



English PEN World Atlas

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Saturday, December 13, 2008

A History of the Arab Body: The Prophet's Wife, Jasad and Mourid Barghouti Make the News.

Providing further context and consideration to the charges laid against *Jewel* comes an excellent interview in The Guardian with Lebanese poet and journalist Joumana Haddad, who has launched Jasad, "a quarterly magazine specialising in the body's arts, sciences, and literatures."



On sale in Lebanon in sealed plastic envelopes (and by couriered subscription elsewhere), Jasad is, as Haddad points out, a continuation of a rich tradition in Arabic literature; she tells Ian Black,

"I'm not trying to introduce something alien. We have wonderful erotic texts in Arabic like the Scented Garden or the non-censored texts of a Thousand and One Nights. These are all part of our heritage and we have come to deny it."

The first issue has a plethora of contributors, whom Haddad insists write under their given names. They are a distinguished bunch, including French writer Catherine Millet (whose memoir *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* caused shockwaves), prize-winning novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun, Egyptian poet Emad Fouad, and Abbas Beydoun, who is the Cultural Editor of Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir* as well as a novelist and poet.

There's an essay on lesbian life in Syria and France by Kurdish-Syrian journalist Maha Hassan, author of the excellent article "Female Arabic Writers: Neither Mannish nor Scheherazadian." She critiques Moroccan novelist Said Benkrad's assertion, made in August 2008, in Damascus (the 2008 Capital of Arabic culture), during a debate about female writing,

that the female Arab novel carried within itself only the body and temptation and that female writers put their desires above their words.

He thus made a very clear distinction between novels written by men and those that are written by women.

As the erotic writing by Ben Jelloun, Fouad and Beydoun included in *Jasad* shows, the erotic body is not the provenance of women writers -- but nor are they excluded from writing about it. Cannily, the magazine's website has a [forum](#) where issues of gender, sexuality, censorship, cultural heritage and so on can be discussed by readers and browsers, as the magazine provides a forum for writers to present their intellectual and erotic fantasies. The magazine is currently only available in Arabic, and in print, but excerpts are readable online, in English and Arabic.

It's great to see a full-page article about Arabic literature in the Saturday Guardian (dominated by a picture of the very beautiful Haddad and featuring a box entitled "World of Contradictions" summarising the double standards around the erotic in the Arab world), but appearing on the same day as the NYT *Jewel* review, it makes me wonder whether it's not so much about Arabic literature as the still-tantalising Orientalist myth of the erotic East, at once sternly veiled and sybaritically laid bare. While *Jasad* itself explores sensually, sparkily and thoughtfully a diverse world of sexuality, including cannibalism, fetishism, cinematic voyeurism, gender difference and body theory, the article presents it simply as a controversial "culture clash" of Western values (its "articles and illustrations are of a quality that would not be out of place in Paris, New York or London") and Arabic social mores. *Jewel* is being read through a similar narrow focus. But each carries with it, for Western readers and editors, a whiff of Burtonesque jasmine, a seduction -- into easy arguments as well as erotic reveries.

Haddad is a bold and talented writer and editor, and her magazine showcases a selection of the most exciting writers and artists from the region. But is this really all the coverage the Guardian can afford to the Beirut Book Fair and to Arabic literature? In fairness, the Review section's "A Life In Writing" interview this week is with [Mourid Barghouti](#).