NEW EYES ON THE ARAB WORLD:

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS OF FEAR AND PREJUDICE

Peter Theroux, Raja Alem, Tom McDonough, and Joe Sacco

Moderated by Sulaiman Al Hattlan

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

www.nypl.org/live

KIM IRWIN: Hello. I'm Kim Irwin and I'm manager of LIVE from the NYPL. And I welcome you to the New York Public Library. And if this is your first time, it's very exciting to have you here, and if you're a LIVE supporter, we're glad to see you again. The exciting thing about our spring season is that it's still happening after tonight. So, on

Monday, June 8, we hope to see you for a wonderful evening with Alain de Botton, who will be in conversation with LIVE director Paul Holdengräber. And that program is The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work. And from June 9th through the 11th, we're also very excited to have five evening programs as part of Muslim Voices. It's a citywide festival that is copresented by the Asia Society, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the New York Center for Dialogues. And that whole festival is taking place from June 5th to 14th. But at the Library, we're doing a very special symposium from the 9th through the 11th on Islam in Europe: Insult: Fractured States?. And this will explore the multiple perspectives for viewing relations between European societies and their Muslim communities. And it will have prominent speakers such as her majesty Queen Noor, Benjamin Barber, David Brancaccio, and Tahar Ban Jelloun, so we're very excited about that, and we hope you come back for that. And there's flyers on your seats. You can check out the times and everything on those events.

And of course you're at the Library. We want you to become a Friend of the Library. If you do, for as little as forty dollars, you can get ten-dollar discounts on every LIVE ticket, so that's very exciting, and no service fee. And also if you join tonight, and you can join right outside, you get free tickets to upcoming LIVE events. Also, you will probably see our e-mail signup. We hope you will sign up so you know events as they're happening. And you can also find LIVE on Facebook and Flickr and del.icio.us, and Twitter and, you know, all those places.

And, then, very exciting after the event tonight is we're going to have a book signing. So you can purchase your books. 192 Books is our wonderful local independent bookstore that sells books at LIVE events. And you can purchase books there and then we'll have the signing over near the elevator.

Now I want to thank all the people who have brought us this exceptional evening tonight, New Eyes on the Arab World. This event would not have been possible without the generous support of the Jamal Al Shehhi and at the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, so we thank them very much for their support. And many thanks to Anna Swank and Livia Alexander of *ARTEEAST*. Anna is the literary programs director who curated this event tonight and Livia is the executive director of *ARTEEAST*. And finally, please welcome the man who has brought all of these people together to make this happen and whom I've enjoyed working with tremendously, is Ruediger Wischenbart. Thank you.

(applause)

RUEDIGER WISCHENBART: Hello. Good evening. I'm very, very happy that you have come, that these speakers have been available for us, because you won't believe me, but at Book Expo America, we have a global market forum, the Arab World, which was kicked off yesterday morning by his Excellency Mr. Amr Moussa, who is the general secretary of the Arab League, so the highest politician for all the Arab countries and he was very fond in his opening remarks about the role of books. And then we had these

panel debates about copyright and editors and how you distribute books, but then we saw a very little movie of thirteen minutes filmed last week, ten days ago, in Baghdad in Iraq and you saw not a single gun, not a single other weapon, no barbed wire, you just saw books and people flipping these books, reading these books, buying these books, authors interviewed, people talking about how to publish books in Iraq, how to bring books from Iraqi writers to the rest of the world, to other Arab countries, et cetera, et cetera, so we thought, "Oh, you can have a completely different look at this place, you can have new eyes on the Arab world as well." So we thought, wouldn't it be nice to explore that a little further? And guess what? By coincidence, we had a few people around, and we had Anna Swank, whom I welcome particularly well, who said, "Let's make something out of this. Let's try to explore those New Eyes," and in less than, in about twenty-four hours we made that happen, and we told you, and you came. So let's have a wonderful evening. And Anna Swank will be so kind to introduce those speakers that we present to you tonight. I'm very happy to welcome you.

(applause)

ANNA SWANK: Good evening, everyone, and I promise I'm the last person before the real act. I'm not introducing anyone but them, so we can get to the people you came here to see. My name is Anna Swank, and as Ruediger Wischenbart. and Kim so kindly let you know, I'm doing literary programs for *ArteEast*, which is an organization that the New Yorkers among you hopefully have come across. We do Middle East–related arts

programming in the city. So I hope you'll look for upcoming events, and we have flyers outside.

So it's been a really exciting process and a very difficult choice to bring the people together that you see before you now, but I couldn't be happier about the meeting of minds that you're about to witness. So here they are. First of all, we have Peter Theroux, who is one of the foremost translators from the Arabic to the English and he's translated works by Naguib Mahfouz, Emile Habiby, Abdelrahman Munif, the biggest names in Arabic literature, some of which are available outside, namely *Cities of Salt* and *Children of the Alley*. He's also the author of memoirs of his own about the Middle East and other parts of the world, *Syria Behind the Mask* and *Translating LA: A Tour of the Rainbow City*.

