

Bilal Khbeiz  
**In Praise of  
Books: When  
Authorities  
Close a Prison,  
They Foil a  
Revolution!**

e-flux journal #38 — october 2012 Bilal Khbeiz  
In Praise of Books: When Authorities Close a Prison, They Foil a Revolution!

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People these days lament young people's disdain for reading and, by extension, writing. Quite a few of today's young people secretly indulge in writing poetry that will never be published, probably because they seek distraction elsewhere. It seems that in the West, and especially in America, all the best-selling authors are retired celebrities. The list of retirees who write is long, starting with politicians and continuing with businessmen, economists, and the wives of famous baseball players or golfers. Each has an enthralling tale to tell that is worthy of publishing only if there's a success story behind it. That is why Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, published a book at the end of his long and successful career.<sup>1</sup> Had the financial crash of Lehmann Brothers happened before the release of his book, he might have stopped the presses, since he presided over the economic policies that led to the financial avalanche of September 17, 2008.

The celebrity retirees are not the only writers these days. There are countless writers of countless genres of books. Yet studying these retirees reveals some of the ways books are consumed today. A successful retiree writes to enlighten young people about the secrets of success, not to share his thoughts with his equally famous colleagues or with individuals who are more knowledgeable. Writers these days are no longer the "inadequate, measly poor" who write for more worthy readers in the way the important philosophers used to write for princes and kings. They don't address those whose youth is behind them and who are now plowing through life, trying to grab success by the horns. Writing is thus for young people who haven't joined the workforce yet and are still attending school. They are expected to deal with books by owning and reading them.

Should this kind of writing receive the raving praise that is usually reserved for literature? It's likely that the world of readers would answer in the affirmative. Different people desire different things from reading. No one would dare to classify Stephen King as one of the great literary giants, since his writing appeals to more naïve readers. You will find many people who will resist his nomination for a Nobel Prize. Others, however, would argue for promoting him from a third-rate to first-rate novelist. Other writers are not even lucky enough to have this kind of debate for or against them. One such writer is John Grisham, who claims that he's the best-selling author in a country where no one reads. And this is a profoundly revealing claim. If John Grisham's novels enjoy record-breaking sales, then somebody out there must be reading them. Yet lumping Grisham's writing in with that of lower caliber authors makes the latter's

writings feel like a miser's banquet: a gram of sugar and a ton of dry wood. In reality, though, people who read both King and Grisham are not real readers (although in the case of Grisham, some "professionals" might take interest in his work). If we maintain that Grisham's readers are not readers, then the same goes for those who follow Greenspan's words, since both groups of readers are stuck in a stage of instructional manual reading. A Greenspan reader might or might not be faithful after graduation. They are obliged to read him.

And so, there are books that resemble street signs or flight manuals. They have broad appeal among general readers and "professionals," but they don't touch readers. Greenspan's book reads like traffic regulations – stern and clear-cut to make everyone comply. A failure to learn it is a failure to profit. The same applies to pop novels, which resemble the morning news: they both provide just enough detail to give the audience a passing familiarity with events. It is truly odd that John Grisham's movie adaptations outnumber all of Paul Auster's published works.

The reader, then, is the maker of the writer, especially when the reader is a writer himself. When one becomes a writer, one gains a certain

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power that can be quite influential depending on the context. Parts of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry strike fear into the hearts of the Israeli Army, more so than any declaration by Ismael Haniyeh.<sup>2</sup> But that might not be the best example. Let's imagine the specter of *The Communist Manifesto* taking over the whole of Europe. Let's claim that *Fahrenheit 451* was Francois Truffaut's ode to writing and books. *The Name of the Rose* was a book and a film about a book. The protagonist of Larry Burkett's *The Illuminati* is a book, about which we know very little – a book that was purportedly authored by Aristotle and that scares Western and Arab authorities, who are working hard to destroy it and eliminate its followers. But we still don't know what's actually in the book and find ourselves face to face with its readers, who interpret selectively based on their own preferences. The most telling clue in *The Illuminati* is a reference to a group of people across the ages who have pledged an oath to protect the book. These people are no more than slaves to that book. And when the time comes, the book will reveal itself and guide leaders and rulers alike.

But talking about writing and writers is not complete without covering writing and reading rituals. Influential books are conceived in



Book block by Italian students in an anti-Berlusconi protest, 2011.

isolation. There's Gramsci, who wrote in his prison cell, and Lenin, who composed in exile, and Karl Kautsky, who wrote in his room. Most revolutionaries learned to write in prisons, whether self-imposed or otherwise. Regis Debray is quoted as saying,

