

#SoAatHome | John Calder Week: How I translate – in
conversation with Katharine Halls
Thursday 29 January 2026



1

00:00:00,000--> 00:00:01,746

-Well, good afternoon

2

00:00:01,771--> 00:00:04,108

and welcome everyone

to today's event,

3

00:00:04,132--> 00:00:08,628

How I translate – in

conversation with Katharine Halls.

4

00:00:08,652--> 00:00:10,748

My name, for those of

you who don't know me,

5

00:00:10,772--> 00:00:15,000

is Vineet Lal and I am a literary

translator and equalities campaigner

6

00:00:15,000--> 00:00:17,748

based in Edinburgh in Scotland.

7

00:00:17,772--> 00:00:21,000

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I have degrees in French
from the University of Edinburgh

8

00:00:21,000--> 00:00:22,188

and Princeton,

9

00:00:22,212--> 00:00:26,548

and studied translation and conference
interpreting at Heriot-Watt University.

10

00:00:26,572--> 00:00:30,028

I had a very long career in
something completely different,

11

00:00:30,052--> 00:00:33,000

which was tourism and
destination marketing.

12

00:00:33,000--> 00:00:35,428

And I eventually turned to

13

00:00:35,452--> 00:00:40,000

literary translation,
um, around about 2010.

14

00:00:40,000--> 00:00:41,788

In fact, I was one
of the first recipients

15

00:00:41,812--> 00:00:44,468

of what are now the Emerging
Translator Mentorships

16

00:00:44,492--> 00:00:46,668

in that year, in 2010.

17

00:00:46,692--> 00:00:50,548

I've translated a
number of novels now

18

00:00:50,572--> 00:00:52,588

by all sorts of French authors

19

00:00:52,612--> 00:00:56,588

Including Guillaume Musso,
Michel Bussi, Grégoire Delacourt,

20

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00:00:56,612--> 00:00:59,268

as well as a growing number of

21

00:00:59,292--> 00:01:04,000

books and short stories for
children and younger readers.

22

00:01:04,000--> 00:01:05,668

In July 2025,

23

00:01:05,692--> 00:01:09,000

I led the French-English
Translation Workshop

24

00:01:09,000--> 00:01:12,000

at the British Centre for Literary
Translation Summer School

25

00:01:12,000--> 00:01:14,468

with the Swiss author Bruno Pellegrino.

26

00:01:14,492--> 00:01:18,628

I've been a trustee of Edinburgh
UNESCO City of Literature

27

00:01:18,652--> 00:01:23,000

for a number of years,

from 2013 to 2025.

28

00:01:23,000--> 00:01:26,000

And I've also been co-chair
of the Translators Association

29

00:01:26,000--> 00:01:28,948

from 2022 to 24.

30

00:01:28,972--> 00:01:32,000

And most recently, in
November of last year,

31

00:01:32,000--> 00:01:34,311

I was really pleased
to be appointed

32

00:01:34,335--> 00:01:36,907

as a Fellow of the
Society of Authors

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33

00:01:36,932--> 00:01:38,268

which has been part of my life

34

00:01:38,292--> 00:01:41,548

ever since I began my
journey in literary translation.

35

00:01:41,572--> 00:01:42,664

36

00:01:42,689--> 00:01:44,948

For the purposes of
the audio description,

37

00:01:44,972--> 00:01:47,988

I am a brown-skinned South
Asian man with a shaved head.

38

00:01:48,012--> 00:01:50,991

I'm wearing a dark blue
cardigan and I have glasses.

39

00:01:51,015--> 00:01:54,650

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Katharine, would you like to
describe yourself before I carry on?

40

00:01:54,943--> 00:01:59,683

-Sure. I'm a white
woman in a green cardigan

41

00:01:59,708--> 00:02:02,988

with a pair of headphones in
and a cup of tea next to me,

42

00:02:03,012--> 00:02:04,708

which you'll see now and then.

43

00:02:04,732--> 00:02:05,810

44

00:02:05,835--> 00:02:08,628

-Thanks, Catherine. And
I too have a very fetching

45

00:02:08,652--> 00:02:11,548

pottery mug of tea, which

I will lift now and then.

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46

00:02:11,572--> 00:02:15,388

This event is part of

the Society of Authors

47

00:02:15,412--> 00:02:19,266

#SoAatHome Spring/Summer

2026 programme

48

00:02:19,291--> 00:02:22,000

and is part of what is

called John Calder Week.

49

00:02:22,000--> 00:02:25,668

A very special week of

events to celebrate the SoA's

50

00:02:25,692--> 00:02:28,536

new John Calder

Translation Prize

51

00:02:28,561--> 00:02:31,508

which was launched

in November 2024.

52

00:02:31,532--> 00:02:36,136

The John Calder Translation

Prize is an annual award

53

00:02:36,161--> 00:02:38,358

for translations into English,

54

00:02:38,382--> 00:02:42,748

are full-length, ambitious,

groundbreaking works of literary merit

55

00:02:42,772--> 00:02:44,790

and general interest.

56

00:02:44,815--> 00:02:46,908

The winner is awarded £3,000

57

00:02:46,932--> 00:02:50,000

and a runner-up

is awarded £1,000.

58

00:02:50,000--> 00:02:52,268

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You can check out
the full line-up of events,

59

00:02:52,292--> 00:02:54,000

which are part of
John Calder Week,

60

00:02:54,000--> 00:02:56,188

as well as buying your
tickets or registering

61

00:02:56,212--> 00:02:58,668

for this year's
Translation Prizes.

62

00:02:58,692--> 00:03:01,000

And there should be a
link coming up for that

63

00:03:01,000--> 00:03:02,748

on your screens.

64

00:03:02,772--> 00:03:08,000

The #SoAatHome event, of

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which this is part, is free to all.

65

00:03:08,000--> 00:03:09,508

But if you could afford to,

66

00:03:09,532--> 00:03:13,000

please consider donating to the
Society of Authors Access Fund.

67

00:03:13,000--> 00:03:14,348

If you're not aware of this,

68

00:03:14,372--> 00:03:16,198

it provides grants
to authors so that

69

00:03:16,222--> 00:03:20,228

travel, subsistence, childcare
costs, access needs, etcetera,

70

00:03:20,252--> 00:03:22,258

aren't barriers to
authors taking part in

71

00:03:22,282--> 00:03:25,028

events, residencies

and retreats.

72

00:03:25,052--> 00:03:28,000

We suggest a

minimum donation of £5.

73

00:03:28,000--> 00:03:30,148

Again, there will

be a link coming up.

74

00:03:30,172--> 00:03:34,000

You can also help the Society

of Authors Access Fund

75

00:03:34,000--> 00:03:36,778

by making a purchase

on our virtual bookstore

76

00:03:36,802--> 00:03:38,305

on bookshop.org

77

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00:03:38,330--> 00:03:40,948

where you can find
books by writers taking part

78

00:03:40,972--> 00:03:43,000
in the #SoAatHome programme.

79

00:03:43,000--> 00:03:45,493
And there will be
a link in the chat.

80

00:03:46,413--> 00:03:50,708
We envisage this session
lasting around 45 minutes,

81

00:03:50,732--> 00:03:54,436
including a 20-minute
Q&A at the end.

82

00:03:55,396--> 00:03:57,068
If you would like captions,

83

00:03:57,092--> 00:03:58,908
please turn on the

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closed captions option,

84

00:03:58,932--> 00:04:01,170

which will give

you live subtitles.

85

00:04:01,676--> 00:04:05,988

The recording of this event will be

available on the SoA's website for members,

86

00:04:06,012--> 00:04:09,000

which can be accessed by

logging into the members area

87

00:04:09,000--> 00:04:11,628

and going to the

SoA Resources page.

88

00:04:11,652--> 00:04:13,388

And for non-members,

89

00:04:13,412--> 00:04:18,000

the recording will be available

via the SoA's Vimeo channel.

90

00:04:18,000--> 00:04:20,108

And again, there should
be links coming up.

91

00:04:20,132--> 00:04:22,228

Now, if you...

92

00:04:22,252--> 00:04:24,148

if you do have any questions,

93

00:04:24,172--> 00:04:27,000

I would encourage you to
post them in the Q&A box.

94

00:04:27,000--> 00:04:31,000

You can, of course, post
them anonymously if you prefer.

95

00:04:31,000--> 00:04:32,288

And if you have
general comments,

96

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00:04:32,312--> 00:04:35,043

you can put those
in the chat box.

97

00:04:35,068--> 00:04:37,988

So, that's all of
our housekeeping.

98

00:04:38,012--> 00:04:42,776

And now we get on to the... to the... to the
meat and bones of the... of... of the event.

99

00:04:42,801--> 00:04:45,908

I'm so delighted to
introduce you to today's guest,

100

00:04:45,932--> 00:04:47,000

Katharine Halls.

101

00:04:47,000--> 00:04:50,428

Katharine Halls is an
Arabic-to-English translator.

102

00:04:50,452--> 00:04:54,708

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Her translation of Ahmed Naji's prison memoir "Rotten Evidence",

103

00:04:54,732--> 00:04:58,000

was awarded the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize.

104

00:04:58,000--> 00:05:02,000

Her work appears in AGNI, The Kenyon Review, The Believer,

105

00:05:02,000--> 00:05:05,628

McSweeney's, The New York Review of Books Online,

106

00:05:05,652--> 00:05:07,868

Deep Vellum's Best Literary Translations,

107

00:05:07,892--> 00:05:11,803

and The Penguin Book of the International Short Story.

108

00:05:11,828--> 00:05:13,788

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A really illustrious career,

109

00:05:13,812--> 00:05:16,108

and I'm so pleased that she's
found time to join us

110

00:05:16,132--> 00:05:18,028

for today's event.

111

00:05:18,052--> 00:05:20,123

Katharine, welcome.

How are you today?

112

00:05:20,390--> 00:05:23,548

-Thanks very much, Vineet, for
that lovely, lovely introduction.

113

00:05:23,572--> 00:05:25,506

I'm very well, thanks.

I'm very happy to be here.

114

00:05:25,531--> 00:05:27,915

Um, and I do want to just start
by saying thank you to Robin

115

00:05:27,940--> 00:05:31,000

and everybody at the Society of
Authors for making this happen.

116

00:05:31,000--> 00:05:33,748

And I'm especially
excited that it's, um,

117

00:05:33,772--> 00:05:36,108

to mark the founding of a
new prize for translations,

118

00:05:36,132--> 00:05:39,000

because I think it's really
wonderful to see recognition

119

00:05:39,000--> 00:05:40,428

for the way in which translation

120

00:05:40,452--> 00:05:42,748

enriches our literary
and linguistic life

121

00:05:42,772--> 00:05:44,708

by bringing in ideas from
elsewhere in the world

122

00:05:44,732--> 00:05:48,150

and from other languages, so I'm very glad
that the Society of Authors have done that.

123

00:05:48,550--> 00:05:51,028

That's such an... that's
such a relevant comment,

124

00:05:51,052--> 00:05:53,000

because I think you're
absolutely right that,

125

00:05:53,000--> 00:05:55,748

especially now, we just have
to think about world events,

126

00:05:55,772--> 00:05:57,468

the ability to...

127

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00:05:57,492--> 00:05:58,656

to, um...

128

00:05:58,681--> 00:06:02,000

to bring literature over

from other cultures and to...

129

00:06:02,000--> 00:06:03,908

and to foster understanding,

130

00:06:03,932--> 00:06:06,643

and transparency through

the act of translation

131

00:06:06,668--> 00:06:09,251

strikes me as being even

more important than ever before,

132

00:06:09,275--> 00:06:13,445

and particularly, I guess, from the

language that you translate from,

133

00:06:13,469--> 00:06:15,508

so that's... that's a

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really relevant point.