Next up, we have actually a writing team. Raja Alem, who is a Saudi Arabian writer, and she is a novelist in her own right in Arabic but more recently has begun writing novels also in English, which is a project that by a series of events which I'm sure they will describe to you, she came to be working with Tom McDonough, who is the author of *Virgin with Child* and *Light Years*, in English. They have been writing books together now for about ten years. Two of which have been published now in English: *My Thousand and One Nights: A Novel of Mecca* and *Fatima: A Novel of Arabia*. It's very, very exciting work they've been doing together and I hope you will have a chance to read it and find out more.

Next we have Joe Sacco, who is an American graphic novelist who has worked extensively in the Middle East. He's published a book on Palestine and has an upcoming book on Gaza, which you can look forward to in December?

JOE SACCO: Sure.

ANNA SWANK: I hope so. He is currently living in Portland, Oregon, and he joins us tonight in New York.

Last but certainly not least we have our moderator, Sulaiman Al Hattlan, who is currently CEO of the Arab Strategy Forum, former editor-in-chief of *Forbes Arabia*, and he's worked with ABC News, written for the *New York Times*, currently hosts a current-affairs program on Al Hurra TV broadcast out of Iraq. So this international media personality joins us to bring these minds together and lead us in what I'm sure will be a very exciting discussion. Welcome to all of you and let's be off!

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: I'm the only one on the stage who hasn't written a novel yet, but I'm a big fan of the great writers on the stage and this actually makes it very difficult for me to moderate a session with people I'm very much impressed by their creative minds, I'm so honored to be here with you tonight. Let me also thank the New York Public Library and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation for doing such a great event, and I hope this will be the first of a series of events. I think our region back home in the Middle East and here in America we need to do more of, you know,

events that will create doors and windows for communications. Mr. Obama is on his way soon to Cairo to speak to the Muslim world and to the Arabs, he's here tonight. Maybe he might join at one point **(laughter)** to start from here. So all of these are great events actually in terms of creating new doors of communications with the Arab world.

I must admit also I am a little bit skeptical about the second part of the title of tonight: Breaking Down Barriers of Fear and Prejudice. My fear, or my concern, is that we might exaggerate in our expectations of the role of writings and writers. Also that might raise a question of the role of writers and writings. Do we really write for a political agenda? Do we write for social causes, or do we write for the joy of writing and the process of writing itself? I'll leave it to you to discuss it at one point tonight.

Let me start. As we agreed, I'll give each one five to ten minutes to briefly talk about your previous experience in relation to the main question of tonight, which is can writing, especially fictions, break down barriers between people and cultures? I would appreciate some examples from your own experience. I'll start with Peter.

PETER THEROUX: Thank you. Thank you, Sulaiman. I would comment that we'll—I'm sure everybody who is Arab here this evening would know this expression that popped into my mind hearing about little film about the Iraqis looking at books. There's this saying that "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads," because Iraqis have an extremely long tradition of being book lovers and writers that goes back for as long as Baghdad has existed, for sure. And it's an interesting sign of the times. That's not a very

recent saying, but what you have in front of you tonight, which is a Saudi Arabian novelist, or writing pair, you have an eminent media person who's also from Saudi Arabia, and even in terms of my own work as a translator, I'll be alluding to in a moment, it skews pretty heavily toward Iraq writing and Saudi Arabia writing, so it's, you know, it's not just Egypt that has a lock on being great writers, as you know.

I started out as a student and then as a journalist and writer in the Middle East, and I became a translator of Arabic literature because I liked Arabic books and I wanted to step away to the extent that I could and let the people—help the people of the region speak for themselves. And to if possible take some modern Arabic books, or to let's say take our perspective of the Arab world out of the political arena so that our views, our informed views, might be—might view it as less exotic and less political and more from the inside, and to me it was always unfortunate—the more I got to know the region, living in first Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, the more it's seen from the inside and through the eyes of the people, you develop something far, far, far, far better than any, most, anyway, journalists or nonfiction commentaries are going to say.

It also struck me because I really love the Middle East a lot—I love the Arab world and the Middle East a lot—it's a very, very great distortion to let politics even dominate the scene, you know, as distinct from the culture, because you have some resplendent cultures, but some fairly pathological political, you know, stuff going on, which, you know, it would be terrible to view the region through—such a complex and ancient region through that view. I was actually part of the problem. Among my other

accomplishments, I wrote for *National Geographic* magazine. I mean, I think the work I did was fine, but if you're doing Egypt it skews heavily toward, I don't know, the ancient Egypt and then the modern ecological and political stuff, and even with great photographers and a great budget and movement, you don't nail it, you have to let—Authors have to step in front of you and those men and women do the job.

