

Epilogue

Monstrous Omniscience

I began this study with Mahfouz's Amina in her rooftop garden, watering the flowers and jasmine vines, feeding the chickens and pigeons, and contemplating the "invisible cords" that link the visible with the invisible, the known with the unknown, and the world of her own home with the one bustling outside its walls. And here I have ended with yet another Egyptian mother, Umm Wahid, whose irreverence, melodramatic adventures, and instinctive grasp of social and economic injustices couldn't be further from Amina's practices of piety, cloistering, and care. Umm Wahid has been to prison ("yoooooh, lots of times") (Z 273); Amina is terrified even at the prospect of her name being written in a police report. Amina has no grasp of the social totality of which she is a part (she is more concerned with divine totality and "completeness" or "perfection," *kamāl*); Umm Wahid seems all too aware of the various economic and political forces conspiring to immiserate lower-class Egyptians—and how to outsmart them. The two characters live in different Cairos, different worlds, yet each practices a way of seeing built from everyday experience rather than formal education and expertise. From them, and from many other characters in Arabic fictions of investigation, we can learn to see and seek in nonpanoptic ways.

This book has examined how fictions from the Arab world stage scenes of seeing, reading, and knowing—all acts with which the detective is stereotypically concerned. I have shown how these practices, when staged in fiction, offer counterpoints to state-sanctioned practices of knowledge production designed to identify, categorize, and thereby control. I have argued that, by observing the blind spots in these fictional investigators' ways of seeing, readers and critics of these novels can learn to recognize the social conditions determining their own ways of

seeking and knowing. I have made the wager, finally, that Arab novels of investigation (*baḥṭh*) can train their readers in alternative, noncoercive practices of looking at “the other.” Perhaps this has been the wager of a naïve Pollyanna insufficiently attentive to the social, economic, and political worlds in which literary texts come to matter (or not matter). As a corrective, let me clarify that not all Arabic novels that thematize investigation necessarily offer their readers such critical viewpoints. To illustrate, let me return briefly to the scene of the crime—omniscience as narrative point of view—this time as it has been staged in a more recent novel.

In 2013, the Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (commonly known as the “Arabic Booker”) for his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (*Frānkishtāyin fī Baghdād*). The book stitches together the lives of numerous Iraqis of various backgrounds, including Elishva, an elderly Assyrian woman looking for her missing son Daniel (abducted by the Iraqi Baath party for mandatory conscription in the 1990s), Hadi, a junk collector fond of telling fantastical stories, and a coterie of journalists, documentarians, and photographers struggling to write and publish amid the chaos and corruption caused by the 2003 American invasion. The book also stitches together a Frankenstein-like monster, his body parts assembled by the junk dealer Hadi, and his spirit reanimated by Elishva, who addresses fervent prayers to an icon of Saint George, pleading for her son’s safe return. Animated by the spirit of a guard killed in a suicide bombing on a hotel, this Iraqi Frankenstein’s limbs continually call him to avenge the deaths of the people to whose bodies they once belonged. But as the monster—or the “Whatsitsname” (*al-Shismuh*), as he’s referred to throughout—avenges each death, he also sheds body parts, requiring replacements that in turn call out for revenge, and so on ad infinitum. The cycle of violence and vengeance soon overwhelms monster and reader alike. “There are no innocents who are completely innocent or criminals who are completely criminal,” the Whatsitsname thinks to himself. “This was the realization that would undermine his mission—because every criminal he killed was also a victim.”¹

Despite some metafictional gestures,² Saadawi’s novel sutures its multiple storylines through omniscient narration and free indirect discourse. In a single scene, the reader is liable to be shuttled from the mind of a self-serving real-estate developer like Faraj, for example, to the consciousness of a beggar who’s just witnessed a crime, then into the perspective of a corrupt police officer like Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid. The transitions can sometimes be jarringly awkward: “Faraj slowly took a sip of tea and looked with contempt at the old beggar. At the same moment, someone else was drinking his tea—Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid.”³ Where the other novels I have examined in this book play with narrative perspective as a commentary on power and knowledge production in colonial and authoritarian states, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* seems more interested in granting its readers an all-seeing perspective on post-2003 Iraq than in challenging them to think about who knows what, through which means, and when. Tawfiq al-Hakim’s

