Abdoh.

Thanks to the publisher and Edelweiss+ for giving me access to an ecopy of this wonderful collection.

Sam Sattler says

Baghdad Noir is another short story collection in Akaschic's long series of story collections set in various cities around the world. This time around, the stories all center on Baghdad and its outskirts, and thirteen of the collection's fourteen stories are written by Iraqi authors. As in all short story collections I've ever read, the stories can be a little hit-or-miss depending on the taste of the individual reader, but as a whole, Baghdad Noir is well worth reading.

The stories focus on everything from everyday life to the intrigues and dangers common to war torn cities around the world, and the writers do a good job in capturing the atmosphere within which all their mysteries and crimes take place. One of the more interesting stories, precisely because it focuses on a period seldom captured in fiction today, is set in 1950. That story, "Baghdad House," though, has a bit of a nebulous endings and is not among my favorites, as it turns out.

My favorites are "Jasim's File," a story with a bit of a twist at the end about a man who escapes from a mental institution when the building is hit in during a fire, and "Baghdad on Borrowed Time," a well crafted story about someone taking revenge on numerous members of Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. I also like the cleverness of the one story in the book by a non-Iraqi, American Roy Scranton, called "Homecoming," another story of revenge and murder - a combination that I can well imagine occurs in Baghdad today way more than anyone would like to think.

Dave says

Akashic Noir is slowly but surely covering the known universe with its noir series. At last count (and the count keeps changing), the series is well over 80 books strong and growing. Each volume features 12-14 crime stories all centered around a geographic location from a number of local authors familiar with the geographic centerpiece of the volume. Baghdad Noir is one of the more exotic locales featured. And, one of the amazing thing about this 14-story volume is that there is crime fiction tradition in Iraqi literature, let alone a noir tradition. Yet, this book perhaps more than many others in the series, really brings to life the city of Baghdad and its diverse people, both under Saddam's rule and the aftermath. And, amazingly, you can really feel the noir-ness of these stories, the darkness, the ennui.

"I Killed Her Because I Love Her" by Mushin al-Ramli, is the first such dark selection and it is a quintessential Baghdad story of murder and despair. The actual murder presents itself starkly in all its bloody glory like it was ripped right out of American pulp fiction.

Doomsday Book by Nassif Falak tells us how Baghdad even under Saddam was like life being on a knife's edge with imagery of grenades buried under houses, crucified infants, yellow buses like giant coffins. A scent of death is inescapable as is an atmosphere of hopelessness.

Jason's File by Sinan Antoon is a glimpse into the chaos that enveloped Baghdad when the Americans came. It was just as if the asylum gates had opened and all the crazies were let out of the looney bin. Absolutely brilliant work capturing a moment in time, of lawlessness, chaos, confusion.

A Sense of Remorse by Ahmed Saadawi explores a world of endless killings, animosity, revenge, and tests.

Where is the Trust? Baghdad on Borrowed Time by Salar Abdoh features a private eye in Teheran whose clients all tell him he's like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The action however is all back in Baghdad.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS REALITY IN QADISIYA BY HADIA SAID is a story about property and squatters and deeds and despair.

THE FEAR OF IRAQI INTELLIGENCE BY HAYET RAIES takes us into Saddam's secret police state with spies and informed and distrust everywhere, even among college students.

ROOM 22 BY MOHAMMED ALWAN JABR is a story about a kidnapping and a ransom payment but it has a distinctly Baghdadian feel to it

THE APARTMENT BY SALIMA SALIH is a traditional murder mystery about clues and theories.

EMPTY BOTTLES BY HUSSAIN AL-MOZANY brings to mind the everyday violence in modern Baghdad and how much it became a part of the city's atmosphere

GETTING TO ABU NUWAS STREET BY DHEYA AL-KHALIDI Bab al-Moatham is a story about wandering into the wrong neighborhood after curfew. Dreamlike prose.

BLOOD ON MY HANDS HOMECOMING BY ROY SCRANTON

This is a story about family obligation set in 2007-2008 when Daesh/Isis held The Western part of Iraq and making deliveries could be rather hazardous duty. Great adventure story.

