

Saddam the Romancier

While Baghdad burned, was the dictator fiddling with fiction? Saddam is now working on his fifth romantic novel; a good time to assess his place in the genre of "dic-lit"

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In an isolated prison cell, an ageing, mustachioed gentleman sits writing at a small canteen table. Recent months have seen a stark change in his fortunes. Gone are the Gucci suits and French hair dye. Gone is the entourage of supporters. The writer has very little outside contact now, save the occasional visits from the Red Cross and his interrogators. He has no idea if the novel he is working on, an epic allegorical tale of passion and revenge, will ever be published.

Provisionally entitled *The Great Awakening*, his fifth novel will emerge into a very different critical climate from that which greeted the others. In his home country his works were acclaimed bestsellers with sales into the millions. One was made into a 20-part television series. It had recently been announced that his books were to be studied as part of the national school curriculum. And then the regime changed.

For the last eight years, Saddam Hussein has been carving out an alternative career as a writer of romantic and fantasy fiction, full of thinly veiled political allegory, grandiose rhetoric and autobiography. He has published four novels in less than five years - prolific for someone whose day job was, presumably, fairly demanding.

Many statesmen and revolutionaries have been consummate writers of prose and poetry. Saddam, however, is part of a less honourable

tradition - of despots who have turned their attentions to the arts. From Nero to Napoleon, Hitler to Mao, there is sufficient output to suggest that we acknowledge this as a genre in its own right: dictator literature.

As with any genre, the range of dic-lit talent runs from the literary to the populist. Fellow middle eastern autocrat and dic-lit star Colonel Muammar Gaddafi has built a solid literary reputation based on a collection of short story fiction entitled *The Village, the Village, the Earth, the Earth and the Suicide of the Astronaut*. Published in 1998, there followed an international edition, retitled *Escape to Hell and Other Stories*. This included a foreword from Pierre Salinger, one of JFK's press spokesmen, who says the writings provided insight into a unique mind.

Saddam's writing is at the other end of the dic-lit spectrum and follows a populist family tradition. His uncle, a former mayor of Baghdad, and an influential local tyrant himself, contributed to the genre with a book entitled *He Created Them by Mistake: the Persians, Jews and Flies*, published in 1974. His masterstroke was to make 20,000 Iraqi schools purchase 50 copies each. Result: a million seller, and no marketing spend at all.

What motivates dic-lit authors? They know critical reaction to their work is unlikely to be genuine. It may be that the act of creating "art" is an extension of the urge to control. Fiction in particular offers the author a malleable world. But just because he was a brutal dictator, should Saddam be excluded from a place in literary history? Many great writers were not great human beings, and often a little despotic. Hemingway (drunk, violent and possessing, as Scott Fitzgerald observed, a "tendency towards megalomania"); Fitzgerald himself (drunk, violent and riddled with self-loathing); William Burroughs (a wife-shooting, pederastic drug addict); Byron (who paraded his litany of crimes both moral and legal like peacock feathers). Perhaps Saddam merely had more scope to realise his vision.

Of the four Saddam novels - *Zabibah and the King*, *The Fortified Castle*, *Men and the City* and *Be Gone Demons!* - the first remains the best known and best selling. Published in 2000, it is a torrid, romantic tale with an obvious political analogy. *Zabibah*, the heroine, represents Iraq; her cruel husband is America; and the strong but vengeful king is Saddam. "Once upon a time," the fairy tale-like story opens, "there was a great and powerful king... His influence was widespread and... he was surrounded by respect, peace, love, and trust as well as awe and fear.... This king was obeyed by his people, either willingly or by force."

Zabibah, unhappily married, falls in love with the king and they develop an intimate friendship. "'Do the people need strict measures from their king?' he asks. 'Yes, your majesty,' she replies. 'The people need strict measures so that they can feel protected.'" Such exchanges may be understood as Saddam exploring his personal demons. At one point *Zabibah* describes her faith in the one God, implying a mild rebuke to the king over his faithlessness (as a Ba'athist Saddam pronounced Iraq secular, but latterly he tried to appeal to all Iraqis through Islam). But the king always has the last word as their discussions range over themes of power, cruelty, justice, nature and tradition.

Then, one night, *Zabibah* is attacked and raped by a hooded stranger on her way home. The stranger turns out to be her husband (the Americans!) and so the incident offers the king an opportunity to take vengeance. A great battle follows, coinciding with the date of the Desert Storm assault of the first Gulf war. But in this case, US forces are symbolically defeated, as the vicious husband is killed. Order is restored though, tragically, neither *Zabibah* nor the king live to see it.

On the back of this tour de force came *The Fortified Castle* which, like *Zabibah*, also veils a political agenda with romance. Set after the 1991 Gulf war, it tells the story of an ex-soldier who falls for a

girl from northern Iraq (balm to Saddam's actual policies against the Kurds). The sub-plot - a servant running off with the master's sister - is a clear reference to Saddam's feelings of betrayal by the Kuwaitis.