134

00:06:15,532--> 00:06:19,000

We will come back to

John Calder in time, but

135

00:06:19,000--> 00:06:20,748

let's kind of start at

the beginning and,

136

00:06:20,772--> 00:06:24,000

Katharine, tell us a bit, for those
of us who don't know your work,

137

00:06:24,000--> 00:06:26,148

how did you come
to Arabic translation?

138

00:06:26,172--> 00:06:28,770

And how did Arabic
become part of your life?

139

00:06:29,923--> 00:06:34,000

-Well, I was a teenager when,

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um, September 11th happened

140

00:06:34,000--> 00:06:35,948

and the Iraq War.

141

00:06:35,972--> 00:06:39,532

And my classmates and I
walked out of our English class,

142

00:06:39,556--> 00:06:41,245

whatever day it was

143

00:06:41,270--> 00:06:43,892

that there was the massive
demonstrations against the Iraq War.

144

00:06:43,917--> 00:06:47,000

And throughout
the time I was at

145

00:06:47,000--> 00:06:49,308

high school, I... the Middle
East was in the news.

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146

00:06:49,332--> 00:06:50,646

Um...

147

00:06:50,671--> 00:06:52,068

Mostly in a bad way.

148

00:06:52,092--> 00:06:54,588

Um, and I remember just...

149

00:06:54,612--> 00:06:58,788

being intrigued, being fascinated,
being obviously enraged.

150

00:06:58,812--> 00:07:00,903

I had quite a strong
sense of justice as a...

151

00:07:00,928--> 00:07:03,000

as a child and a young person.

152

00:07:03,000--> 00:07:04,571

And so when it came to

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153

00:07:04,595--> 00:07:06,628

deciding what I wanted

to study at university,

154

00:07:06,652--> 00:07:08,000

I found that I'd already,

155

00:07:08,000--> 00:07:11,868

you know, studied Spanish,

French, Italian at school,

156

00:07:11,892--> 00:07:16,000

and I knew I wanted to do

a language, and I thought,

157

00:07:16,000--> 00:07:18,628

you know, let's do

Arabic, I'm really interested.

158

00:07:18,652--> 00:07:21,708

Um, in the end, I didn't end up

doing anything to do with politics,

159

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00:07:21,732--> 00:07:24,279

which is what I'd kind
of always imagined.

160

00:07:24,304--> 00:07:25,861

I...

161

00:07:25,885--> 00:07:30,194

Well, I suppose, sort of, my
weigh-in was political, I suppose.

162

00:07:30,218--> 00:07:32,285

I studied Arabic and
Hebrew at university,

163

00:07:32,309--> 00:07:34,165

and while I was still
doing my undergraduate,

164

00:07:34,190--> 00:07:38,000

um, I lived in Egypt for a year
because I had to do a year abroad.

165

00:07:38,000--> 00:07:41,188

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And when the Egyptian
Revolution happened in 2011,

166

00:07:41,212--> 00:07:42,588

I'd already got
a lot of friends,

167

00:07:42,612--> 00:07:44,108

um, people I'd met there,

168

00:07:44,132--> 00:07:45,908

and I found people
were asking me for help

169

00:07:45,932--> 00:07:47,788

translating stuff into English,

170

00:07:47,812--> 00:07:48,908

subtitling videos,

171

00:07:48,932--> 00:07:51,000

kind of citizen
media type stuff

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172

00:07:51,000--> 00:07:55,000

to let the world know what
was happening in Egypt.

173

00:07:55,000--> 00:07:57,068

And so, I started doing that,

174

00:07:57,092--> 00:07:58,504

and it was just,
you know, for free.

175

00:07:58,529--> 00:08:00,348

I was doing it as an
activist, as a volunteer,

176

00:08:00,372--> 00:08:02,612

as a favour to friends, and
I found that I really loved it

177

00:08:02,636--> 00:08:04,470

and I was quite good
at it, and I thought

178

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00:08:04,495--> 00:08:05,708

I really want to do this.

179

00:08:05,732--> 00:08:09,028

So, I ended up sort of
doing my first, you know,

180

00:08:09,052--> 00:08:12,000

kind of paid translation
jobs and, actually,

181

00:08:12,000--> 00:08:14,588

also, literary, I did a play
was one of the first things I did

182

00:08:14,612--> 00:08:18,228

for a friend in Egypt whose
work I continued translating later,

183

00:08:18,252--> 00:08:20,000

um, but also, yeah, lots of...

184

00:08:20,000--> 00:08:21,508

lots of non-literary

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stuff as well.

185

00:08:21,532--> 00:08:24,268

But I did all that while I was
kind of still finishing off my studies

186

00:08:24,292--> 00:08:27,268

and then I decided to go and
do a Master's in translation.

187

00:08:27,292--> 00:08:28,730

In the end, I think it was,

188

00:08:28,755--> 00:08:31,468

you know, the experience equipped
me better than the Master's did,

189

00:08:31,492--> 00:08:33,000

but the Master's was good too.

190

00:08:33,000--> 00:08:35,908

Um, and...

191

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00:08:35,932--> 00:08:38,228

Yeah, I kind of...

192

00:08:38,252--> 00:08:40,548

had one foot in

academia for a little while

193

00:08:40,572--> 00:08:42,068

and then it was about

194

00:08:42,092--> 00:08:44,988

7 or 8 years ago, I thought, no, I
really just need to do this full-time.

195

00:08:45,012--> 00:08:47,588

And since then, I have
been working, you know,

196

00:08:47,612--> 00:08:49,708

full-time doing
literary translation.

197

00:08:49,732--> 00:08:50,948

Um...

198

00:08:50,972--> 00:08:53,268

As you know, we, you
know, we all supplement our,

199

00:08:53,292--> 00:08:55,988

you know, our income
with other bits of translation,

200

00:08:56,012--> 00:08:57,012

maybe not so literary.

201

00:08:57,036--> 00:08:58,948

But I enjoy that
too, to be honest.

202

00:08:58,972--> 00:09:02,416

Um, so yeah, that's how I
ended up doing literary translation.

203

00:09:02,441--> 00:09:04,588

-And in terms of...

204

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00:09:04,612--> 00:09:06,450

We discussed this the other day, um...

205

00:09:06,475--> 00:09:08,868

One of the challenges

that translators face

206

00:09:08,892--> 00:09:12,668

always is keeping up their
source language competency.

207

00:09:12,692--> 00:09:15,148

Am I right in thinking
that for you, Arabic is...

208

00:09:15,172--> 00:09:16,791

is part of your everyday world,

209

00:09:16,815--> 00:09:18,588

which might be
unusual for a lot of us,

210

00:09:18,612--> 00:09:22,132

working from source

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languages into English.

211

00:09:22,157--> 00:09:25,988

-Yeah, I suppose I'm
quite lucky, um, in that I...

212

00:09:26,012--> 00:09:29,068

Well, I speak Arabic at
home a lot of the time,

213

00:09:29,092--> 00:09:31,468

but I also live... I
mean, I live in Germany,

214

00:09:31,492--> 00:09:32,687

but I live in a neighbourhood

215

00:09:32,711--> 00:09:35,600

where there's lots of Arabic being
spoken around me all the time, and...

216

00:09:35,624--> 00:09:38,748

lots and lots of very close friends
here from Egypt and elsewhere.

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217

00:09:38,772--> 00:09:42,000

You know, they've all ended up in
Berlin, so a lot of my social life is,

218

00:09:42,000--> 00:09:45,000

you know, takes place in Arabic
as well. But I also have a book club,

219

00:09:45,000--> 00:09:47,228

which I really love,
in Arabic, and I'm...

220

00:09:47,252--> 00:09:48,628

Yeah, it's great reading...

221

00:09:48,652--> 00:09:50,748

reading sort of new
books that come out with...

222

00:09:50,772--> 00:09:53,428

with friends and colleagues,
and just other readers,

223

00:09:53,452--> 00:09:55,452

and seeing what they think

and chatting about them.

224

00:09:55,476--> 00:09:57,190

So yeah, I'm lucky

in that respect.

225

00:09:57,215--> 00:09:59,148

-You're in a very unique position

226

00:09:59,172--> 00:10:01,588

because your portfolio of

languages you mentioned,

227

00:10:01,612--> 00:10:03,000

Spanish and French.

228

00:10:03,000--> 00:10:07,428

And then, of course, your expertise

now is within the Arabic domain.

229

00:10:07,452--> 00:10:09,478

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Um, how would you...

230

00:10:09,502--> 00:10:11,948

how would you... If

you had to summarize,

231

00:10:11,972--> 00:10:14,868

distinguish between

the challenges of

232

00:10:14,892--> 00:10:17,388

the modern European

languages and Arabic.

233

00:10:17,412--> 00:10:19,000

Does Arabic bring

234

00:10:19,000--> 00:10:21,588

very particular difficulties

235

00:10:21,612--> 00:10:23,068

for the translator

236

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00:10:23,092--> 00:10:25,183

and especially for

the literary translator?

237

00:10:26,975--> 00:10:29,548

-That's an interesting

question. I think, I mean...

238

00:10:29,572--> 00:10:31,750

When I look across the board,

239

00:10:31,775--> 00:10:33,508

I think the main difference

240

00:10:33,532--> 00:10:35,708

is just simply that, you know,

241

00:10:35,732--> 00:10:37,828

languages other than

the big European ones,

242

00:10:37,852--> 00:10:40,845

French, Spanish, German, just

don't get taught in British schools,

243

00:10:40,869--> 00:10:43,000

at least, so everybody

who starts to learn them

244

00:10:43,000--> 00:10:47,490

is starting, um, much

later, and kind of is really

245

00:10:47,515--> 00:10:50,428

at a disadvantage in terms of what

kind of level they're going to reach.

246

00:10:50,452--> 00:10:51,890

And I think that's such a shame.

247

00:10:51,915--> 00:10:54,068

Um, I really wish

British schools

248

00:10:54,092--> 00:10:55,628

had more language

teaching in general,

249

00:10:55,652--> 00:10:59,000

and also more options for people to
study non-European languages, I think.

250

00:10:59,000--> 00:11:00,428

You know, the state of our...

251

00:11:00,452--> 00:11:04,150

of our literary lives, but also
probably the world in general

252

00:11:04,175--> 00:11:06,031

would be a lot better if
people in the UK were...

253

00:11:06,055--> 00:11:07,758

kids in the UK were
learning more languages

254

00:11:07,782--> 00:11:09,548

and more different
languages as well.

255

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00:11:09,572--> 00:11:12,188

Um, are they

different in terms of

256

00:11:12,212--> 00:11:15,068

kind of actual

nitty-gritty translation?

257

00:11:15,092--> 00:11:18,548

I think the fact that Arabic

syntax is so different

258

00:11:18,572--> 00:11:20,308

does mean it's kind of...

259

00:11:20,332--> 00:11:24,308

Especially it's got a special intensity

to the thought process. I'm... I'm...

260

00:11:24,332--> 00:11:26,908

I definitely don't want to say

that one is harder than the other,

261

00:11:26,932--> 00:11:28,788

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because I think every
translator working from...

262

00:11:28,812--> 00:11:31,246

in every language
combination, um, you know...

263

00:11:31,271--> 00:11:32,646

has got their own challenges, but...

264

00:11:32,671--> 00:11:34,591

-I don't think if it's so
much difficulty as just

265

00:11:34,615--> 00:11:37,065

are there peculiar things about
Arabic that you think, oh yes,

266

00:11:37,090--> 00:11:40,238

I'm working in Arabic now, so
this is gonna come up, or whatever.

267

00:11:40,263--> 00:11:42,198

Yeah, so syntax is

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always, you know...

268

00:11:42,222-->00:11:44,568

Syntax just always takes
that little bit longer to kind of...

269

00:11:44,592-->00:11:47,112

You've got to take it apart and
put it back together, I suppose,

270

00:11:47,136-->00:11:49,108

with when you're working
from Arabic into English.

