

**NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
SUMMER SEMINARS FOR SCHOOL TEACHERS**

Seminar: *The Arabic Novel in Translation*

Director: Roger Allen, Professor of Arabic,
Chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages,
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Location: Swarthmore College,
500, College Avenue,
Swarthmore, Pennsylvania 19081

Dates: July 5th – 30th, 2010

Website: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/neh>

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your interest in the summer seminar which I will be directing at Swarthmore College in Summer 2010, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am much looking forward to the chances that this seminar will offer to discuss with a group of interested teachers a number of fictional works from the Arab World. That process in which we will all be sharing will allow us to broach the numerous critical and pedagogical issues associated with the way we read, interpret, and then introduce into the curriculum materials from a non-Western culture.

It hardly needs to be said that, as the aftermath of the dreadful events of September 2001 become part of our posture towards our own and other cultures, we now confront a world where motivations are more often than not misunderstood on either side of what has come to be portrayed as a huge cultural divide. In such a context, the processes of understanding the construct that is the proverbial other and learning more, much more, about their history and culture are absolutely essential if there is to be any hope of a future that will again witness meaningful inter-cultural (and inter-faith) dialogue. That, at base, is an overriding goal of this seminar.

Beyond that, of course, is also the longer-term (and ultimately more desirable) goal of engaging with the esthetic and critical principles that govern the creativity of another world culture through readings of the fictional works produced within that region. An investigation of the literary creativity of a Middle Eastern cultural tradition such as that of Arabic is thus more apposite than ever.

THE SUBJECT

This seminar proposes to introduce participants to the literature of the Arab World through the study of examples of the modern Arabic novel and therefrom of other literary genres. I have selected these six particular works because each can be seen as addressing itself to a particular topic.

Al-Tayyib Salih, Season of Migration to the North, London: Penguin World Classics, 2003.

This novel, set in the Sudan and England, is a wonderful study of the cultural ambivalence which results when a brilliant young Sudanese student is educated in England and then returns to his homeland. His cultural disjuncture in both countries is severe and leads to dreadful consequences. The way in which the novel is narrated, with extreme ambiguity about the relationship between the narrator and major character, allows for excellent discussion of narrative voice. The orientalist image of the East is another powerful topic of this novel.

Najib Mahfuz, The Journey of Ibn Fattouma, New York: Doubleday

A somewhat different selection by the Nobel Laureate. A novel in allegory form--thus linkable to examples from numerous other literary traditions--that involves a journey of discovery. The narrator visits a number of "havens" where different belief-systems and governmental organizations hold sway. He is challenged by what he sees to re-examine the bases of his own [Islamic] beliefs and the underpinnings of his moral posture towards life and his fellow humans.

Abd al-rahman Munif, Endings, Massachusetts: Interlink Books

I choose this novel because its topic, a community living on the edge of the desert, allows for an investigation of that entity to which the whole of the Arabic literary heritage looks back as its supreme "classical" era: its nomadic origins in the Arabian peninsula. This is a novel by a brilliant Saudi-born writer (three novels in his Quintet Cities of Salt, have been published by Random House). This is a more compact work, about a "liminal" community. Almost a novel without characters or names, it gives a fascinating insight into the kind of community that the novel as a mostly urban genre has completely ignored.

Hanan al-Shaykh, The Story of Zahra, New York: Doubleday

This work is already acquiring an enormous repute. One of the most graphic accounts of the civil strife in Lebanon in the 1980s, it is also one of the frankest statements yet by a modern Arab woman of total disgust and dissatisfaction with the mores and customs of Middle Eastern society. I use this text in a course on Middle Eastern Literatures in translation that is taught every year at Penn, and it never ceases to arouse the most intense discussions regarding traditional and non-traditional roles, the position of both father and mother in feminist critical perspectives, the relationship between sexuality and war, all set in the insane environment of Lebanon as it self-destructs.

Muhammad Barrada, The Game of Forgetting, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

I choose this novel, first of all, because its author is from Morocco, and thus it introduces its readers to that part of the Arabic-speaking world to which English readers have had little exposure through translations. Barrada is French-trained, and this novel--a wonderfully nuanced study of the lives of a Moroccan family--makes use of all the devices of the modern novel (including a severe skepticism on the narrator's part regarding the author's intentions!). A reading of this book simultaneously introduces readers to the very different cultural milieu of North-West Africa and challenges the very methods that fiction has used to tell stories through time and to portray characters and actions.