Diary of a Country Prosecutor was replete with interjections and interruptions that frustrated the narrator's progress toward solving the murder of Qamar al-Dawla 'Alwan, and it thereby mocked its *adib*-like narrator's dismissive essentialisms about the countryside. The frame narrator of Elias Khoury's *White Masks*, meanwhile, threw up his hands from the very beginning of that novel, refusing to "make sense" of the narrative materials he had gathered and leaving the last word with "the documents themselves." *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, by contrast, flows "seamlessly" (ironically, given the novel's titular subject) from one chapter, character, and subjectivity into the next.

In particular, readers are granted access to a number of spaces, communities, and histories that are often suppressed or marginalized in writing on and from Iraq. The up-close glimpse at Iraqi Assyrians through Elishva, her priest, and her expat daughters in Australia; the memory of the Iraqi Jewish community uncovered when Hadi the junk dealer finds a Hebrew inscription concealed behind a statue of the Virgin Mary in his crumbling residence; the echo of ongoing tribal rivalries in the backstory of the journalist Mahmoud al-Sawadi, who was forced to leave his provincial hometown after a dispute with a man from a rival clan; these and other pat subplots read like introductions to Iraqi history intended as revelations for foreigners (perhaps specifically Americans), as though *Frankenstein in Baghdad* were "born translated."⁴ The novel also has its requisite villain: Brigadier Sorour, a former Baath party member who used his army connections to resist de-Baathification and score a post as the head of the top-secret Tracking and Pursuit Department. This fictional department, we learn, is "a special information unit set up by the Americans" whose mission is "to monitor unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumors . . . and, more important, to make predictions about crimes that would take place in the future: car bombings and assassinations of officials and other important people" (F 75). When we learn that Brigadier Sorour has employed soothsayers, tarot card readers, astrologists, and various other kinds of seers and magicians to detect "pre-crimes" for his unit, the novel invites us to laugh at his superstitious backwardness and side with Mahmoud and the other journalists and photographers struggling to work amid the perilous terrain of the American occupation.

Yet the novel's representational strategies and form of narration are also, lest we forget, a form of politics. The reader who is invited to take an omniscient view of Iraqi society through the literary text has more in common with the brigadier's band of seers and soothsayers than she might like to believe. We may well laugh at the "great astrologer" with his "long white pointed beard, his tall conical hat, and his flowing robes," just as we laugh at the idea that he had "enslaved the djinn and the familiar spirits and used Babylonian astrological secrets and the sciences of the Sabians and the Mandeans to find the aura of the name surrounding the body of the criminal." (Another chuckle arrives when that "name" is revealed: "It's . . . it's the One Who Has No Name") (F 112). The great astrologer strikes an absurd

pose staring into a playing card “as if he could see in it a deep chasm or a door that opened onto a whole world only he could see” (*F* 211). Yet the forms of reading and understanding that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* solicits its readers to practice also open up “whole worlds” that “only we can see.” Like the seers who deliver specialized knowledge derived from their visionary capabilities, Saadawi delivers a ready-made, multiconfessional Iraq for the reader’s consumption, smoothing over the seams between one narrative perspective and the next.

The novel ends as it began—omnisciently. There is the rather confusing reappearance of the unnamed “author” from the prologue, who informs the reader that he has written a novel built from the testimonies of Mahmoud, Abu Salim, and the Whatsitsname itself, but that this novel was confiscated by the authorities and has not yet been returned to him. Yet, unlike most metafictional author-figures, whose role is usually to comment on the limitations and omissions structuring any act of narration, the author-character in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* continues to have unfettered, omniscient access to the characters’ innermost thoughts and memories. Specifically, this “author” narrates experiences and monologues to which his interviews and the files leaked from the Tracking and Pursuit Department couldn’t possibly have given him access—for example, the midnight scene in which Hadi the junk dealer encounters his now-horribly disfigured face in a hospital mirror,⁵ or the Whatsitsname’s inner reflections on death and vengeance the night he murdered the senior astrologer.⁶ Where Jabra’s Dr. Jawad, Khoury’s unnamed frame narrator, and Ghanim’s quasi-autobiographical first-person narrator invited their readers to meditate on the limits and blind spots structuring every “search” for truth, Saadawi’s “author” (*mu’allif*)—true to his name—picks up the remaining pieces of the narrative and stitches them into their proper places, rather like Hercule Poirot tying up the loose ends that even the characters themselves might not have remembered.

