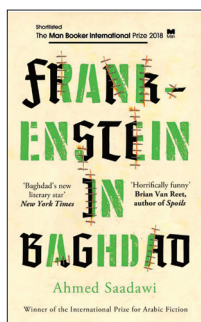


Frankenstein in Baghdad
Ahmed Saadawi, trans. Jonathan Wright
Oneworld Publications, 2018, PB, 288pp,
£7.48, 978-1786070609



CITY OF DEATH

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction and was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize. It is set in Iraq's capital in 2005, then occupied by the US military, at a time of escalating violence. I felt that this novel is a cousin to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Here too a city is beset by the forces of disorder and the supernatural is set loose, although *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is much, much bloodier.

The characters and events of this novel are riddled with ambiguity. Characters are described in contradictory ways. Good people turn into bad people and justice becomes vengeance. A miraculous occurrence may just be the delusion of a sad old woman. The victim of a suicide bomber may inhabit a Frankenstein's monster or it may just be a hoax. The book is framed as a manuscript presented as evidence for a government inquiry. The confession of the Whatsitsname (as the monster is known) is presented as the transcript of a video recording. Nothing is certain.

Saadawi creates an impressively heterogeneous group of characters. There is Elishva, an elderly woman who prays for the return for her son, Daniel, lost long ago in the Iran-Iraq War. Hadi is a junk dealer who creates the Whatsitsname, stitching it together from bodies as a protest against the authorities. Mahmoud is a hardworking, ambitious, but naive journalist always on the backfoot as he chases the story of the Whatsitsname. Pathos, tragedy, and horror permeate the lives of the characters.

But there is black comedy too. The Iraqi government's murky Tracking and Pursuit Department, one of the groups hunting

down the Whatsitsname, is staffed by soothsayers and astrologists, and, as the violence mounts and the different factions start massacring each other, the various actors blur into an indistinguishable chaos. The novel perhaps dissolves a little too much into actual incoherence, and the ending, although neat for the characters, is not entirely satisfying.

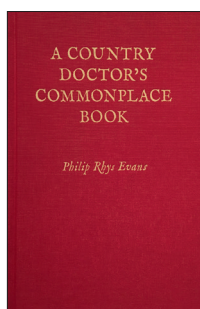
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X700073>

A Country Doctor's Commonplace Book: Wonders and Absurdities

Philip Rhys Evans

Slightly Foxed, 2018, HB, 112pp, £12, 978-1910898147



NOT SO COMMONPLACE

Commonplace books, which are essentially scrapbooks containing written items of all kinds including quotations, letters, poems, proverbs, and prayers, have a long history. John Milton's commonplace book consisted largely of proverbs and wise statements, and in 1706 John Locke produced a guide to making commonplace books, describing techniques for entering proverbs, quotations, ideas, and speeches, including arranging them by subject categories, such as love, politics, and religion. Francis Bacon and EM Forster also kept commonplace books, and WH Auden published his in 1970 as *A Certain World*. John Julius Norwich was the creator of an annual *Christmas Cracker*. Dr Philip Evans, now retired from general practice in Suffolk, is in good company.

Every Christmas for the past 16 years he has sent his friends and family a small booklet of 'wonders and absurdities' gleaned from many different sources over the year. A

selection of the material contained in these booklets has now been published as a very attractive cloth-bound hardback, complete with silk ribbon marker, by the publishers of the quarterly literary magazine *Slightly Foxed*. The contents reflect Dr Evans's many interests, including wine, cricket, poetry, Anton Chekhov and PG Wodehouse, the strange goings-on of the Church of England, and the eccentricities of British politics. These are laced with worldly-wise reflections on marriage, health, and family life, and snippets of conversations, letters to editors, correspondence, and, from that richest vein of English peculiarities, parish newsletters. Alan Bennett, TE Lawrence, and John Mortimer make appearances.

Making a selection of extracts is very risky, but here goes. Churchill's reply to George Bernard Shaw's invitation to 'the first night of my new play; bring a friend if you have one' was 'Cannot possibly attend first night; will attend second, if there is one.' The Queen to Alan Titchmarsh, in the *Independent*: 'You have given a lot of women a lot of pleasure.' From John Julius Norwich's *Christmas Cracker*: 'As you grow old, you lose interest in sex, your friends drift away, your children often ignore you. There are many other advantages of course, but these would seem to be the outstanding ones.' And from a parish newsletter: 'Low self-esteem support group will meet Thursday at 7pm, please use the back door.'

In the preface Evans writes, 'Life as a country GP exposes one to an extraordinary range of people and situations — always fascinating, sometimes absurd, often sad and poignant. I hope this small book catches something of that infinite variety.'

It certainly does, and I'm sure that it will, like the celebrity gardener, give a lot of readers a lot of pleasure.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X700085>