271

00:11:49,132-->00:11:51,431

The other thing I think about
a lot when I'm translating

272

00:11:51,456-->00:11:54,188

is tense because
the... the, um...

273

00:11:54,212-->00:11:56,725

the kind of tense system of

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274

00:11:56,750--> 00:11:59,908

of Semitic languages just really doesn't map onto the tense system of English.

275

00:11:59,932--> 00:12:02,456

In fact, you know, Arabic kind of doesn't have tenses, it has...

276

00:12:02,481--> 00:12:04,268

It has aspects, um...

277

00:12:04,292--> 00:12:08,000

So, you know, verb forms don't necessarily tell you

278

00:12:08,000--> 00:12:09,828

when the action took place.

279

00:12:09,852--> 00:12:12,378

They tell you other bits of information about it.

280

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00:12:12,402--> 00:12:15,000

So you often have to decide,
completely from scratch,

281

00:12:15,000--> 00:12:17,228

what tense am I going
to translate this story in?

282

00:12:17,252--> 00:12:19,748

And that can be quite
a loaded decision,

283

00:12:19,772--> 00:12:21,908

partly because, I think,
different tenses in English

284

00:12:21,932--> 00:12:26,028

that you can, you know,
different narrative tenses, um...

285

00:12:26,052--> 00:12:29,081

can convey quite different
stylistic choices, can't they?

286

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00:12:29,105--> 00:12:31,000

You know, it can
be a very, sort of,

287

00:12:31,000--> 00:12:32,447

modern-sounding

288

00:12:32,471--> 00:12:34,668
kind of stream of
consciousness narrative present

289

00:12:34,692--> 00:12:36,588
or it can be a more
traditional narrative past,

290

00:12:36,612--> 00:12:40,000
and often that's just basically left
to the translator to decide, because,

291

00:12:40,000--> 00:12:41,960
you know, writers, when
they're writing in Arabic,

292

00:12:41,984--> 00:12:43,428

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don't have to
make that decision.

293

00:12:43,452--> 00:12:46,065

So I think that's, yeah, tense is
probably the one I'd single out.

294

00:12:46,090--> 00:12:48,268

-That's a fascinating
difference, and I guess...

295

00:12:48,292--> 00:12:50,048

Given that you also
translate from French,

296

00:12:50,072--> 00:12:51,688

you'll know what I'm
talking about here.

297

00:12:51,712--> 00:12:54,000

It's almost the reverse
with French, where you have

298

00:12:54,000--> 00:12:56,588

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a very kind of
clearly demarcated,

299

00:12:56,612--> 00:12:59,000

you know, sequence
of past tenses unfolding,

300

00:12:59,000--> 00:13:00,000

you know, with your...

301

00:13:00,000--> 00:13:03,948
your passé composé and
pluperfect, and very often, in English,

302

00:13:03,972--> 00:13:06,748

I find I'm trying to actually
flatten some of that,

303

00:13:06,772--> 00:13:09,000
because it becomes a
bit ridiculous having to put

304

00:13:09,000--> 00:13:12,000
lots of had-dones and

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had-beens in English,

305

00:13:12,000--> 00:13:14,348

which tends to just

306

00:13:14,372--> 00:13:16,733

pretty much dump everything
in the past and be done with it.

307

00:13:16,758--> 00:13:18,840

-Kinship here for it, if
you've got too many hands.

308

00:13:18,865--> 00:13:19,981

Yeah, I know what you mean.

309

00:13:20,005--> 00:13:22,508

Yeah, I was looking at a text
the other day, and I'd been...

310

00:13:22,532--> 00:13:24,250

I'm giving a workshop
next week and I...

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311

00:13:24,275--> 00:13:27,165

Next month, sorry, and I thought

I'd like to do something about tense,

312

00:13:27,189--> 00:13:30,000

so I've been kind of keeping my

eyes peeled for good examples of this.

313

00:13:30,000--> 00:13:33,111

And I was looking at, um, a

piece of a text I'm translating,

314

00:13:33,135--> 00:13:35,000

actually, a new

novel by Shady Lewis,

315

00:13:35,000--> 00:13:38,068

whose book On The Greenwich

Line I'm going to read from shortly.

316

00:13:38,092--> 00:13:39,108

Um...

317

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00:13:39,132--> 00:13:42,188

And I was looking at how to...

deciding how to translate a sentence

318

00:13:42,212--> 00:13:45,000

which said something like, or

it could have been either, um...

319

00:13:45,000--> 00:13:46,228

My father...

320

00:13:46,252--> 00:13:48,396

"My father's sense

of humour always."

321

00:13:48,421--> 00:13:50,250

"I always liked my

father's sense of humour",

322

00:13:50,275--> 00:13:52,885

or "I had always liked my

father's sense of humour",

323

00:13:52,909--> 00:13:55,068

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or "I have always liked
my father's sense of humour."

324

00:13:55,092--> 00:13:56,218

And I thought,

325

00:13:56,243--> 00:13:59,000

I'm just gonna have to call
the guy, because one of these

326

00:13:59,000--> 00:14:00,290

implies that his father is dead,

327

00:14:00,314--> 00:14:04,000

and the other implies that he's alive, and
that's not a decision I can make myself.

328

00:14:04,000--> 00:14:06,030

So yeah, stuff like that.

329

00:14:07,000--> 00:14:08,628

-Yeah, that's...

330

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00:14:08,652--> 00:14:12,188

that's a brilliant example of the kind of decision-making processes

331

00:14:12,212--> 00:14:14,828

that we translators have to kind of engage in

332

00:14:14,852--> 00:14:17,028

almost in a minute-by-minute basis,

333

00:14:17,052--> 00:14:20,000

and sometimes having the author to turn to is a great luxury.

334

00:14:20,000--> 00:14:21,991

Katharine, you're kind of doing my job for me

335

00:14:22,015--> 00:14:24,378

by trailing your reading from your...

336

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00:14:24,402--> 00:14:25,402

-Yes [laughs]

337

00:14:25,426--> 00:14:27,604

-From your... It's your
latest translation, isn't it?

338

00:14:27,629--> 00:14:30,188

-Um, this is the most recent
one, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

339

00:14:30,212--> 00:14:31,388

-But before we do that,

340

00:14:31,412--> 00:14:34,620

would you like to, for the
uninitiated, and that includes myself,

341

00:14:34,644--> 00:14:38,588

paint the general picture of Arabic
literature and translation for me,

342

00:14:38,612--> 00:14:42,000

and referring back to our

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conversation the other day,

343

00:14:42,000--> 00:14:46,000

some of the challenges, I guess,
that you as a literary translator face

344

00:14:46,000--> 00:14:48,908

in terms of, I guess, persuading

345

00:14:48,932--> 00:14:52,988

the Western world
that X or Y texts

346

00:14:53,012--> 00:14:55,508

is really worth considering.

347

00:14:55,532--> 00:14:59,000

Just give us a flavour of
that world that you inhabit.

348

00:14:59,000--> 00:15:01,148

-Sure. Um...

349

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00:15:01,172--> 00:15:05,188

Well, you know,

Arabic is spoken by

350

00:15:05,212--> 00:15:10,188

400 million plus people in

22 countries around the world,

351

00:15:10,212--> 00:15:13,000

um, and also

people in diaspora's...

352

00:15:13,000--> 00:15:15,988

uh... even further

flung than those countries.

353

00:15:16,012--> 00:15:17,668

Um...

354

00:15:17,692--> 00:15:22,000

And pretty much every

Arabic-speaking country,

355

00:15:22,000--> 00:15:25,068

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plus countries which don't even
have Arabic as an official language,

356

00:15:25,092--> 00:15:27,788

have their own Arabic
kind of publishing industries

357

00:15:27,812--> 00:15:31,628

and their own literary
cultures and subcultures, so...

358

00:15:31,652--> 00:15:33,788

It's a massive book market,

359

00:15:33,812--> 00:15:35,388

it's a massive literary world,

360

00:15:35,412--> 00:15:36,668

um...

361

00:15:36,692--> 00:15:39,948

As such, you know, hard for
me to sum all of that up, but...

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362

00:15:39,972--> 00:15:45,388

just as pertinently, I think, quite hard for, um, publishers and readers

363

00:15:45,412--> 00:15:48,198

in the West, in the UK, or the English language market,

364

00:15:48,222--> 00:15:50,668

whatever you want to call it, to get their head around it all.

365

00:15:50,692--> 00:15:52,548

Um, so...

366

00:15:52,572--> 00:15:55,428

My experience is that it's, sort of,

367

00:15:55,452--> 00:15:58,908

small little snippets of that vast literary landscape

368

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00:15:58,932--> 00:16:03,188

that get translated into English. Some of them things that I think are great,

369

00:16:03,212--> 00:16:05,468

some of them I think, God,
why did you translate that

370

00:16:05,492--> 00:16:07,308

when you had so
much to choose from?

371

00:16:07,332--> 00:16:09,390

And some of it's just a
question of taste, you know.

372

00:16:09,415--> 00:16:11,268

Different things for
different... different...

373

00:16:11,292--> 00:16:12,668

different readers.

374

00:16:12,692--> 00:16:15,228

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Um, there... I would say

375

00:16:15,252-->00:16:19,000

the kind of the big

crisis, or the big kind of

376

00:16:19,000-->00:16:21,880

thing that we're all struggling with,

translators from Arabic to English,

377

00:16:21,904-->00:16:23,716

is that there's very

little funding available

378

00:16:23,741-->00:16:25,748

for the translation of

379

00:16:25,772-->00:16:27,108

Arabic literature into English.

380

00:16:27,132-->00:16:31,308

There are some kind of

funding programs, some, um...

381

00:16:31,332--> 00:16:33,988

prizes that have
funding attached.

382

00:16:34,012--> 00:16:37,000

Most of those are
based in the Gulf.

383

00:16:37,000--> 00:16:40,000

They have their own
kind of specific tastes.

384

00:16:40,000--> 00:16:44,000

There's also the International
Prize for Arabic Fiction.

385

00:16:44,000--> 00:16:45,428

Um...

386

00:16:45,452--> 00:16:46,988

But my impression is, again,

387

00:16:47,012--> 00:16:51,068

that these tend to favour a kind of very specific end of the...

388

00:16:51,092--> 00:16:54,588

of kind of the literary output of the Arab world.

389

00:16:54,612--> 00:16:58,188

They're often these, you know, the winners and the shortlistees for those prizes

390

00:16:58,212--> 00:17:00,000

are often these kind of heavy hitters.

391

00:17:00,000--> 00:17:05,000

Big, sort of, historical novels, often, um, really big themes.

392

00:17:05,000--> 00:17:07,818

Love, war, exile, that kind of thing.

393

00:17:07,842--> 00:17:10,762

A lot of, kind of, looking back over
the recent history of the Arab world,

394

00:17:10,786--> 00:17:13,586
or even, you know, going back
into, kind of, Islamic history and so on.

395

00:17:13,610--> 00:17:14,951
Um...

396

00:17:14,975--> 00:17:17,868
Which is great, it's not
particularly my taste, I must say.

397

00:17:17,892--> 00:17:21,000
I'm not usually one to
pick up a historical novel.

398

00:17:21,000--> 00:17:22,908
Um, and so...

399

00:17:22,932--> 00:17:25,268
for a lot of the books
that I'm working on,

400

00:17:25,292--> 00:17:26,716

which are often kind of

401

00:17:26,741--> 00:17:30,038

a younger set of writers, more

maybe millennial concerns,

402

00:17:30,062--> 00:17:33,988

I also really like, sort of,

experimental writing, hybrid writing,

403

00:17:34,012--> 00:17:37,403

a slightly, you know,

kookier story or character.

404

00:17:37,428--> 00:17:39,188

There's not a lot

of funding available.

405

00:17:39,212--> 00:17:41,948

And there's not a lot of,

kind of, publicity either.

