Elzembely, Hosam A. Ibrahim, and Emad El-Din Aysha. ***Arab and Muslim Science Fiction: Critical Essays.*** **McFarland, 2022.**

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/arab-and-muslim-science-fiction/

In the preface to *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction: Critical Essays*, edited by Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely and Emad El-Din Aysha, the former writes, "This is a book dedicated to filling in the gap once and for all in the production and dissemination of knowledge about Arabic and Muslim science fiction" (1). What is most important is the perspective from which the volume operates. As Ibrahim Elzembely observes, much of the scholarship on Arabic and Muslim sf, prior to the publication of this book, has been done "from the singular perspective of a foreign expert" (1)—that is to say, the work already done in this space has mostly been done by those "not intimately acquainted with [Arab] cultural perspective and values or the exact nature of the problems they all face" (1). As such, this volume operates as a corrective to what the editors see as glaring omission in the study of global literature; as Lyn Qualey observes a few pages later in the introduction, "Most of the critical and academic attention given to science fiction has been to the literature produced in North America and Europe" (4). Against the claim that there is "there is no such thing as Arabic science fiction at all" (4), the editors and writers included in *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction* add to the conversation "the rich landscape of science fiction in other languages" by exploring not just that fiction itself but also "the ways in which it fuses with other literary and cultural traditions" (4).

There are two more points to be made here. The first is, implicit in a collection like this one, the argument that sf is a form of "serious literature" (4), a claim that situates this book in a growing number of scholars willing to take the genre seriously. James E. Gunn, in the first article in the collection, lays out the theoretical underpinning of this claim by reflecting on the tension

between “[m]ainstream fiction’s preoccupation with the present,” which he examines as a “desire to freeze reality in its current state” and sf’s “belief that the most important aspect of existence is a search for humanity’s origins, its purpose, and its ultimate fate” (8). The second point, which Gunn introduces both with his emphasis on the genre’s focus on the “human species” (5) and with his claim that sf is part of a broader process in which Arab and Muslim authors are “making sense of the changing world around them and the prospects it opens up for them and the laws that ultimately govern” those changes (9), is that this literature is global in nature through its engagement in a genre that is often seen, as mentioned above, through the limited lens of Westernization. This might be considered the thesis of the book, not made explicitly but rather by its very production: Arab and Muslim literature has a place in the growing scholarship of sf.

To these ends, Section II of the book, titled “Local Voices: Essays and Interviews,” is broken up into subsections according to region—North Africa; The Levant; Gulf; Europe, Russia, and Central Asia; South Asia; Africa; and the Far East—and presents forty articles ranging from, as the title of the section indicates, interviews with writers (both creative and academic) and scholarly articles. The range of topics these entries to the anthology touch upon varies greatly: the historicization of the genre in specific contexts; the relationship between sf and the political struggles of nations; the futurist and utopian projects of Arab and Muslim sf; examinations of the politics of publishing in the genre; analysis of the forms the genre takes in the Arab and Muslim context; inclusions of related genres like comic books. Given the scope of scholarship, it is difficult to summarize and generalize the work this anthology does in the critical conversation around sf. There are, however, a few standouts. It should be noted that I choose these articles not at the exclusion of the others but because they exemplify the goals laid out in the editors’ introduction. We might take the first article in Section II, “The Continuum: Four Waves of Egyptian Sci-Fi” by

Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely, as being emblematic of one of those goals. Ibrahim Elzembely deftly brings several important themes to the forefront with this article: first, Ibrahim Elzembely makes it clear that the ability of sf authors in Egypt to write is indelibly tied to the political and social situations of the state and its citizens: “The atmosphere in Egypt is very stifling for creativity” (11), and “[t]he fear of dictatorship is present deep inside our psyche (residents of the developing world)” (12). This relates to a second observation: that the sf this volume treats is necessarily an international dialogue happening at the levels of story and genre and that of personal experience. Ibrahim Elzembely writes, “My own story with science fiction began with my tender years, as a teenager in the United Kingdom, when the Star Wars series came out” (10). We see this emphasis on internationalism throughout the volume in mentions of non-Arab and Muslim sf authors—sometimes in line with those authors and sometimes in reaction to them—and, especially, in an emphasis on how international issues like the war on terror inform the genre in this context.