The books of revolutions are written in prisons, from Lenin and Trotsky to Sayed Qutb and Abdsulsalam Faraj. In prisons, exiles, and gloomy locked rooms, the books and the guiding principles of revolutions were born. And if one desires to mark the twentieth century with an identity, it would be that it's the century of readers and their books and writers. When power shuts a prison down it thwarts a revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, reading has a colorful history. Reading and writing didn't start as revolutionary overtures or as ways to give birth to leaders and revolutionaries. Most likely, the desire to read arose from the surplus leisure time that the aristocracies of the East and the West accrued. Arab poets used to perform their work before sultans who served both as their critics and readers. The great Western philosophers wrote their works with a specific reader in mind, usually a member of the royal family or even the king himself. Hence the true power of the reader is to exercise moral and material power over art. It's possible that Karl Marx's crowning achievement was that he appealed to a new readership other than sultans, kings, and royal escorts. That might be why the first French edition of *Das Kapital* never sold more than twenty-five copies in the first twenty-five years after its release. The publisher even went as far as mailing complimentary copies to readers who he thought might be interested in the book, requesting payment only for shipping. They all declined. Marx's opus wasn't worth the cost of shipment because the intended reader was not the traditional powerful nobleman who would reduce hired writers to mere consultants. The reader of *Das Kapital* is the maker of twentieth-century revolutions.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of reader still exists in some parts of the world. The supplanting of the reading aristocracy by the common reader has liberated writers from the tyranny of the former, but it has also subjected them to a different tyranny that is far more cruel. Writers now have to pander to oblivious masses instead of arrogant rulers. The highest form of this kind of pandering is, of course, magical realism, which took hold of world literature for decades and made everyone become a reader whether they realized it or not. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels paid huge tribute to the poor and outcasts and made them

both the subjects of novels and the source of their strength.

In his autobiography *Living to Tell the Tale*, Marquez recounts how he lived his life in a country in turmoil. He mentions many incidents and events in his book but the ones I would like to point out relate to his lifestyle. This writer, who took his country by storm, lived a bohemian life not out of choice but because he often found himself without money to put a roof over his head. He lived like a hermit without the basic amenities guaranteed by the most basic human rights, but he wasn't alone in this. In *The Red Notebook: True Stories*, Paul Auster relates how he lived for months in the French countryside at the home of a friend who was traveling at the time, and the only thing he could eat was onion soup because it was in the kitchen and he couldn't afford to buy anything else.<sup>4</sup> He ate onions until he became a writer! There are too many similar stories to list, but what is odd in all of them is that the writers didn't find in these situations any reason to complain or rebel. Such conditions – hunger, unemployment, homelessness – would be sufficient grounds for some decisive action on the part of characters in their stories. (It would be unfair to include Auster in this generalization, since he is the only Lonely American among the authors I've mentioned. That is, he is the only writer who allows characters to emerge from a quintessentially American loneliness and isolation.)

A writer could be proud and content with a life of neediness, isolation, or poverty. But a writer wouldn't wish this condition upon readers. For despite a writer's conviction that the ideas that move the world are born in solitude, the readers and their lives must be somewhat different. The reader is the de facto authority for being nameless and ignorant. Unlike the writer, who builds a reputation out of the fragile adoration of fans, a reader could lay to waste to an entire empire in the blink of an eye!

Nowadays, there are readers who reveal a flat, shallow reading of writers by making a public retort. The reader always has a sword pointed at the writer's neck: "This is a shallow article!" "This study is not worth the paper it's printed on!" and when it comes to political analysis of situations like the ones in Lebanon and Syria or even Israel or Egypt, "This writer is a hired gun," "He serves the interests of the enemy," or "This study works to demoralize us, discourage us from fighting, and belittle our victories." A powerless writer has no defense against this, since he craves readers' approval. Consequently, a writer is faced with a situation similar to that of Frankenstein and his maker: he creates the power of the modern reader and yet is the first to be enslaved under the reader's

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unjust scepter.

This not a common occurrence, since reading and writing are still considered a tool for the powerful in some countries. They are still the makers of revolutions and the intellectual grounding of struggles born in prisons and exiles. But the world has changed. There are new hermits on the block, new marginalized and isolated groups, but it is definitely not readers or writers who will be likely to bring about the future revolutions. These revolutions will undoubtedly be far more violent than anything humanity has ever seen. But that is another story.

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Bilal Khbeiz (1963, Kfarchouba) is a poet, essayist, and journalist. He regularly contributes to the newspapers Beirut Al Masa', Al Nahar, and to Future Television Beirut, among other publications and networks. Published poetry and books on cultural theory include *Fi Annal jassad Khatia' Wa Khalas (That the Body is Sin and Deliverance)*, *Globalisation and the Manufacture of Transient Events*, *The Enduring Image and the Vanishing World*, and *Tragedy in the Moment of Vision*.

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Published on September 17, 2007, Greenspan's memoir *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World* debuted at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for hardcover nonfiction.

2

Mahmoud Darwish (Arabic: *محمّد داوود*) (March 13, 1941–August 9, 2008) was a Palestinian poet and author who won numerous literary awards and was regarded as the Palestinian national poet. In his work, Palestine became a metaphor for the loss of Eden, birth, and resurrection, and the anguish of dispossession and exile. Ismael Hanyie is the prime minister of the Hamas government in Gaza District.

3

Jules Régis Debray, *Introduction a la Mediologie*, (Collection Premier Cycle, PUF, 1999).  
Sayed Qutub (October 6, 1906–August 2, 1966) was an Egyptian journalist, politician, and theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood.

4

Régis Debray, *Introduction a la Mediologie*, (Collection Premier Cycle, PUF, 1999).

5

Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook: True Stories*, (New York: Faber and Faber, 1995).

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