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406

00:17:41,972--> 00:17:45,188

So, I think publishers who are based
in the UK or, you know, in Europe

407

00:17:45,212--> 00:17:46,408

wanting to find out about...

408

00:17:46,432--> 00:17:48,751

about work in Arabic
really, really struggle.

409

00:17:48,775--> 00:17:51,308

They kind of don't have
their finger on the pulse

410

00:17:51,332--> 00:17:53,812

in the way that they can with
something like German literature,

411

00:17:53,836--> 00:17:56,916

where there's, you know, a magazine
that comes out called New Books in German,

412

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00:17:56,940--> 00:17:59,922

with all the cool stuff that from this year that publishers should publish.

413

00:17:59,947--> 00:18:01,808

So yeah, so that's a bit what it's like for us.

414

00:18:01,832--> 00:18:04,588

We often, I think, feel like we're shouting into the void a bit.

415

00:18:04,612--> 00:18:05,748

We each go and we...

416

00:18:05,772--> 00:18:08,308

You know, I think I speak for a lot of translators from Arabic

417

00:18:08,332--> 00:18:10,845

when I say that we, you know, we have books that we really love

418

00:18:10,869--> 00:18:13,788

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and then we go to publishers
and try and tell them about them,

419

00:18:13,812--> 00:18:15,788

and ask them to publish
them, and they say, "oh...

420

00:18:15,812--> 00:18:17,237

we're not really
interested in that.

421

00:18:17,262--> 00:18:21,628

We saw this other book,
which won the prize last year."

422

00:18:21,652--> 00:18:24,148

And I think, yeah, but that's
not the kind of stuff you publish

423

00:18:24,172--> 00:18:25,611

in translation from
other languages,

424

00:18:25,635--> 00:18:27,200

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so why would you
publish it from Arabic?

425

00:18:27,224--> 00:18:29,524

So, there we are, but, you
know, we're doing our best.

426

00:18:29,549--> 00:18:32,059

-And do you feel that
you're winning that battle,

427

00:18:32,083--> 00:18:35,108

or is it just small
steps incrementally,

428

00:18:35,132--> 00:18:38,058

year by year, and you're just
one of many ambassadors who are...

429

00:18:38,083--> 00:18:41,030

who are championing the
cause of Arabic literature?

430

00:18:41,055--> 00:18:42,708

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-I'm definitely one of many

431

00:18:42,732--> 00:18:45,628

and my hope is that that
many will become more.

432

00:18:45,652--> 00:18:47,000

Um, I think there's lots of

433

00:18:47,000--> 00:18:49,138

great new translators
kind of coming into the field,

434

00:18:49,162--> 00:18:50,348

and that's really exciting.

435

00:18:50,372--> 00:18:51,508

Um...

436

00:18:51,532--> 00:18:53,985

Yeah, I don't say... I don't
think I feel like I'm winning.

437

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00:18:54,009--> 00:18:55,009

[laughs]

438

00:18:55,033--> 00:18:58,348

Incremental is... is

a good description.

439

00:18:58,372--> 00:19:02,000

What I do think is

really nice is that I think,

440

00:19:02,000--> 00:19:04,548

you know, I've definitely seen

in the last few years a lot of,

441

00:19:04,572--> 00:19:06,000

kind of, small,

442

00:19:06,000--> 00:19:08,348

indie presses, publishing

443

00:19:08,372--> 00:19:12,868

interesting, unusual works

of Arabic writing, which,

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444

00:19:12,892--> 00:19:15,548

you know, haven't kind
of made the big prize lists

445

00:19:15,572--> 00:19:17,660

and aren't going to be
published by a big publisher,

446

00:19:17,684--> 00:19:19,204

and I think that's
really great because

447

00:19:19,228--> 00:19:21,989

that's the section of, you know,
of literature that I'm interested in.

448

00:19:22,013--> 00:19:23,533

That's the kind of
books I want to read

449

00:19:23,557--> 00:19:25,357

that are translated from
French or Portuguese,

450

00:19:25,381--> 00:19:28,661

or whatever it is, or that are written in
English. I want to read what the little

451

00:19:28,685--> 00:19:32,000

independent presses are publishing.
So I'm very happy that that part

452

00:19:32,000--> 00:19:34,708

of the world of Arabic
literature translated into English

453

00:19:34,732--> 00:19:36,556

does seem to be
kind of thriving.

454

00:19:36,581--> 00:19:37,581

-Wonderful.

455

00:19:37,605--> 00:19:40,171

-That said though, the state of
independent publishing in the UK,

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456

00:19:40,195--> 00:19:43,028

you know, go and read the
indie publisher's open letter.

457

00:19:43,052--> 00:19:45,668

They're having a terrible
time of it financially, so...

458

00:19:45,692--> 00:19:49,000

Yeah, without some help,
that might not last for long, so...

459

00:19:49,000--> 00:19:50,751

support independent publishers

460

00:19:50,775--> 00:19:52,618

and buy books at your
local bookshop, please.

461

00:19:52,642--> 00:19:53,642

[laughs]

462

00:19:53,666--> 00:19:58,000

-And on that note, and with that wonderful cri de coeur and that call to action,

463

00:19:58,000--> 00:20:01,228

would you like to

introduce your excerpt?

464

00:20:01,252--> 00:20:03,703

Set it up for us, tell us

what you're going to read.

465

00:20:03,728--> 00:20:07,190

And perhaps you could tell us a little bit about how this... this text came to you.

466

00:20:07,215--> 00:20:09,868

Sure, yeah. Um...

467

00:20:09,892--> 00:20:12,788

So, this, this novel is, um...

468

00:20:12,812--> 00:20:14,625

It's the third novel by...

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469

00:20:14,649--> 00:20:16,188

Sorry, it's the second novel,

470

00:20:16,212--> 00:20:18,258

but the first to be

published in English by

471

00:20:18,282--> 00:20:21,000

a really great Egyptian

writer called Shady Lewis.

472

00:20:21,000--> 00:20:23,268

He spells his name with a Y,

473

00:20:23,292--> 00:20:25,428

so it looks like "shady",

but it's "Shah-dee".

474

00:20:25,452--> 00:20:27,348

And my mum recently said...

475

00:20:27,372--> 00:20:29,388

My mum lives in

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Wales, and she's, um...

476

00:20:29,412-->00:20:32,292

told a couple of people about the
book, and she recently said that people

477

00:20:32,316-->00:20:33,743

have kept asking her if...

478

00:20:33,768-->00:20:36,371

if he's Egyptian, why has
he got a Welsh surname?

479

00:20:36,395-->00:20:37,948

Which I thought
was really funny.

480

00:20:37,972-->00:20:39,772

Never occurred to me
that Lewis sounded Welsh.

481

00:20:39,796-->00:20:41,000

Anyway, "Loo-ees".

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482

00:20:41,000--> 00:20:42,000

Um...

483

00:20:42,024--> 00:20:46,211

So he has been based in the
UK for a very long time now.

484

00:20:46,235--> 00:20:47,950

He lives in London and he's...

485

00:20:47,975--> 00:20:50,171

he's really interesting
because he's, you know, he's

486

00:20:50,196--> 00:20:52,628

a multiply published
writer in Arabic,

487

00:20:52,652--> 00:20:55,548

but when he, um,
moved to the UK,

488

00:20:55,572--> 00:20:57,828

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he started working in,

kind of, local authorities,

489

00:20:57,852--> 00:20:58,988

housing departments,

490

00:20:59,012--> 00:21:01,750

he works with, um,

patients with complex needs,

491

00:21:01,775--> 00:21:03,691

mental health services,

that kind of thing.

492

00:21:03,715--> 00:21:06,000

So he's really seen

the UK, kind of,

493

00:21:06,000--> 00:21:09,108

from the inside out, and seeing some

of the most vulnerable people in the UK,

494

00:21:09,132--> 00:21:10,548

and the people who are kind of...

495

00:21:10,572--> 00:21:13,268

you know, really kind of chewed
up and spat out by society,

496

00:21:13,292--> 00:21:15,975

and have been worst affected
by austerity and that kind of thing.

497

00:21:16,000--> 00:21:17,731

Um, he's a very...
he's got, kind of

498

00:21:17,755--> 00:21:21,536

a very black sense of
humour, um, quite Kafka-esque.

499

00:21:21,561--> 00:21:25,000

Um, and yeah, I read
this book... I think...

500

00:21:25,000--> 00:21:26,788

This was the second
of his books that I read.

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501

00:21:26,812--> 00:21:28,668

His first has not
been published yet,

502

00:21:28,692--> 00:21:30,000

but we're working on it.

503

00:21:30,000--> 00:21:33,348

Um, and it's set in London,

504

00:21:33,372--> 00:21:35,468

and I just thought it would
be such an interesting

505

00:21:35,492--> 00:21:36,908

book for British writers--

506

00:21:36,932--> 00:21:39,000

British readers, sorry,
to read, because it's,

507

00:21:39,000--> 00:21:40,938

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you know, it's a kind

of like a London novel.

508

00:21:40,962--> 00:21:42,722

It's kind of like a White

Teeth or something,

509

00:21:42,746--> 00:21:45,226

but written in Arabic, and I

thought that was really great.

510

00:21:45,251--> 00:21:46,251

Um...

511

00:21:46,275--> 00:21:47,428

Shady is, um,

512

00:21:47,452--> 00:21:50,908

one of the authors who I represent

in my literary agency, 10/11.

513

00:21:50,932--> 00:21:54,108

I have a kind of very

small literary agency,

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514

00:21:54,132--> 00:21:57,308

which I run with a colleague who
translates from Arabic into German,

515

00:21:57,332--> 00:22:00,000

and Shady is one of
the authors that we...

516

00:22:00,000--> 00:22:01,108

that we represent.

517

00:22:01,132--> 00:22:02,748

So yeah, so I, I...

518

00:22:02,772--> 00:22:04,388

sent his book to
many publishers,

519

00:22:04,412--> 00:22:07,188

and as I told you
earlier, that's not easy.

520

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00:22:07,212--> 00:22:09,828

But eventually, um, Peirene

Press said, "yeah, we love this,

521

00:22:09,852--> 00:22:10,852

we'd love to publish it",

522

00:22:10,876--> 00:22:12,000

so it came out with them...

523

00:22:12,000--> 00:22:13,000

with them last year.

524

00:22:13,024--> 00:22:15,430

I'm going to read...

525

00:22:15,455--> 00:22:17,091

uh...

526

00:22:17,115--> 00:22:18,908

Chapter 2, the

beginning of Chapter 2,

527

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00:22:18,932--> 00:22:21,730

which is just about the character kind of describing

528

00:22:21,755--> 00:22:23,068

a little bit about

529

00:22:23,092--> 00:22:25,105

how he's kind of come to settle down in the UK

530

00:22:25,129--> 00:22:26,571

and what his family think about that.

531

00:22:26,965--> 00:22:27,965

-Thank you.

532

00:22:31,977--> 00:22:34,108

"He was twenty years older than me.

533

00:22:34,132--> 00:22:36,548

He'd left for Italy on

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one of those boats

534

00:22:36,572--> 00:22:39,268

that dumped their human cargo
several kilometres from shore

535

00:22:39,292--> 00:22:41,537

and I hadn't seen him since.

536

00:22:41,561--> 00:22:44,988

Once he got his papers and
found a legal job cleaning toilets,

537

00:22:45,012--> 00:22:46,600

he visited Egypt twice.

538

00:22:46,625--> 00:22:49,168

But for some reason, I
didn't see him on either visit.

539

00:22:49,193--> 00:22:51,380

I hardly remembered
what he looked like,

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540

00:22:51,404--> 00:22:52,927

just that he was skinny.

541

00:22:52,951--> 00:22:55,695

His voice I couldn't
remember at all.

542

00:22:55,720--> 00:22:57,783

But 6 months after
arriving in London,

543

00:22:57,807--> 00:22:59,065

I heard it once again.