The third, a biographical novel, *Men and the City*, is based on the rise of the Ba'ath party. It features a tableau of relatives, including Saddam's uncle and grandfather. But it is in the fourth novel that Saddam focuses on his favourite genre - military literature. *Be Gone Demons!* follows an Arab nobleman, Salim, in his battle to defeat his American and Jewish enemies (both recast as ancient-style foreign tribes) in an attack that mirrors 9/11. By this point in Saddam's literary career, US and Jewish hegemony has become an obsession. Completed in the run-up to the 2003 war (no wonder Iraqi forces had no strategy) the presidential publisher Al-Hurriah (meaning "freedom"), just managed to print 40,000 copies of *Be Gone Demons!* before the fall of Baghdad. As with all his books, Saddam's name does not appear. He prefers the phrase: "A novel written by its author."

It is easy to see why the CIA, MI6 and Mossad have analysed these outlandish tales of heroism and sacrifice in detail. Avi Rubin, an ex-Mossad agent, believes that Saddam's past is at the core of his anger against seemingly broader targets such as western civilisation and Jews. "In reality," Rubin argues, "he is speaking about the pain of his own childhood and upbringing."

Indeed, that childhood is as freakish as any of his fictions. Saddam's mother was a prostitute, he was gang-raped by homosexuals at the age of ten, and as a teenager was refused admission to Iraq's top military school. Angered by this rejection, he teamed up with the CIA to assassinate unwanted Iraqi communists before later turning on the Americans over the invasion of Kuwait. The inspiration for *Zabibah* was probably his fourth wife Iman, 40 years his junior, whom he adored and married a few years ago aged 63.

So dic-lit may be seen as a confessional genre. But what of the writing? Does Saddam have talent in the romantic fantasy genre? To determine the answer, I sent extracts of *Zabibah and the King* "blind" to some experts. The editor at Mills and Boon, after agreeing to comment, backed out when she discovered who the author was. But JoJo Moyes, winner of the Romantic Novelists' Association novel of the year award, agreed, and was alarmed by the style. With the first four paragraphs of the book containing no less than 13 rhetorical questions, she pointed out that the author was not interested in his readers. "I had a fear that it was by Osama bin Laden or Alastair Campbell," she said, trying to guess the author. "Once I knew who it was it all made sense. His writing was the literary equivalent of those lurid fantasy murals he had painted all over his palaces."

Naturally, before the war, reviews for Saddam in Iraq were superlative. The press claimed that *The Fortified Castle* was "a literary innovation that nobody has managed to achieve or surpass in the last century." But according to Amin Al-Issa, from Al Saqi Books, people bought copies out of curiosity. "They wanted to learn how 'out of order' Saddam was."

Tina Phillips, a consultant researcher at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, is surprised Saddam chose the novel at all, as in wider Islamic culture it is the poet who is most revered. The novel form is modern and considered a western import - it wasn't until the 1960s that an internationally recognised work was published (Nobel prize-winning Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz's *The Trilogy*). But Saddam was content to inhabit western culture, recognising in the novel a powerful tool. He used tried and tested Arabic stylistic devices to add "native flavour," blending Arab and western forms. Saddam was famously fascinated by other great leaders, particularly Nebuchadnezzar, Napoleon, Stalin and Hitler, and he mixed culture, mythology and religion to create in himself a hybrid, prophet-type character (a common trope in dic-lit).

In Iraq, fiction was all but banned by Saddam. And while he was initially content with co-opting other people to immortalise him - both in writing and on the silver screen (Abd Al-Amir Al-Mala's portrayal of the president, *The Long Days*, was made into a film by the Egyptian director Toufic Salih), this ultimately proved unsatisfactory and by 2000 he had turned his own hand to the business and produced the 160-page *Zabibah*. Perhaps he was not the real author. There are rumours that a ghostwriter was poisoned to keep the truth secret. But even if Saddam did not write every word then, he is certainly writing them all now.

The obvious conclusion is that we are looking at an author who is insecure, untalented and delusional. Is he alone? Is this the case with all dic-lit authors? Clearly not. Colonel Gaddafi, by comparison, is an authentic voice who has carved out a new narrative form derived from traditional popular culture. His writing has shades of Russian literature interestingly transposed onto an environment of modern urban decay and psychological pollution. "By the nature of city life, one's purpose becomes self-interest and opportunism. And one's norm of behaviour becomes hypocrisy," Gaddafi has written with, if not great originality, then at least some perceptiveness.

By contrast, for Saddam, writing seems more a consolation for his political failings. He knew that his career as an overlord was on the wane after the 1991 Gulf war, and it is no coincidence that this is when his literary endeavours began. His translator Sa'adoon Al-Zubaydi maintains that, fuelled by the good notices for *Zabibah*, he began to retreat into his own internal world. He increasingly came to use his body doubles rather than meeting face to face with his armed forces.

The Iraqi poet Nabeel Yasin argues that the mixture of fact and fiction in his books is there to create an emotional and political utopia (like fellow jailbird and fantasist Jeffrey Archer, Saddam's novels are based on the reinvention of the facts of his own life). And

according to Al-Zubaydi, Saddam, "longed for the golden days of his youth when he was being hunted down after the failed coup of 1958. He longed for a return to some original state of purity." As one literary Jordanian I know put it: "He writes about the world as he would like it to be. The lost Kurdish girl can fall in love with the disbanded Iraqi soldier, and the king can rule on in peace, loved and respected by his people.

Of course, there is no way of knowing whether Saddam Hussein's future work will offer anything beyond the comic cachet of simply owning the books. In the meantime, we can only speculate if his inner life will sustain him, like Archer or Oscar Wilde, through his incarceration and trial. Knowing Saddam's writing, however, he won't be giving us the Ballad of Abu Ghraib.