Emil Habibi, The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist, Massachusetts: Interlink Books.

This classic work, now fortunately back in print, is a wonderfully sardonic account by the late Emil Habibi, a Palestinian who lived in Israel (a former member of the Knesset). It explores the absurdities associated with daily life in the Arab community in Israel. Through its picaresque qualities, it also allows for a direct link to be established with the early fictional genres of the Arabic classical heritage, as well as to Western classics such as Don Quixote and Candide.

The identification of these particular works of fiction and the topic areas that emerge from a reading of them has allowed me to incorporate into the seminar readings of further examples from other Arabic literary genres--the poem and short story, for example. The aim in providing these supplementary readings is to afford an introduction to the various literary genres of Arabic, both classical and modern, and thus offer some perspective on contemporary literary creativity in the Arab World and on the lengthy and illustrious heritage of the past.

Supplementary readings will be taken from:

Modern Arabic Poetry: an anthology, ed. S. Jayyusi, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

Desert Tracings trans. Michael Sells, Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

Egyptian Short Stories trans. Denys Johnson-Davies, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978.

The aim of this seminar is to integrate these examples of the novel genre into courses involving readings of fiction from various world literary traditions. Each novel will be examined first and foremost as a work of fiction, a contribution to world fiction, including an examination of its particular techniques (such as the uses of the narrative voice and manipulation of time). While I intend that the discussions themselves should involve reference to environments, customs, characters, and even styles that will be very unfamiliar to the participants, I will hope also to place these contributions to world literature into the larger context of the novel and of recent narratological scholarship. Discussion will also focus on the different origins and careers of the authors concerned, and the variety in language usage caused both by the breadth of the Arab World itself and the differing registers of language available to the writer of fiction.

MY INTERESTS

I have been teaching Arabic literature at the University of Pennsylvania since 1968 and have also served as chair of the Program in Comparative Literature; I am currently chairing the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations there.

My book, **The Arabic Novel** (Syracuse University Press, 1982; 2nd revised and enlarged edition, 1994), was the first work of its kind in English and has been translated into Arabic. I have also published a more general study of the entire Arabic literary tradition, **The Arabic Literary Heritage** (Cambridge, 1998); an abridged version of this work, **An Introduction to Arabic Literature**, has been published in paperback (Cambridge, 2000) and has also been translated into Arabic and Italian. I have also (2006) completed the (lengthy) article on “Arabic Literature” for the **Encyclopedia Britannica**.

I have composed a large number of shorter studies on all aspects of Arabic literature, both classical and modern, including a major anthology of modern Arabic criticism, **Modern Arabic Literature** (Ungar Publications). I am interested in the theory and practice of translation and have myself translated many works of modern Arabic fiction (including one of the novels to be read in the seminar). I have also edited the volume of the **Cambridge History of Arabic Literature** devoted to the pre-modern period (and I'm an Oxford graduate at that!).

Each fall semester, I alternate two courses taught in English: one is on Arabic Literary History; the other on Arabic Literature and Literary Theory (including a number of

aspects in the study of narratives--orality, point of view, time, metafiction, intertextuality, autobiography, and so on). I have made presentations at numerous schools and colleges all over the country on Islam and Middle Eastern Literature. On the more local level, I have given many presentations to high-school teachers in the Delaware Valley region on Arabic literature. Needless to say, since September 2001 and even more so since the start of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, I have found myself making presentations on the Middle East to societies, libraries, historical associations, synagogues and churches (including sermons) in the same region.

In 1993 I offered this seminar as part of the NEH Summer Seminars for High School Teachers for the first time; I can say without equivocation that I consistently found the four weeks that I spent with 15 highly motivated high school teachers reading and discussing the literary works I know and love to be one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of my teaching career. I have since conducted the seminar in 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2008.

I continue to offer this seminar, not only for the reasons I have suggested above but also because, such is the creativity and motivation of the participants in each one, there is always more to discuss and more to learn. I thus fully anticipate that this seminar in 2010 will also be a learning experience for me as well as, I hope, for the participants.