544

00:23:00,000--> 00:23:01,708

The uncle who
never kept in touch

545

00:23:01,732--> 00:23:04,000

had rung my mother for a
catch-up two days earlier

546

00:23:04,000--> 00:23:05,341

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and she told him the good news

547

00:23:05,365--> 00:23:06,868

that I'd just got my first job

548

00:23:06,892--> 00:23:08,201

after months of searching.

549

00:23:08,226--> 00:23:10,628

Feeling obliged to

congratulate me personally,

550

00:23:10,652--> 00:23:12,000

he asked my mother

for my number.

551

00:23:12,000--> 00:23:13,845

It was a long call.

552

00:23:13,869--> 00:23:15,868

I was a boy of ten

when he'd last seen me

553

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00:23:15,892--> 00:23:19,000

and he wanted to know everything that
had happened in the intervening period.

554

00:23:19,000--> 00:23:20,268

I wasn't up for that,

555

00:23:20,292--> 00:23:23,000

so I gave him a dry synopsis
of my studies and work

556

00:23:23,000--> 00:23:24,595

which seemed to satisfy him.

557

00:23:24,619--> 00:23:27,000

What really took a long time

558

00:23:27,000--> 00:23:29,340

was his astonishment
at the nature of the job

559

00:23:29,365--> 00:23:31,033

I'd managed to obtain.

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560

00:23:31,746--> 00:23:33,073

My uncle,

561

00:23:33,097--> 00:23:34,975

actually a first

cousin once removed,

562

00:23:35,000--> 00:23:37,432

could barely believe his ears.

563

00:23:37,456--> 00:23:40,489

He repeated each of his

questions several times.

564

00:23:40,514--> 00:23:41,668

Every time I answered,

565

00:23:41,692--> 00:23:44,508

I could hear a faint gasp of

amazement on the other end

566

00:23:44,533--> 00:23:48,000

and I couldn't help

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laughing, though I tried not to.

567

00:23:48,000--> 00:23:49,628

Although struggling

to believe me,

568

00:23:49,652--> 00:23:53,401

he was overjoyed. And yet somewhere in

this mixture of delights and incredulity,

569

00:23:53,426--> 00:23:55,449

there was also a note

of embarrassment.

570

00:23:55,473--> 00:23:58,468

Perhaps because his questions

began to sound increasingly envious

571

00:23:58,492--> 00:24:00,543

as the conversation progressed.

572

00:24:03,000--> 00:24:04,908

"Let me get this

straight," he said,

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573

00:24:04,932--> 00:24:07,570

enunciating the question
clearly, just to be sure.

574

00:24:07,595--> 00:24:10,103

"You work for the government?"

575

00:24:10,127--> 00:24:13,303

"Not exactly, uncle, I
work for the local council."

576

00:24:13,328--> 00:24:16,000

I tried to downplay
it, but it didn't work.

577

00:24:16,000--> 00:24:17,301

"So you work for the government.

578

00:24:17,325--> 00:24:18,988

I mean, what else
is a local council?

579

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00:24:19,012--> 00:24:20,736

It's part of the government!

580

00:24:20,761--> 00:24:22,588

And you really
work in an office?"

581

00:24:22,612--> 00:24:25,130

His voice was
twitching with awe.

582

00:24:25,155--> 00:24:27,683

All I could do was
go along with him.

583

00:24:27,708--> 00:24:29,228

"That's right, Uncle".

584

00:24:29,252--> 00:24:31,118

Silence.

585

00:24:31,142--> 00:24:34,000

"And do you have your own
desk and chair, and so forth?"

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586

00:24:34,000--> 00:24:36,668

he asked, more seriously now.

587

00:24:36,692--> 00:24:41,000

I tried not to let my annoyance at his
insistent questioning show in my voice,

588

00:24:41,000--> 00:24:42,988

but I couldn't find...
couldn't find it in me

589

00:24:43,012--> 00:24:45,570

to feign enthusiasm
when I replied that, yes,

590

00:24:45,595--> 00:24:46,595

I did.

591

00:24:46,619--> 00:24:49,178

"I have a computer
as well," I added.

592

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00:24:49,202--> 00:24:51,748

Uncle was positively jubilant

593

00:24:51,772--> 00:24:54,628

at this achievement by a member
of his family in the diaspora.

594

00:24:54,653--> 00:24:57,148

"Masha'Allah, and you've
only just arrived there!"

595

00:24:57,172--> 00:24:59,116

Tremendous! Masha'allah!"

596

00:24:59,183--> 00:25:01,708

"It's only a junior
position," I said,

597

00:25:01,732--> 00:25:04,423

making another attempt to
keep things in perspective,

598

00:25:04,448--> 00:25:06,125

though I knew it was futile.

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599

00:25:06,149--> 00:25:08,508

"Still, thanks be to God."

600

00:25:08,532--> 00:25:09,955

He wasn't having any of it.

601

00:25:09,979--> 00:25:11,388

"Junior, my hat!"

602

00:25:11,412--> 00:25:12,748

he exclaimed reproachfully.

603

00:25:12,772--> 00:25:14,198

"You have your own chair!

604

00:25:14,223--> 00:25:16,388

A chair for you to sit on!"

605

00:25:17,573--> 00:25:19,268

Over the next 9 years,

606

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00:25:19,292--> 00:25:20,748

the memory of that phone call

607

00:25:20,772--> 00:25:24,068

and Uncle Tanios' eager
questioning about my chair

608

00:25:24,092--> 00:25:26,000

and the fact of
my sitting on it

609

00:25:26,000--> 00:25:30,000

kept me from losing my patience
with my job time and time again.

610

00:25:30,000--> 00:25:31,628

It really wasn't a bad job.

611

00:25:31,652--> 00:25:35,000

True, I thought of it as a
stepping stone to begin with.

612

00:25:35,000--> 00:25:36,868

But even so, I was

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luckier than many.

613

00:25:36,892-->00:25:41,576

Living in London, working for a
local authority, working full stop.

614

00:25:41,601-->00:25:43,308

That was a lot of luck.

615

00:25:44,052-->00:25:47,388

And to be fair, the thing I disliked
about it was the same thing I disliked

616

00:25:47,412-->00:25:49,000

about other jobs in the past.

617

00:25:49,000-->00:25:51,468

There was nothing
to do, or very little.

618

00:25:51,492-->00:25:55,000

Back in Egypt, I'd always
had to pretend to be working.

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619

00:25:55,000--> 00:25:56,828

Here, that wasn't necessary,

620

00:25:56,852--> 00:25:58,191

because everyone around me

621

00:25:58,215--> 00:26:02,000

was always so engrossed in their
work they barely noticed my presence.

622

00:26:02,000--> 00:26:03,308

I couldn't work it out.

623

00:26:03,332--> 00:26:07,336

How were they constantly occupied
when I couldn't find anything to do?

624

00:26:07,361--> 00:26:10,548

My previous bosses
had often called me lazy.

625

00:26:10,572--> 00:26:13,503

The issue now, though,

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wasn't filling the time,

626

00:26:13,528--> 00:26:16,350

but looking for things to do

that I could convince myself

627

00:26:16,375--> 00:26:17,817

had some meaning.

628

00:26:17,841--> 00:26:19,297

And so,

629

00:26:19,321--> 00:26:21,228

I had to keep reminding myself

630

00:26:21,252--> 00:26:24,000

of that phone call with my

first cousin once removed

631

00:26:24,000--> 00:26:27,260

every day, and on difficult

days more than ever.

632

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00:26:27,285--> 00:26:28,948

I have a chair

633

00:26:28,972--> 00:26:30,443

and I sit on it.

634

00:26:32,000--> 00:26:34,708

Thank you, Catherine,

that was absolutely brilliant.

635

00:26:34,732--> 00:26:36,588

A very, very engaging piece.

636

00:26:36,612--> 00:26:38,503

I was struck by the...

637

00:26:38,528--> 00:26:40,868

the challenges which I

could imagine in my head

638

00:26:40,892--> 00:26:43,700

with the dialogue

and some of the...

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639

00:26:43,725--> 00:26:47,188

some of the phrases that you
opted to keep, I guess, in Arabic?

640

00:26:47,212--> 00:26:49,228

Was it Masha'Allah,
something similar to that?

641

00:26:49,252--> 00:26:51,548

And there were some
others that you did translate.

642

00:26:51,572--> 00:26:53,000

Talk me through some of the...

643

00:26:53,000--> 00:26:57,000

the Q&A in your head over some
of those dialogue issues for you.

644

00:26:57,000--> 00:26:59,388

-Do you know what, I
have to say, I think Shady

645

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00:26:59,412--> 00:27:01,188

really makes it easy for...

646

00:27:01,212--> 00:27:03,188

for translators to

translate his work,

647

00:27:03,212--> 00:27:05,268

because his writing

is so kind of fluid

648

00:27:05,292--> 00:27:06,988

and because he's

lived in the UK,

649

00:27:07,012--> 00:27:10,000

he's got this... I mean, the whole

book has this cast of characters that he

650

00:27:10,000--> 00:27:11,788

either works with

at the council.

651

00:27:11,812--> 00:27:14,000

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It's somewhere in East London.

652

00:27:14,000--> 00:27:16,948

Um, so either the

people he works with

653

00:27:16,972--> 00:27:19,548

or, or, um,

654

00:27:19,572--> 00:27:21,488

people he comes into

contact with during his...

655

00:27:21,512--> 00:27:23,000

his job as a housing officer.

656

00:27:23,000--> 00:27:25,548

Um, and they just felt...

657

00:27:25,572--> 00:27:28,548

like, real London characters

and it was so easy to...

658

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00:27:28,572--> 00:27:31,000

to kind of imagine

how they might talk.

659

00:27:31,000--> 00:27:32,428

Um...

660

00:27:32,452--> 00:27:34,828

So he really made it
easy for me in that respect.

661

00:27:34,852--> 00:27:36,028

Um...

662

00:27:36,052--> 00:27:37,548

Yeah, do you know what?

663

00:27:37,572--> 00:27:39,371

Masha'Allah, as I read
that, I was thinking,

664

00:27:39,395--> 00:27:41,571

that's actually not something
I tend to do very often.

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665

00:27:41,595--> 00:27:44,228

I often try to stay

away from, um...

666

00:27:44,252--> 00:27:46,908

preserving specifically

those Arabic words

667

00:27:46,932--> 00:27:49,398

that have to do with things

like, kind of, religion in Arabic.

668

00:27:49,422--> 00:27:51,658

I find that a bit of a cliche

in translation sometimes,

669

00:27:51,682--> 00:27:53,828

but it just fitted the

character also so well here.

670

00:27:53,852--> 00:27:55,188

You know, he's just...

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671

00:27:55,212--> 00:27:59,148

so excited about his nephew, his
first cousin once removed, and that

672

00:27:59,172--> 00:28:00,471

chair and computer of his,

673

00:28:00,495--> 00:28:02,536

so I felt it worked for him.

674

00:28:02,561--> 00:28:04,988

-No, it worked terribly
well, and actually,

675

00:28:05,012--> 00:28:06,588

some of the questions
are pouring in

676

00:28:06,612--> 00:28:09,268

and some of them are to
do with the actual, you know...

677

00:28:09,292--> 00:28:11,708

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the nuts and bolts.

678

00:28:11,732--> 00:28:12,748

So here's one.

679

00:28:12,772--> 00:28:15,570

In terms of structural
differences in punctuation,

680

00:28:15,595--> 00:28:18,748

could you say something about the
things that you stumble over sometimes?

681

00:28:21,595--> 00:28:22,748

[Katharine exhales]

682

00:28:22,772--> 00:28:25,748

We talked about
tense earlier, um...

683

00:28:25,772--> 00:28:27,508

I guess cultural differences?

684

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00:28:27,532--> 00:28:28,668

Do they present issues?