I'm just going to give, to expand a little bit on that perspective, a short rundown on the types of projects I did. The first novel I did was in English it was called *Cities of Salt* by Abdelrahman Munif, who started out Saudi. His country took away his citizenship, he carried about literally twelve different passports in his life. A very nice book. A strong political thread ran through it. And unfortunately it was reviewed—I mentioned I wanted to try and take the view of the region out of the exotic and out of the political, and one of the most prominent reviews of that book, in the *New Yorker*, a reasonably well-known review, by people who know the book, by John Updike treated the book as a kind of a freak, as an exotic thing, and he actually slightly ridiculed the idea. "A book—a novel by a Saudi. Whoooa. Wrap your mind around that." I forget his exact words but they were approximately like that, and he leaned heavily on the political and the documentary aspect of that novel, which did involve the discovery of oil, so maybe that's fair.

Of course, the book was criticized—it was the first Saudi novel I'm aware of translated into English, so it was a little—it was a novelty. And of course now, there's of course, there's Raja, there's another Rajaa, Alsanea, who wrote *Girls of Riyadh*. And there's Yousif Al-Mohaimeed, and there's Ahmed Abodehman. So this is no longer—Saudis are

actually getting way, way prominent. I did a Naguib Mafouz novel— *Awlaadu Haaratena. The Children of the Alley* was the translation of the title for better or worse, very dramatic and playful with religion with a hot-button issue. Another Egyptian book by an underrated and not very well-known writer, Abd al-Hakim Qasim, no politics there, except the Muslim Brotherhood is slightly villainous in part of that. And an Iraqi book, by Āliyah Mamdū which I did partially because the Iraqi book I was dying to publish was done—Catherine Cobham beat me to it, *Al-Raj al-baid*—it was translated as I think *The Long Way Back*. Really, really, really great, great, great book that if I could turn back time I would translate it.

And I did Lebanese and Nubian books and a very—an odd little book by Emile Habiby, an Israeli-Arab Palestinian from Haifa and Nazareth, which was an intermingling of fantasy, myth, and history, and you really can't unravel, as I said an Israeli, a really quintessentially Israeli book, quintessentially Palestinian book because the loss of Palestine is what it was, was the heartbreaking, you know, heart of the book and now I am translating an Iraqi author named Najem Wali, in fact I translated it's not published the first nonfiction book I've done, which is his *Discovery of Israel*, which is a—by an Iraqi who himself is both Sunni and Shiite from his parents' different religious sects and someone who served in Saddam Hussein's army, of course he's a Shia from the south, so he was sent into Kurdistan so as not to develop sympathies with the locals, and he went to Israel and has an Iraqi perspective—"wow, soldiers everywhere, I know exactly what they're thinking and why they might not be so happy," and his understanding of that country is a perspective that I—incredibly new, and he also wrote a novel I'm translating.

My—this is a long way of saying that the diversity—and I've never even touched North Africa though I would be willing to—the diversity just within like one person's partial career of translating Arabic is just fabulous diversity and much more to do, of course.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Great. Raja.

RAJA ALEM: He was talking about writing if it's good bring fears**.** It's difficult to answer that—be sure about this but in me and my personal experience, it brings something, writing. I think definitely a literature or translation is the answer to this mistrust in the world, because our problem is not being able to open up to things. My experience with translation was—will never be only literary. It was most profoundly translation of the self. When I started a correspondence with Tom, it was very difficult for me at the beginning to open up. I would feel annoyed when Tom would ask questions. Getting into details, I would feel naked. And I didn't want him to come into my world, because my world was so special for me. It's more related to our tradition about the Sufi books influenced by both the style of the Qur'an, which is not about the hero, it's about the transformation—the letter or the line could take or lead to. So I started—this is not perfect, but working with Tom gradually I found pleasure in opening up, in exposing my mental and spiritual world, so I tried to be open.

We worked on many books, and there were scenes where I felt Tom was maybe taking them like comically, they were translated comically, but it took us time to find the tune,

to reach a now understanding each other to the extent that he wants me to go fishing and I want him to understand my prayer and so on. **(laughter)**

So this comes to us through writing, and I think we are exaggerating about their fear, because either we like it or not, the world is moving gradually to establishing a new uniglobal language, it might be English because people are shifting closer, bringing their inheritance of culture and way of thinking, through this daily translation of art, science, and literature on the Internet. I feel if we are in, we this generation the last generation to suffer from difficulties in translation or any form of communication. Because for example yesterday, I was walking in Times Square, and suddenly I looked around and found people all engrossed in their mobiles, texting or being texted, while all these huge screens exhibiting messages and images, I felt for a moment as if we were transferred into a new world where there's no barriers, because this new generation who are working on the new modern way of communication, they are transferring, they are going beyond barriers.