Given *Frankenstein in Baghdad*’s continued use of free indirect discourse despite the presence of a metafictional author-figure, it is appropriate that the novel should end with a scene observed from a rooftop. The final chapter moves from the metafictional author-character’s voice back into that of the novel’s original third-person narrator, who describes the characters from Lane 7 as they celebrate the arrest of Hadi the storyteller, whom the police have misidentified as the Monster, the Whatitsname, Criminal X. “Everyone was happy,” the reader is told, “tasting a kind of joy they had forgotten in the decades of disasters that had befallen their country . . . Reduced to a state of childlike elation, no one could see, or even tried to see, those timid eyes looking out from behind the balconies and windows of the abandoned Orouba Hotel.” It is the monster, the Whatsitsname—now referred to only as “the specter of an unknown man”—looking down on the festivities from the hotel’s third floor (*F* 280).

But of course, someone *does* see these eyes—none other than the sorcerer-like reader herself. Saadawi’s omniscient narration plays the same role for the novel’s

form that the astrologers' magic plays for its plot: it allows the reader to glimpse the face and track the location of the "Whatsitsname," to "know" the man who "is not known" and "has no name." Although *Frankenstein in Baghdad* was written many decades after the novels I have read throughout this study, the "narrative subject" is still omnipresent in Saadawi's novel,⁷ lurking in the background, on the rooftops, like the monster it describes. The only difference is that the viewing figure at the center of this Iraqi panorama is a *monster*—a terrifying figure sewn together from the body parts of an accumulating number of victims. If there is something to redeem Saadawi's otherwise unremarkable take on narrative perspective and "investigation" in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, it is this subtle equation of omniscience with the monstrous.

We may well condemn Tawfiq al-Hakim's racist essentializations of rural Egyptians in *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* and dismiss the pat, utopian socialist endings of novels like Ghanim's *al-Jabal* and Idris' *The Sinners*. Yet these authors from the first half of the twentieth century give us something that even the most highly regarded authors of the early twenty-first do not: narrators who do not know, who have been frustrated in their quests for knowledge, and whose aspirations of omniscience are persistently foreclosed by such humble figures as peasant girls, mad shaykhs, landless migrant laborers, and "tomb-raiding" Gurnawis. The all-seeing and unseen eye is alive and well, by contrast, in Saadawi's *Frankenstein*. We are perhaps meant to be frightened of the still-living monster looking down on the celebrations, terrified that he will strike again in the sequel. But, if we look again, we might sense the parallels between this stitched-up monster on his third-story perch and the monstrous nature of our own worst reading impulses.

In reading the novels selected for this study, I have highlighted specific narrative forms and structures overlooked in most accounts of modern fiction from the Arab world, in the hopes of transforming these structures into new methodologies and ways of reading for scholars in disciplines ranging from history and comparative literature to anthropology and religious studies. Tawfiq al-Hakim and Driss Chraïbi taught us to look for the traces of past communalisms, buried myths, and critiques of objectivity in the experiences of native officers of the law seeking social status and economic advantage through employment in (post) colonial legal systems. Yusuf Idris and Yusuf al-Qa'id showed us how to look on the secreted world of the Egyptian *'izbah* not with the eyes of an effendi, developer, or Cairo-based author, but with those of a migrant laborer, a landless, undocumented farmer, or a writer caught between the imperative to document exploitation in "the other Egypt" and the anxiety of making his living from "the corpses of the destitute."⁸ Naguib Mahfouz and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra revealed the porosity of the border said to divide dispassionate investigation from mystical contemplation, as well as the perils of atomization involved in such isolated, personalized quests for fleeting, unknowable, ineffable others. Fathi Ghanim and Elias Khoury illustrated how a detective-like quest for the "truth" risks blinding one to the many