685

00:28:28,692--> 00:28:29,692

Or cultural references?

686

00:28:29,716--> 00:28:31,668

-I like how the person has asked

687

00:28:31,692--> 00:28:33,628

about structural differences

and pronunciation...

688

00:28:33,652--> 00:28:35,000

Uh, sorry, punctuation.

689

00:28:35,000--> 00:28:36,708

Um...

690

00:28:36,732--> 00:28:38,588

Yeah, so I...

691

00:28:38,612--> 00:28:41,588

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It's funny, actually, I'm
working on a text right now with...

692

00:28:41,612--> 00:28:44,188
by an author who's... who... who...

693

00:28:44,212--> 00:28:47,028
you know, has very good
English and pays a lot of attention

694

00:28:47,052--> 00:28:48,748
to what the translation is like.

695

00:28:48,772--> 00:28:51,000
And that author, kind of,

696

00:28:51,000--> 00:28:52,951
um, has a... has a...

697

00:28:52,975--> 00:28:55,508
has a real hatred of
many kinds of punctuation.

698

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00:28:55,532--> 00:28:57,732

Basically everything other
than a comma and a full stop.

699

00:28:57,756--> 00:28:59,756

So I'm being really kind
of straight-jacketed and,

700

00:28:59,780--> 00:29:01,308

you know, not being
allowed to use

701

00:29:01,332--> 00:29:05,000

semicolons and m-dashes
and things like that.

702

00:29:05,000--> 00:29:07,405

Um, which is hard, because...

703

00:29:07,429--> 00:29:09,673

and now we get to the point
about structural differences.

704

00:29:09,698--> 00:29:11,668

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Arabic, I mean, traditionally,

705

00:29:11,692--> 00:29:13,988

in the pre-modern

period, let's say,

706

00:29:14,012--> 00:29:17,000

didn't really have punctuation.

707

00:29:17,000--> 00:29:19,588

And then punctuation

kind of filtered in

708

00:29:19,612--> 00:29:22,988

through the influence of

European languages and,

709

00:29:23,012--> 00:29:24,998

you know, actually differs

across the Arab world

710

00:29:25,022--> 00:29:27,491

depending on which European

language it came from.

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711

00:29:27,515--> 00:29:29,428

So, in, um...

712

00:29:29,452--> 00:29:32,948

North Africa, you find a kind of more
French-influenced use of punctuation,

713

00:29:32,972--> 00:29:34,000

and...

714

00:29:34,000--> 00:29:36,508

in the Middle East,
more English influenced.

715

00:29:36,532--> 00:29:37,931

I mean, that
sounds a bit abstract.

716

00:29:37,955--> 00:29:41,000

I wish I could think of an example,
but you do notice it, actually, because

717

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00:29:41,000--> 00:29:42,803

punctuation, I mean,

you'll know this, Vineet,

718

00:29:42,828--> 00:29:45,305

punctuation in French is
quite different in English, isn't it?

719

00:29:45,330--> 00:29:46,588

Um...

720

00:29:46,612--> 00:29:49,228

So anyway, before,
kind of, and still, I think,

721

00:29:49,252--> 00:29:51,788

punctuation in Arabic
does not, like, exactly mirror

722

00:29:51,812--> 00:29:53,417

how it's used in
European languages.

723

00:29:53,442--> 00:29:55,508

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There's an influence, but

it's not exactly the same.

724

00:29:55,532--> 00:29:56,788

And there are these...

725

00:29:56,812--> 00:30:00,000

something which I really
love, actually, there are words

726

00:30:00,000--> 00:30:04,348

in... in Arabic, which are... or particles,
which are best translated as punctuation.

727

00:30:04,372--> 00:30:08,108

There's this wonderful little,
kind of, uh, the letter "Fu" in Arabic

728

00:30:08,132--> 00:30:10,916

that, you know, when you see that
at the beginning of a word, it means

729

00:30:10,941--> 00:30:12,438

"and now I'm about

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to say something,"

730

00:30:12,462--> 00:30:14,868

which is, um, you

know, logically related

731

00:30:14,892--> 00:30:17,085

or, you know, a

consequence of the thing,

732

00:30:17,109--> 00:30:19,287

the piece of information

I've just been told, and often

733

00:30:19,312--> 00:30:22,000

the best way to translate

the letter "Fu" is a colon.

734

00:30:22,000--> 00:30:23,750

Um...

735

00:30:23,775--> 00:30:26,828

So yeah, I don't know about things I
struggle with, but things I really love,

736

00:30:26,852--> 00:30:29,000

yeah, that's something

I really love, kind of,

737

00:30:29,000--> 00:30:30,636

grappling with

when I'm translating.

738

00:30:30,661--> 00:30:32,788

-When you're

working through a text,

739

00:30:32,812--> 00:30:35,028

certainly the way I work

is I keep a running tab,

740

00:30:35,052--> 00:30:37,000

which gets longer

and longer and longer,

741

00:30:37,000--> 00:30:39,588

of stuff that I

know is problematic

742

00:30:39,612--> 00:30:41,000

and is going to

keep cropping up.

743

00:30:41,000--> 00:30:44,348

And that becomes my

ready reckoner for the next...

744

00:30:44,372--> 00:30:46,988

the next proofing

is I then, yeah,

745

00:30:47,012--> 00:30:49,000

I'm meticulously

going through that,

746

00:30:49,000--> 00:30:52,005

kind of, in a way, kind of anal way,

going through this list to say, right,

747

00:30:52,029--> 00:30:55,290

how many times have I used this

word which I'm guilty of using a lot?

748

00:30:55,315--> 00:30:56,555

Do you... does that... does that...

749

00:30:56,580--> 00:30:57,580

-Interesting.

750

00:30:57,604--> 00:30:59,108

-Does that strike

an echo with you?

751

00:30:59,132--> 00:31:00,838

-No, I wonder if I

should, actually,

752

00:31:00,862--> 00:31:03,428

because there's probably

words that I'm overusing, or...

753

00:31:03,452--> 00:31:06,388

Yeah, that's interesting.

I'll try that one.

754

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00:31:07,163--> 00:31:09,705

-It's just daunting when that list becomes longer and longer.

755

00:31:09,729--> 00:31:12,291

I think, goodness me, I've got the next proofing stage to go.

756

00:31:12,316--> 00:31:14,296

And before I get to the next question, the...

757

00:31:14,321--> 00:31:16,468

I'm always curious to know, um, Daniel Hahn

758

00:31:16,492--> 00:31:18,765

famously never reads books when he translates.

759

00:31:18,789--> 00:31:20,748

He dives straight in.

760

00:31:20,772--> 00:31:23,308

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What do you do? Do you read
the whole thing first, or do you...

761

00:31:23,332--> 00:31:26,308

Do you dive straight in and
discover the book with the reader?

762

00:31:26,332--> 00:31:28,428

-Goodness, I've usually
read the book about 3 times,

763

00:31:28,452--> 00:31:30,028

I think, by the time
I start work on it.

764

00:31:30,052--> 00:31:31,148

-I'm with you.

765

00:31:31,172--> 00:31:32,188

-Yeah...

766

00:31:32,212--> 00:31:35,348

I think especially
because I'm, um...

767

00:31:35,372--> 00:31:37,071

Now a lot of the... I mean...

768

00:31:37,095--> 00:31:39,485

The main way I work is
kind of through my agency.

769

00:31:39,509--> 00:31:42,388

I'm finding writers, I'm
deciding to represent their work

770

00:31:42,412--> 00:31:45,388

and then I'm, you know, writing
synopses and samples and so on,

771

00:31:45,412--> 00:31:48,452

and sending them to publishers before
I really start work on the translation.

772

00:31:48,476--> 00:31:50,188

I might do a
chapter sample, but...

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773

00:31:50,212--> 00:31:52,588

But I'll always have
read the book first.

774

00:31:52,612--> 00:31:55,508

So usually I know
the book pretty well,

775

00:31:55,532--> 00:31:57,058

and I actually really like that.

776

00:31:57,082--> 00:31:59,118

I mean, I'm not saying
I've never done it, I have.

777

00:31:59,143--> 00:32:00,348

I can't remember which book.

778

00:32:00,372--> 00:32:03,172

I've definitely done something
where there was a really short deadline,

779

00:32:03,196--> 00:32:04,300

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I just had to get to work.

780

00:32:04,324--> 00:32:06,188

Um, but I really like

781

00:32:06,212--> 00:32:08,308

going through a book

782

00:32:08,332--> 00:32:10,145

and noticing what

jumps out at me,

783

00:32:10,169--> 00:32:14,188

and thinking, in advance, about what I want

to kind of highlight in my translation.

784

00:32:14,212--> 00:32:16,300

And actually linking to

kind of previous question,

785

00:32:16,324--> 00:32:19,468

something like punctuation,

and noticing, for example, whether

786

00:32:19,492--> 00:32:21,748

the sentences tend

to be long or short,

787

00:32:21,772--> 00:32:24,332

and what that looks like throughout

the course of the whole book,

788

00:32:24,356--> 00:32:27,000

I think is really important, because

then it makes me think, okay,

789

00:32:27,024--> 00:32:28,868

when I start this, this

is how I want to do it,

790

00:32:28,892--> 00:32:30,800

or these are the things

that I want to preserve.

791

00:32:30,824--> 00:32:33,868

So I've definitely got a couple of

paper copies where, like, every single,

792

00:32:33,892--> 00:32:37,388

you know, instance of a
certain word or semantic field,

793

00:32:37,412--> 00:32:39,228

or even every single
full stop is highlighted,

794

00:32:39,252--> 00:32:40,900

because it's stuff I
want to think about.

795

00:32:40,924--> 00:32:42,728

-Yeah, we're looking
for patterns, aren't we?

796

00:32:42,752--> 00:32:46,616

Things that ripple through the
text, because you want to... to...

797

00:32:46,641--> 00:32:48,868

recreate that rippling
in your translation.

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798

00:32:48,892--> 00:32:50,868

Here's an interesting question.

799

00:32:50,892--> 00:32:53,748

I found out recently there's
not a tradition of literary editors

800

00:32:53,772--> 00:32:55,000

in Arabic literature

801

00:32:55,000--> 00:32:58,000

in the same way there is
in the UK publishing world.

802

00:32:58,000--> 00:33:02,000

Do you find yourself doing a lot
of editing while also translating?

803

00:33:02,000--> 00:33:03,898

And is this something you
find is changing,

804

00:33:03,922--> 00:33:06,000

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particularly as you say
you favour a millennial or

805

00:33:06,000--> 00:33:09,000

Hybrid works.

806

00:33:09,000--> 00:33:12,148

-Um, yes and yes.

807

00:33:12,172--> 00:33:16,000

I often find myself doing, um,

808

00:33:16,000--> 00:33:17,148

kind of editing.

809

00:33:17,172--> 00:33:20,468

I think that's quite normal
for a lot of translators.

810

00:33:20,492--> 00:33:23,468

I think it's not just for
people working from Arabic,

811

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00:33:23,492--> 00:33:25,708

because translators are
just such careful readers

812

00:33:25,732--> 00:33:27,048

and often if there's, like, a

813

00:33:27,072--> 00:33:29,000

little thing that doesn't
make sense or a...

814

00:33:29,000--> 00:33:31,508

-We're the most annoying
readers on the planet, aren't we?

815

00:33:31,532--> 00:33:33,508

-Yeah.

816

00:33:33,532--> 00:33:37,548

Um, so I think that's partly part
of everybody's job as a translator,

817

00:33:37,572--> 00:33:39,716

but I do find sometimes

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that I'm doing it with...

818

00:33:39,741--> 00:33:41,788

with Arabic and...

819

00:33:41,812--> 00:33:44,148

Um, usually there's a kind of...