Many of the authors also emphasize a kind of cosmopolitanism: in “Interview with Jeremy Szal: Global and Local Imperatives in Lebanese Science Fiction,” Szal is asked, “Do you consider yourself a ‘citizen of the world’?” and he responds, “Absolutely. I’ve lived in both Thailand and Austria, speak two languages, visited five continents, have cultural backgrounds with over half a dozen nations, and my family speaks eight languages between them. I’m Australian, first and foremost, but I’m less interested in drawing lines at borders than I am in investing in what the whole world has to offer” (87). This dynamic—the ways in which personal experiences of immigration and cultural diversity inform the generation of texts—threads through many of the articles in the volume. Another important point the volume makes, then, is the long history of Arab and Muslim sf. Ibrahim Elzembely, to return to his article already mentioned above, traces the first

wave of Egyptian sf back to the 1950s and connects it to "the space race between the superpowers and the prospect of landing on the moon" (13). Kawthar Ayed, in "Mapping the Maghreb: The History and Prospects of SF in the Arab West," traces the early influences of Arab and Muslim sf still farther back, referencing *Prairies of Gold and Mines of Jewels* from the ninth century, by Al-Mass'udi's, and *1001 Nights* as "proto-science fiction" (22). Furthermore, they point towards "the subspecies of Utopian literature in contemporary Arabic history" in the mid-nineteenth century and to "Syrian author Michelle Al-Saqal (1824–1885) with a novel set on Venus and the Moon" (22). Ayed sums up the point succinctly: "The Arabic history of science fiction, then, is older than we think" (22).

Section III, "A Literature in Appraisal," takes a step back from the regional lens Section II emphasizes and attempts to end the collection with a broader take on Arab and Muslim sf by placing it more squarely in the political and academic world, focusing on the project of amplifying this literature. This section points towards increasing acceptance in academia of both sf generally and Arab and Muslim fictions specifically. As Rebecca Hankins observes in "Archiving the Future: A Conversation with Rebecca Hankins on the Fictional Frontiers of Muslim and African SF," "there is less resistance now than in the past, where now this work is finding wider audiences" (350). This section also introduces an interesting question in the overall project this book embodies, especially given the international emphasis of much of the work in the volume: translation. In "Between Two Traditions: A Testimonial on Translating Arabic Science Fiction Stories," Areeg Ibrahīm begins by stating, flatly, "Science Fiction (SF) is challenging to translate" (367). For Ibrahīm, the difficulty hinges on the tensions "between two traditions of SF writing (Western and Eastern) and the two different cultures of the Arabic source text (ST) and the English target text (TT)" (350). Resolving this tension, then, requires "a mix of foreignization and

domestication" in which Ibrahīm "mediate[d]" between the two traditions and cultures (371 and 372).

The issue of translation, then, speaks to the broader project in which *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction* is engaged. Ibrahim Elzembely in the conclusion asks an important question: "[W]here do we go from this point on" (373)? They note translation from English into multiple other languages as being the first step, and they also put forth several other possibilities: "an anthology translated into English of young, aspiring Arab authors;" "a study text replete with questions and answers and open-ended exercises;" "discussions with like-minded individuals and groups over the book;" "a newer, larger organization that will pull together all those who participated in the birthing of our book to the benefit of the global audience;" "a series of specialized studies on such unexplored topics as Sufism in Arabic and Muslim science fiction or artificial intelligence in Arab-Muslim sci-fi;" "or comparative studies with other bodies of SF produced in the Global South" (374). One thing, then, is quite clear: this excellent and necessary book is just the beginning of an exciting and growing body of scholarship on a too-long neglected history in the importance of sf.

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