BAGHDAD HOUSE BY ALI BADER is set in the 1950's, a little different than the other stories in this volume. It's a different Baghdad, but dark, mysterious, suspicious.

TUESDAY OF SORROWS BY LAYLA QASRANY is also set in an earlier period, but after the Baathists took power.

Melisende d'Outremer says

Another instalment in the Akashic Books collection of noir fiction from around the world. This time, the setting is pre and post war Iraq; during the reign of Saddam and under the US occupation.

Don't go looking for private detectives - there is only one in this collection; the element is entirely human, and the focus is family and the political climate of fear. In the introduction, Samuel Shiman states that this type of fiction is a new concept for Arab writers, so take their journey, one so different from the noir of the 1940s & 1950s that we are more familiar with. You won't be disappointed.

Charlene says

I had previously read Chicago Noir by the same publisher and while I'm not usually a fan crime/mystery/thrillers I greatly enjoyed the experience. I knew when I saw that Baghdad Noir was going to be released in August 2018 that I needed to read it. I was lucky enough to get an ARC and it was a brilliant read. I'm always glad to read books from another country and culture. Baghdad Noir really delivers. The characters are well fleshed out and their environments painted with such vibrant detail. I was drawn in from the start and was filled with a sense of sadness as I neared the end. Luckily I also got an early copy of Marrakech Noir so I'm going to jump into that really soon. I'm a firm fan of this series and the vast range of locations makes this a great way to travel without leaving home. I can see me buying this entire series. Pick up a copy in August. It's so worth it!

Tonstant Weader says

Baghdad Noir is the most recent release in the phenomenal Akashic Noir Series of short story anthologies with a noir sensibility. The genius feature is that each edition is edited and written by locals, people intimately knowledgeable of the people and the place that is the focus of each edition in the series. Samuel Shimon, the author of "An Iraqi in Paris" and founder of "Banipal" a respected Arabic literary magazine seems a perfect choice to edit the Baghdad edition.

Baghdad Noir has fourteen stories in four sections called 'Murder in the Family', 'Where is the Trust?', 'Wake Me Up,' and 'Blood on My Hands.' It encompasses the time before and during Saddam, during and after the American invasion and includes men and women who currently live in Iraq and others in exile as well as a story by an American soldier. In his introduction, Shimon points out that noir is not a common genre in Arabic literature and he had to explain the concept of commissioning a story and of noir itself, it's clear he had a hard row to hoe.

There were a few stories I liked. My favorite, to my chagrin, was the one written by the former American soldier, "The Homecoming." It is the story that most felt like a noir story. There was menace throughout and it was unrelentingly grim. "Post-Traumatic Stress Reality in Qadisiya" and several others struck me more like magical realism. Mainly though what I found off-putting about the stories was the propensity for final paragraph "surprise" revelations. Not that they all surprised, but there was this O'Henry or Guy de Maupassant quality to the stories. I have rows and rows and rows of Akashic Noir books so I dug out the "Queens Noir" book to reread "Alice Fantastic" by Maggie Estep, the story Shimon used as an example for writers who didn't know noir. It does have a surprise twist, but it works because it's part of the story's natural progress. If you look at "The Apartment", the surprise at the end is motivated by people who were not in the story. That's not how it's supposed to work.

This is the first time I have felt disappointed by a book in the Akashic Noir Series and considering the dozens they have published, that pretty amazing. I have read stories from many other cultures with pleasure, so I don't think my disappointment is rooted in parochialism, particularly since what I find most disappointing is the twist ending from old classic short story writers of the West. Still, it is a useful book to read, not just because we know too little and understand too little about Iraq, some first-person story-telling can only help us all.

I received an e-galley of Baghdad Noir from the publisher through Edelweiss.

Baghdad Noir at Akashic Books

Akashic Noir Series

Samuel Shimon bio in "Banipal", a magazine he co-founded with Margaret Obank.

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