820

00:33:44,172--> 00:33:45,916

sort of low-level

first pass of that,

821

00:33:45,941--> 00:33:47,508

and I'll chat a little

bit to the author

822

00:33:47,532--> 00:33:50,000

and maybe make some

suggestions if necessary.

823

00:33:50,000--> 00:33:52,102

But I feel also really

lucky that I've had

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824

00:33:52,126--> 00:33:54,228

a couple of really nice
editorial experiences

825

00:33:54,252--> 00:33:55,788

than working with
the English editor.

826

00:33:55,812--> 00:33:57,908

This was really the case
with Rotten Evidence,

827

00:33:57,932--> 00:34:00,148

um, which, um...

828

00:34:00,172--> 00:34:01,708

you know, it follows the...

829

00:34:01,732--> 00:34:04,068

it follows the...

830

00:34:04,092--> 00:34:05,308

Um...

831

00:34:05,332--> 00:34:07,228

obscenity case,

832

00:34:07,252--> 00:34:10,468

which Ahmed Naji, in which Ahmed

Naji was charged with obscenity,

833

00:34:10,492--> 00:34:11,868

and then his time in prison.

834

00:34:11,892--> 00:34:14,132

And that case was really,

really high profile in English,

835

00:34:14,156--> 00:34:16,588

and he chose to tell the

story non-chronologically.

836

00:34:16,612--> 00:34:18,691

And because,

basically, you know,

837

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00:34:18,715--> 00:34:20,545

in the USA where the
book was published first,

838

00:34:20,569--> 00:34:22,369

people hadn't really
heard that much about it,

839

00:34:22,393--> 00:34:24,753

and they certainly didn't know
the ins and outs of the case.

840

00:34:24,777--> 00:34:27,897

We thought, we're just gonna have to
make this a little bit more chronological,

841

00:34:27,921--> 00:34:29,580

otherwise the reader's
going to get lost.

842

00:34:29,604--> 00:34:31,998

So it was quite a lot of
chopping up we did with that book.

843

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00:34:32,023--> 00:34:35,023

And you know, some of that happened
with just me and Ahmed talking about it,

844

00:34:35,047--> 00:34:37,428

but then we had a wonderful
editor, Daniel Gumbiner,

845

00:34:37,452--> 00:34:39,308

who did a lot of that
with us, and that's...

846

00:34:39,332--> 00:34:42,308

I think a really
fun process, and...

847

00:34:42,332--> 00:34:43,908

in my experience, like,

848

00:34:43,932--> 00:34:46,852

a lot of the authors I've worked with
have been so happy that's happening,

849

00:34:46,876--> 00:34:49,148

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and so happy that somebody's
so interested in their book,

850

00:34:49,172--> 00:34:51,572
that they want to, like, go
through it with a fine-tooth comb

851

00:34:51,596--> 00:34:53,988
and, like, make
these little tweaks.

852

00:34:54,012--> 00:34:56,225
It's not the case for everybody,
of course. Some people,

853

00:34:56,250--> 00:34:57,708
you know, some writers

854

00:34:57,732--> 00:34:59,758
put together, construct
every single sentence

855

00:34:59,782--> 00:35:02,228
as they want it to be, and

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it doesn't change, and...

856

00:35:02,252--> 00:35:05,268

and no editing is, you
know, desired or needed, so...

857

00:35:05,292--> 00:35:07,000

Yeah, it's arranged.

858

00:35:07,000--> 00:35:08,931

-This might be a good
point, actually, to...

859

00:35:08,955--> 00:35:13,000

you mentioned Ahmed Naji
and Rotten Evidence, and...

860

00:35:13,000--> 00:35:15,228

going back to the
theme of this week,

861

00:35:15,252--> 00:35:17,908

you know, the John
Calder and, um...

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862

00:35:17,932--> 00:35:21,948

Famously, he was involved in a
number of prosecutions for obscenity.

863

00:35:21,972--> 00:35:23,000

Um...

864

00:35:23,000--> 00:35:24,708

And, um...

865

00:35:24,732--> 00:35:30,000

Kind of, it all led to the ending
of literary censorship in Britain.

866

00:35:30,000--> 00:35:35,000

Um, and Ahmed Naji, I
suppose, has had a parallel

867

00:35:35,000--> 00:35:37,638

experience in being a victim
of these persecutions in Egypt,

868

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00:35:37,662--> 00:35:40,000

and was indeed, I

think, sentenced to...

869

00:35:40,000--> 00:35:41,978

to a couple of

years in prison for,

870

00:35:42,002--> 00:35:44,710

inverted commas,

violating public decency.

871

00:35:44,734--> 00:35:47,468

What... What's your take on

872

00:35:47,492--> 00:35:51,548

authors such as Ahmed

Naji and how that fits into

873

00:35:51,572--> 00:35:53,988

the, um, the suppression of...

874

00:35:54,012--> 00:35:56,788

of free voices in literature?

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875

00:35:58,000--> 00:36:01,028

-Well, how wonderful

it must have been

876

00:36:01,052--> 00:36:04,788

to be John Calder and friends

celebrating the end of literary censorship,

877

00:36:04,812--> 00:36:06,596

or what they thought

was going to be

878

00:36:06,621--> 00:36:07,868

the end of literary censorship.

879

00:36:07,892--> 00:36:12,000

Um, I was looking on

the PEN America websites

880

00:36:12,000--> 00:36:15,628

just to kind of think about

this question in advance, and...

881

00:36:15,652--> 00:36:19,748

they have, over the last I
think four years, or since 2021,

882

00:36:19,772--> 00:36:23,390

I think, documented more
bans, more book bans than

883

00:36:23,415--> 00:36:27,148

has happened at any other time
in the life of any living American.

884

00:36:27,172--> 00:36:31,000

So I think we're really seeing
a very dangerous resurgence

885

00:36:31,000--> 00:36:33,308

in literary censorship.

886

00:36:33,332--> 00:36:36,371

And I'm talking about in the West,
I'm not talking about in the Middle East.

887

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00:36:36,396--> 00:36:37,585

Um...

888

00:36:37,609--> 00:36:40,588

I mean, I'm based

in Germany, and

889

00:36:40,612--> 00:36:43,218

the degree of censorship

in the cultural world,

890

00:36:43,243--> 00:36:45,868

specifically around the issue

of Palestine, is off the scale.

891

00:36:45,892--> 00:36:49,723

Um, people are being cancelled

left, right, and centre for,

892

00:36:49,748--> 00:36:52,188

you know, expressing

the uncontroversial opinion

893

00:36:52,212--> 00:36:54,490

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that Palestinians
should not be massacred.

894

00:36:54,515--> 00:36:56,668

Um, so I'm extremely
worried about...

895

00:36:56,692--> 00:37:00,628

about censorship, um, in the
countries where I live and work.

896

00:37:00,652--> 00:37:04,510

Of course, censorship is
also an issue in, you know,

897

00:37:04,535--> 00:37:06,508

in Egypt, for example,
where Ahmed Naji is from.

898

00:37:06,532--> 00:37:10,000

I should add that he was
the first Egyptian writer in...

899

00:37:10,000--> 00:37:11,668

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in the modern period

to ever have gone...

900

00:37:11,692--> 00:37:15,205

I think the only one, in fact, to ever
have gone to prison on obscenity charges.

901

00:37:15,229--> 00:37:16,773

That was quite a kind of

902

00:37:16,798--> 00:37:19,238

unusual turn of events to do
with the fact that the, you know,

903

00:37:19,262--> 00:37:21,788

the Muslim Brotherhood
were in power at the time, and...

904

00:37:21,812--> 00:37:24,588

Sorry, the army were in power
following the Muslim Brotherhood

905

00:37:24,612--> 00:37:26,000

and really wanted to kind of

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906

00:37:26,000--> 00:37:29,068

establish some

moral high ground.

907

00:37:29,092--> 00:37:31,228

So that's why they were

going after obscenity.

908

00:37:31,252--> 00:37:32,828

But it was just kind of...

909

00:37:32,852--> 00:37:34,382

It couldn't have

been more apt, really,

910

00:37:34,406--> 00:37:37,000

because we were... we

were translating that book,

911

00:37:37,000--> 00:37:40,308

working on that book, translating it,

and then it came out in 2023,

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912

00:37:40,332--> 00:37:42,708

which was just as these really,

913

00:37:42,732--> 00:37:44,219

you know, worrying developments

914

00:37:44,243--> 00:37:46,988

with books being banned
from schools and public libraries

915

00:37:47,012--> 00:37:48,588

was getting underway in the USA.

916

00:37:48,612--> 00:37:50,000

So I think that book ended up

917

00:37:50,000--> 00:37:53,108

resonating even more
than it might have,

918

00:37:53,132--> 00:37:56,548

you know, had it been at any
other time in the history of the USA.

919

00:37:58,000--> 00:38:00,748

-And do you kind of feel, in
many ways, that, you know, we...

920

00:38:00,772--> 00:38:03,188

you mentioned earlier
that, as translators,

921

00:38:03,212--> 00:38:06,766

we embark on so many
parallel activities to support

922

00:38:06,791--> 00:38:09,148

the act, the core act
of literary translation.

923

00:38:09,172--> 00:38:12,488

Do you think that political
activism, small P, small A,

924

00:38:12,512--> 00:38:14,548

that's... that's almost inherent

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925

00:38:14,572--> 00:38:16,588

when it comes to working as...

926

00:38:16,612--> 00:38:18,390

in your particular field?

927

00:38:18,415--> 00:38:23,028

-Oh, absolutely, and I mean, especially working from a language like Arabic.

928

00:38:23,052--> 00:38:26,188

I mean, look at the last couple of years with the ongoing genocide.

929

00:38:26,212--> 00:38:27,385

I've been working with

930

00:38:27,410--> 00:38:29,188

quite a few authors from Gaza,

931

00:38:29,212--> 00:38:32,628

and it just feels so self-evident to me that if we want,

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932

00:38:32,652--> 00:38:34,583

you know, if I'm a

person who cares about

933

00:38:34,608--> 00:38:37,508

English language or English

language readers, sorry,

934

00:38:37,532--> 00:38:39,148

reading Arabic literature,

935

00:38:39,172--> 00:38:42,000

then I have to do

something when I see

936

00:38:42,000--> 00:38:44,268

authors of Arabic

literature being,

937

00:38:44,292--> 00:38:46,529

you know, massacred

and bombed and starved.

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938

00:38:46,554--> 00:38:49,148

Um, so I think the two
absolutely go hand in hand,

939

00:38:49,172--> 00:38:52,108

and I'm... I mean, I'm
just so grateful, really,

940

00:38:52,132--> 00:38:54,228

that Arab writers
are continuing to...

941

00:38:54,252--> 00:38:57,000

continuing to write
under the most

942

00:38:57,000--> 00:38:59,668

unimaginable circumstances
very often. I mean...

943

00:38:59,692--> 00:39:03,776

I, you know, I have a bad day if I
don't get a cup of coffee in the morning.

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944

00:39:03,801--> 00:39:06,588

And one writer who I've
been working with from Gaza,

945

00:39:06,612--> 00:39:08,000

Nihil Mohana,
who's really great,

946

00:39:08,000--> 00:39:09,569

she's written loads
of diary entries

947

00:39:09,593--> 00:39:12,348

about what it's been like not
being able to get hold of coffee,

948

00:39:12,372--> 00:39:14,000

what it's been like, you know...

949

00:39:14,000--> 00:39:17,000

The extent that she's
gone to to try and, you know,

950

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00:39:17,000--> 00:39:18,908

burn perfume, for example,

951

00:39:18,932--> 00:39:21,188

so that she can

make her cup of tea

952

00:39:21,212--> 00:39:24,000

because she can't get hold of
coffee on the kind of little home-made...

953

00:39:24,000--> 00:39:25,591

home-made, uh, what's it called?

954

00:39:25,615--> 00:39:27,789

Little stove, so, yeah.

955

00:39:27,814--> 00:39:29,078

What can I say?