I am incidentally also a specialist in language pedagogy and am interested in teaching in general (in 2003 I stepped down from my post as the ACTFL National Oral Proficiency Trainer for Arabic). Beyond all that, I am a professional musician, having previously served for some 26 years as organist-choirmaster in an Episcopal parish in Philadelphia.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Given the unfamiliar nature of the subject materials in this seminar, I am hoping for as much diversity in participants as possible, in terms of age, geographical location, and discipline. In that context, I should probably note that I do not regard previous experience with Arabic or the Middle East as a necessary pre-requisite, although, of course, any such experience will be an additional benefit.

Just take a look at the anthologies of "world literature" currently available for use in American schools and see what the representation of Arabic literature is! The situation has changed (improved) somewhat in recent years, but it is still all too frequent that we encounter volumes with extracts from the Qur'an and the 1001 Nights (neither of which, incidentally, are regarded by the Arabs as "literature"), and that's it. If you're really (un-)lucky, you may also find Umar al-Khayyam, who actually wrote in Persian—but never mind! It is that cultural gap, that significant lack in our cultural understanding, that I seek partially to bridge in this seminar.

With that in mind, I would hope that potential applicants possess two principal qualities: firstly and perhaps most important, a willingness to step outside the familiar bounds and

assumptions of Western culture and to engage in an encounter with a different set of perceptions of both our world and that of others; secondly, a interest in analyzing examples of non-Western fiction both for their own merits and as a mirror on the social priorities and intellectual life of a culture with beliefs, values, and aspirations different from those of our own.

SEMINAR STRUCTURE AND PROCEDURES

The Seminar will be held at Swarthmore College, in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. We will meet in air-conditioned seminar spaces which will allow us the optimum opportunity for learning and discussion.

We will meet for a period of four weeks in July, four days a week: Monday & Tuesday; Thursday and Friday. The seminar will normally meet from 10 a.m. till noon-ish and then after lunch from about 1.30 till 3.00. Thereafter, there will be plenty of time for more informal discussions and for sub-groups to meet with me (see more on that below). I have adopted such a schedule (with a gap on Wednesday) so that participants will have sufficient time at their disposal to read the novels prior to the classroom discussions.

I have arranged the seminar schedule in such a way as to make it feasible to read two novels each week. I will lead the discussion of the first novel (by Al-Tayyib Salih), the theme of which provides an excellent opportunity to discuss contacts between the West and Middle East during recent times from a historical perspective. The five other novels will be assigned to groups of participants for classroom presentation (if there are sixteen participants (according to this year's regulations, then this process will involve groups of three—or more). I will meet separately with each group in order to help in the planning and content of each presentation.

Seminar participants will also meet individually with me in order to prepare a research project (or, if you prefer, a teaching module) on some aspect of the general topic of the seminar. Examples of possible approaches for this project include the following:

- critical discussion of a single work that we have read;
- comparison between more than one work covered in the seminar;
- a comparison of a work covered in the seminar with a piece of literature from another literary tradition;
- discussion of the way(s) in which a particular topic is broached, and plans for integrating some of the materials from this seminar into a broader educational curriculum.

I also welcome suggestions for other kinds of presentations (previous versions of the seminar, for example, engendered a collection of drawings inspired by the readings of the novels, a recording of music inspired by the readings, and CD-ROM of photographs to go

with the text of one of the novels). This project (in preliminary form) will be presented to the seminar during its sessions and then written up and printed for circulation to the entire group following the completion of the seminar.

I will be inviting several of my colleagues to attend sessions at which particular works are to be discussed: Brian Spooner (Department of Anthropology) to talk about environmental issues raised by Munif's novel; Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet (Department of History) to talk about women's fiction, a primary topic of Hanan al-Shaykh's novel, and Walid Hamarneh, my colleague at Swarthmore and a renowned expert on Modern Arabic literature.

I shall also be showing videotapes of film-versions of some of the works read, as well as other videos which discuss the cultural context in which the fiction is written. These will be shown either at lunchtime or after the afternoon session (or both), according to participants' preferences. There will be a number of informal social gatherings during the course of the Seminar. My wife (a high-school teacher of Latin) and I will also host a reception for the participants.

All participants in the seminar will also be placed on the College BLACKBOARD site for the duration of the Seminar, thus allowing them to contact each other and have access to a number of extra texts associated with the materials of the seminar itself.

PARTICIPANTS' STATUS

Participants in the Seminar will be considered "Guests" of the College, a status that, for a small fee permits use of the library, fitness center, swimming pool and other recreational facilities. All participants will have easy access to word-processing and other computing facilities in the Library. The residence hall spaces – and most other spaces on campus – have wireless internet access.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The seminar will be limited to sixteen participants, each of whom will receive a stipend of \$3,300 in two installments: the first upon arrival, the second two weeks later. Swarthmore College will require payment for facility use and housing on arrival.