stories that branch off from a single criminal investigation, some of which offer new languages and literary forms with which to challenge the authority of the official, and the officiality of the author. And Sonallah Ibrahim teaches us, once again, the importance of the public, communal, and collective as the necessary scaffolding for any critique of power. With every new reading (and yes, this is a book of many readings), I have felt called into a series of new methods for approaching Arabic language and literature, none of which aims to be exclusive, all of which question the gaze that claims to see and thereby understand all.

Most of all, I have been shown how quickly and easily any given method, any “way of seeing,” can turn itself inside out, showing its blind spots. Just as the “criminals” in Idris’s *The Sinners* and al-Qa‘id’s *Yaḥduth* turned out to be victims of larger social and economic injustices on the ‘izbah; just as Kamal’s incorrigible idealism in the *Trilogy* caused him to displace his former faith in God onto his “beloved” (*ma būdah*, lit. “object of worship”), so too all the literary works examined in this study remind us of the conditions determining and limiting what we, as critics and readers, can see. They remind us to consider the many ways that surface and depth are related in any act of reading, such that “the object loses its determination and the critic recognizes the totality that constitutes both the object and her relation to it.”⁹

The “poetics of investigation” invites the ongoing, unfixed, shape-shifting quality of *baḥṭh* into the houses of Middle East studies and comparative literature alike. For Middle East studies, a practice of *baḥṭh* encourages a form of research that is never content with a single meaning or reading but is rather constantly looking for new eyes with which to see, particularly when the literary and cultural objects under investigation deem these viewpoints antiquated or outdated, suspicious or superstitious, marginal or unimportant, colloquial or unofficial. For comparative literature, a practice of *baḥṭh* makes possible an attitude toward method as an evolving set of practices, ever building on new languages, idioms, histories, and materials, rather than a fixed set of operations or procedures performed by subject-readers on object-texts. To remain aware of the social and material circumstances limiting what and how we see is not to make ourselves irreducibly contingent or to fetishize indeterminacy, but rather to compel the—I think, enabling—recognition that all practices, including social, economic, and political ones, are contingent and determined in one way or another, and thus open to revision and remaking.¹⁰

To read a few Arabic novels about investigation, and to read them closely, might seem in retrospect like a somewhat trivial occupation for a book-length study, but I have tried, in Gayatri Spivak’s words, “to work as hard as old-fashioned Comp. Lit. is known to be capable of doing,” in an attempt to “reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination—the great inbuilt instrument of othering.” I have gathered texts that feature scholars, experts, investigators, and yes, detectives, to model a practice of methodological training, not only for myself, but also for others seeking to bridge area studies’ emphasis on studying the languages of

“the other” with comparative literature’s attention to language as idiom, as “more than just a field language.”¹¹ Sitting with the languages of these texts, paying attention to their idiomaticity and the way they record specific configurations of historical and social circumstances, I have learned how Arab authors in several national and historical contexts instinctively grasped the problem of colonial pan-opticism and spun it into narratives of tragicomic satire, sensational revelation, or vertiginous “seeking.” Looking at these texts, I have seen myself reflected in figures like Jabra’s sociologist-turned-mystic, Mahfouz’s soul-sick wanderers, and Ghanim’s state-trained investigator or “truth establisher” (*muḥaqqiq*). Following these detectives and seekers as they bumbled through their research, sometimes overtaken by the voices of the workers, peasants, and farmers under investigation, sometimes thrown back into the vortex of truth, I have tried to stay true to what Edward Said described, more than forty years ago, as “the most important task of all” in the wake of Orientalism: “to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from . . . nonrepressive and nonmanipulative perspective[s]” by “rethinking the whole complex problem of knowledge and power.”¹² Such a rethinking, I have wagered, can be excavated from the literary texts and practices of these “others” themselves, if only we know how to look.