956

00:39:29,103--> 00:39:31,308

-Do you... do you
feel that you're...

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957

00:39:31,332--> 00:39:33,108

that you're brave, that you're...

958

00:39:33,132--> 00:39:35,188

that it requires

courage to do this?

959

00:39:35,212--> 00:39:37,000

Are there risks?

960

00:39:37,000--> 00:39:38,428

-I mean, that's...

961

00:39:38,452--> 00:39:40,323

Presumably, there are

some people who will

962

00:39:40,348--> 00:39:43,508

not want to give me a job if I

say too much about Palestine,

963

00:39:43,532--> 00:39:45,991

but I don't want to work

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with them anyway, so...

964

00:39:46,015--> 00:39:47,748

No, I don't think it's
particularly brave.

965

00:39:47,772--> 00:39:50,548

I also don't think we have
a choice, you know, when...

966

00:39:50,572--> 00:39:54,370

when what is happening
in the world around us is

967

00:39:54,395--> 00:39:56,508

so disgraceful, so outrageous,

968

00:39:56,532--> 00:39:59,000

I don't think we have a
choice but to do what we can.

969

00:39:59,000--> 00:40:01,000

-No, and you can't help
but when you're looking at,

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970

00:40:01,024--> 00:40:02,868

particularly the news

from the US at the moment

971

00:40:02,892--> 00:40:04,068

and what's happening in...

972

00:40:04,092--> 00:40:06,308

certainly in Minnesota,

973

00:40:06,332--> 00:40:10,468

it really does, I

think, throw into relief.

974

00:40:10,492--> 00:40:12,668

In terms of, you know,

975

00:40:12,692--> 00:40:14,748

the basic norms of humanity,

976

00:40:14,772--> 00:40:16,000

what a crucial role

977

00:40:16,000--> 00:40:18,788

the migration of

literature can play

978

00:40:18,812--> 00:40:22,148

in that kind of global

movement of ideas.

979

00:40:22,172--> 00:40:24,000

-Absolutely, yep.

980

00:40:24,000--> 00:40:25,868

-There's a really

interesting question here.

981

00:40:25,892--> 00:40:29,000

Do you face any challenges

in terms of gender conflict

982

00:40:29,000--> 00:40:32,428

or other aspects of

cultural differences?

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983

00:40:34,000--> 00:40:35,868

-Hmm... what does that mean?

984

00:40:37,000--> 00:40:39,068

-I'm wondering if

that's referring to, um...

985

00:40:39,092--> 00:40:41,531

gender within the text

986

00:40:41,555--> 00:40:44,000

rather than the

gender of the author.

987

00:40:44,000--> 00:40:45,388

-Hmm.

988

00:40:45,412--> 00:40:47,268

Um...

989

00:40:47,292--> 00:40:48,988

Well, Arabic has

grammatical gender.

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990

00:40:49,012--> 00:40:51,585

Maybe... I don't know if this is a language question or a kind of

991

00:40:51,609--> 00:40:53,748

cultural differences kind of question.

992

00:40:53,772--> 00:40:57,028

Maybe I'll assume it's the latter and answer on that,

993

00:40:57,052--> 00:41:00,028

um, on that grounds. I'm, I...

994

00:41:00,052--> 00:41:01,588

You know, I think I'm very

995

00:41:01,612--> 00:41:04,748

lucky that I get to kind of choose which authors I work with.

996

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00:41:04,772--> 00:41:07,228

And in many cases,

997

00:41:07,252--> 00:41:09,248

these are authors who
have kind of political views

998

00:41:09,272--> 00:41:12,000

and whose creative
output is very progressive

999

00:41:12,000--> 00:41:13,388

and daring.

1000

00:41:13,412--> 00:41:14,588

Um...

1001

00:41:14,612--> 00:41:16,868

So, you know, if it's a
sort of question about,

1002

00:41:16,892--> 00:41:18,891

you know, coming across
kind of backward ideas

1003

00:41:18,915--> 00:41:20,988

or ideas I disagree

with in my work,

1004

00:41:21,012--> 00:41:23,388

I would say I don't have to

come up against that very much.

1005

00:41:23,412--> 00:41:26,348

I'm, you know, very much

working with authors who

1006

00:41:26,372--> 00:41:29,000

share my kind of

view of the world, and...

1007

00:41:29,000--> 00:41:32,465

And I suppose, yeah, I would say I

share with them kind of a mission,

1008

00:41:32,489--> 00:41:34,188

a literary mission, so I am...

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1009

00:41:34,212--> 00:41:35,588

lucky in that respect.

1010

00:41:36,023--> 00:41:40,668

You, um, you won the... The Banipal
Prize that we mentioned earlier

1011

00:41:40,692--> 00:41:43,148

for Rotten Evidence.

1012

00:41:43,172--> 00:41:49,308

How do translation prizes fit
into the Arabic translation world?

1013

00:41:49,332--> 00:41:52,698

Do they help with both
the profile of the translator

1014

00:41:52,722--> 00:41:55,211

or indeed as a more
general advantage

1015

00:41:55,235--> 00:41:57,428

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in as much as they

shine the spotlight

1016

00:41:57,452--> 00:42:00,000

that enables you then

to go to publishers to say,

1017

00:42:00,000--> 00:42:01,868

"look, I won the prize for this,

1018

00:42:01,892--> 00:42:03,568

but there's also this,

and this, and this,

1019

00:42:03,592--> 00:42:07,103

so if you liked X, you

will probably like Y."

1020

00:42:07,128--> 00:42:09,445

And I hope I haven't

answered the question for you.

1021

00:42:09,470--> 00:42:11,491

-Vineet, maybe... maybe

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you could send a message

1022

00:42:11,515--> 00:42:13,705

to a couple of publishers

on my behalf and say,

1023

00:42:13,729--> 00:42:15,951

"you should... you should

see who wins the Banipal Prize

1024

00:42:15,975--> 00:42:17,345

each year and go

and talk to them."

1025

00:42:17,369--> 00:42:20,091

I'm sad to say that I haven't had

many emails from publishers saying,

1026

00:42:20,115--> 00:42:22,523

"do you have anything else

that you'd like to share with us?"

1027

00:42:22,548--> 00:42:24,000

-Well, this is your opportunity.

1028

00:42:24,000--> 00:42:26,068

What would you like

publishers to know?

1029

00:42:26,092--> 00:42:27,345

-Ah!

1030

00:42:27,369--> 00:42:29,948

There is tons of Arabic

literature out there.

1031

00:42:29,972--> 00:42:31,828

It's not all historical fiction.

1032

00:42:31,852--> 00:42:33,648

There's loads of really

interesting books by,

1033

00:42:33,672--> 00:42:35,000

you know, young people and...

1034

00:42:35,000--> 00:42:37,868

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and really interesting,
creative, and experimental work.

1035

00:42:37,892--> 00:42:40,388

And we're here,
waiting to translate it,

1036

00:42:40,412--> 00:42:41,478

so pick up the phone.

1037

00:42:41,502--> 00:42:42,502

[laughs]

1038

00:42:43,206--> 00:42:46,838

-And with that
exaltation from Katharine,

1039

00:42:46,862--> 00:42:50,255

sadly, I think, we happen to
have come to the end of today's

1040

00:42:50,280--> 00:42:53,005

very, very enlightening
conversation.

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1041

00:42:53,029--> 00:42:54,685

Katharine, you've been amazing.

1042

00:42:54,709--> 00:42:56,583

I'd like to say a huge thank you

1043

00:42:56,608--> 00:42:59,468

for, um, for all of your

insights and being so

1044

00:42:59,492--> 00:43:02,228

professionally frank and

open and honest, it's...

1045

00:43:02,252--> 00:43:05,821

it's a joy. And also thank

you to everyone else

1046

00:43:05,846--> 00:43:07,068

who joined us today.

1047

00:43:07,092--> 00:43:11,268

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And thank you to Robin Law
for moderating today's event.

1048

00:43:11,292--> 00:43:12,292

-Yeah, thanks, Vineet.

1049

00:43:12,316--> 00:43:14,828

-If you have enjoyed
today's event-- Oh, thank you.

1050

00:43:14,852--> 00:43:16,068

And you aren't yet a member,

1051

00:43:16,092--> 00:43:19,000

please consider joining with
our special #SoAatHome offer

1052

00:43:19,000--> 00:43:23,000

and you'll get 20% off for
the first year of membership.

1053

00:43:23,000--> 00:43:24,508

And you simply
have to use the code

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1054

00:43:24,532--> 00:43:28,908

"SOAATHOME20",

there's two A's in the middle.

1055

00:43:28,932--> 00:43:32,708

Um, the next #SoAatHome event,

1056

00:43:32,732--> 00:43:38,268

a little trailer coming up, takes place on Monday 23 February

1057

00:43:38,292--> 00:43:41,348

with the Sustainability

Networks meeting.

1058

00:43:41,372--> 00:43:44,828

For more, head to

societyofauthors.org/events

1059

00:43:44,852--> 00:43:47,708

to book or to check out
our events programme.

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1060

00:43:47,732--> 00:43:50,068

And don't forget

to buy your tickets

1061

00:43:50,092--> 00:43:53,000

or register for this year's

Translation Prizes ceremony

1062

00:43:53,000--> 00:43:55,885

which takes place on

Tuesday 10 February,

1063

00:43:55,909--> 00:43:57,388

and I would encourage you to go.

1064

00:43:57,412--> 00:43:59,000

It's always a wonderful evening

1065

00:43:59,000--> 00:44:01,148

at the Translation Prizes.

1066

00:44:01,172--> 00:44:03,068

A final reminder,

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conversation with Katharine Halls
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1067

00:44:03,092--> 00:44:06,028

this #SoAatHome event

is free to SoA members,

1068

00:44:06,052--> 00:44:07,188

but if you can afford to,

1069

00:44:07,212--> 00:44:09,000

please do consider donating

1070

00:44:09,000--> 00:44:11,068

to our Society of

Authors Access Fund.

1071

00:44:11,092--> 00:44:13,628

where we suggest a

minimum donation of £5.

1072

00:44:13,652--> 00:44:16,000

And it's all very, very worthy

1073

00:44:16,000--> 00:44:18,068

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in terms of who
those funds go to.

1074

00:44:18,092--> 00:44:22,000

And, of course, you can
also help the Access Fund

1075

00:44:22,000--> 00:44:23,628

by buying a book,

1076

00:44:23,652--> 00:44:25,508

by making a purchase
on our virtual bookstore

1077

00:44:25,532--> 00:44:27,000

on Bookshop.org

1078

00:44:27,000--> 00:44:28,668

where you can
find books by writers

1079

00:44:28,692--> 00:44:31,468

taking part in the #SoAatHome
Events programme.

1080

00:44:31,492--> 00:44:35,463

And of course, that would include the
text that Katharine has referred to today.

1081

00:44:35,488--> 00:44:38,228

Finally, another huge
thank you to Katharine

1082

00:44:38,252--> 00:44:40,000

for her time and for her candour,

1083

00:44:40,000--> 00:44:43,000

and to all of you who've
joined us for today's event.

1084

00:44:43,000--> 00:44:44,988

And let's continue
this conversation.

1085

00:44:45,012--> 00:44:47,468

Free speech is really
important on social media,

#SoAatHome | John Calder Week: How I translate – in conversation with Katharine Halls
Thursday 29 January 2026



1086

00:44:47,492--> 00:44:49,068

with the festival hashtags

1087

00:44:49,092--> 00:44:51,000

#SoAatHome

1088

00:44:51,000--> 00:44:53,748

and #TranslationPrizes.

1089

00:44:53,772--> 00:44:55,028

Thank you.

1090

00:44:55,052--> 00:44:57,348

-Thanks so much,

Vineet. Thanks, everyone.

1091

00:44:57,372--> 00:44:58,748

-Buh-bye.