Participants will be housed in a new, air conditioned residence hall on campus. All participants (male and female) will be housed on the same floor of the residence hall. The residence hall maybe shared by participants of other programs on campus, but a floor of the residence hall will be exclusively for the participants of this program. If this presents a problem for any participant, please contact the program administrator for assistance. There is a full kitchen (shared) in the residence hall. The hall bathrooms are individual to men and women.

- The cost for housing in the residence hall for 4 weeks is \$760 per bed (sheets provided weekly).
- The cost for the facilities use is \$220 per participant.
- An internet account is \$20 per person

The total cost for use of all services listed above is \$1000 for the four week session. If you are not staying on campus, you will be responsible for the facility and internet charges.

Food costs are additional and will be determined on an individual basis with the program administrator. The College dining hall can provide three meals daily for approximately \$25 per day. Please note – the dining hall is closed on holidays and some weekends during the summer and the fare is somewhat limited in the summer.

CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Swarthmore, one of the nation's finest institutions of higher learning, is located 11 miles southwest of Philadelphia. Swarthmore's idyllic, 357-acre campus is a designated arboretum, complete with rolling lawns, creek, wooded hills, and hiking trails. From its state-of-the-art science complex to its new, environmentally friendly residence hall, Swarthmore's buildings and architecture stand as national models of curricular and co-curricular undergraduate facilities. The College web site is www.swarthmore.edu. For more information on the village of Swarthmore, visit <http://www.swarthmorepa.org/>.

The city of Philadelphia hardly needs any introduction as a site of major historical importance (a statement, the veracity of which is emphasized by the fact that the opinion is here being voiced by a former British citizen!). It is a large East-Coast city, with a host of museums, art-galleries, theaters, cinemas, and shopping malls. The center of the city has been undergoing a rebirth (not least, architecturally), one pleasing feature of which is a large number of superb restaurants, and new book and music stores.

During the summer months, the Philadelphia Orchestra gives a series of open-air concerts at the Mann Music Center in Fairmount Park (the world's largest city park).

Transportation from Swarthmore to Philadelphia

You don't need a car to get to Swarthmore from the Philadelphia airport or 30th Street Station (Amtrak). Simply take the SEPTA R3 line to Swarthmore. The train station is at the foot of the campus.

If you should feel the need to leave such a splendid environment, take the R3 back to 30th Street Station in Philadelphia for easy connections to New York and Washington. For those who like to head for the hills or the shore, both the Poconos and the Jersey Shore are day-trips by car. Valley Forge National Park is a half-hour car-ride away.

For driving directions to Swarthmore, visit:

http://www.swarthmore.edu/visitordash/visitors_content_directions.php.

Philadelphia Airport is 15 minutes away from campus and 30th Street Station is approximately 30 minutes.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE AND DEADLINE

Application information is included with this letter. You will note that the first phase of the process involves filling out an online cover sheet. That can be found at:

<http://www.neh.gov/online/education/participants/>

Your completed application should be postmarked no later than March 2, 2010, and should be addressed to the program administrator:

Patricia Maloney
NEH Program
Swarthmore College
500 College Avenue
Swarthmore, PA 19086

In completing the application, you should devote particular care to the most important part of it, the three-page Application Essay. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant; your reasons for applying to the seminar; your interest, both personal and academic, in its subject; your qualifications to do the work of the seminar and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish in the seminar; and the relation of the seminar to your own teaching or other school work.

I hope that this letter has answered many of the questions that you may have about the seminar. If anything is unclear or if you yourself have further questions, please feel free to write to me at the above address, to telephone me at 215-898-6337, or to send an e-mail message (rallen@ccat.sas.upenn.edu). You may also call me at home in the evening at 215-473-0665. I should also let you know that Patricia Maloney of Swarthmore College will be assisting me in administrative matters before the actual start of the seminar, so you may receive mail or e-mail from her too (pmalone1@swarthmore.edu). She can be reached at 610-328-8355.

I am looking forward to receiving your application. It is my hope that this summer in Philadelphia we will have a whole series of stimulating discussions about a fictional tradition that needs to be better represented in our educational curricula.

Yours sincerely,
ROGER ALLEN