And I think people like those who are now with us on the panel, those are the bridges to reach to a world where there is no fears, so I myself feel literature changed me, because now when I look at my Arabic writing, I see things I could not see before I were writing in English. English language for me was like a reincarnation into a new mind that could throw a different light on our life in Arabic. I could reach—after writing in English and I went back to write in Arabic again, I could reach more readers either in my tongue or in other tongues, so I believe in art and literature as ways to open up to the world.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Great, and now to Tom.

TOM MCDONOUGH: I'm going to read something, because that's what I know how to do. My brother, who's a university professor, said only Oxford dons read stuff at this sort of thing, so you can call me Don. **(laughter)** This will be about eight minutes and it's called "A Guide to Translation." People say "you translate Raja's books, you don't speak a word of Arabic, what are you talking about?" So I have superpowers. Actually the short answer is that Raja and I share experiences. If you want to know the details of how we work together, you can read the introductions for the two books we've done so far, or you can join me now and take part in an experiment that's part of the research for our next book, which is about fly-fishing, which Raja mentioned.

You think this is a stretch? We'll see. We will together translate an experience, a story, not just plugging in cognates for words lined up in a row, but conveying an experience in words. The experience may be foreign to you or mystifying. The aim of the experience is to pin down the distinction between thinking and feeling in two languages at once.

You have glanced at fly-fishing on TV. Maybe you know somebody who does it. You rightly assume that people who have this experience favor certain exotic rituals or beliefs, certain strange values. Your task is to connect the intricate machinery of the story with feelings that strike readers as recognizable and moving. Sometimes the job will be easy, even obvious. Other times you will be blinking and groping for the light. Okay,

translation, collaboration, fly-fishing: these are intimately connected, as we shall rigorously demonstrate. Remember, this is about Raja and me. So here we go.

Exactly one week ago, an old friend of mine went to Maine, in the northeasternmost part of the United States, to fly-fish for landlocked salmon. The salmon are considered the gamest of all fish, the most gallant, the sleekest and heart-stoppingly acrobatic. Their flanks are bright silver with flecks of black, as if they're dressed in formal clothes. My friend had a strict Catholic upbringing, so he refers to salmon as the one true game fish. **(laughter)**

Now the thing about fly-fishing for salmon is you can't just cast and hope as in ordinary civilian fishing. You have cajoled your family. Your wife has scolded you, "You like to fish because you like to be alone." So unfair. You have driven ten hours to the wild and beautiful river you have dreamed about for so long and you are alone with your desires and now you can knock yourself out and go wading aimlessly all over the map or you can do the smart thing and hire a guide.

No, you can't just cast and hope. The guide therefore, plays the part of Scheherazade. This is about Raja and me. The guide's name was Ian. Ian's hands were mashed, his fingers were stubby, many times broken and mended, a prizefighter's mitts. In manner, he tended to be slightly lit up, as though he'd been smoking weed, though he was way beyond that. He came from a distinguished New England family, had two degrees from Princeton, and for a while he practiced as a family therapist. He righted himself by

helping to actualize the dreams of freshly minted innocents, his clients. Ian was a very white man who'd worked his way into what was in this remote part of Maine, still an Indian world. He was fond of quoting, many times during the fishing day, Melville's words about Captain Ahab: "Nay, the captain is not sick, but he is not well." **(laughter)** The remark was flip but not insouciant. It invoked the insanity of pursuing the perfect fish and the grave peril in which all pursuers sooner or later find themselves.

So the guide is Scheherazade. He insinuates that there is reason for hope, that you must trust life to bring more life and stand your ground against despair. With determination and invention, not to mention desperation, the stories go on forever. Nor do they have to have any particular point, unless you count the telling of the stories as a point in itself, the point being the moral leverage the storytelling exerts on the audience, who, in Scheherazade's case, happens to be a disgruntled sultan who reserves his right to exercise the ultimate critical option—decapitating the storyteller. Now that would be a massive inconvenience, not to say a failure of imagination. There is no necessity for killing so long as we keep listening. This is the epic promise of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

This amnesty is extended by the way to salmon who must be released as soon as they are caught, a practice that for a few hyperpoetic souls turns mere sport into pure desire, pure striving, like the kind of writing some of us find ourselves doing. In fly-fishing, as in *A Thousand and One Nights*, there is a distinct narrative strategy. It is called guidespeak. Ian spoke it fluently. By the end of the day, he told my friend, "by today at dusk, when we come to the last pool in the river, the mayflies will be hatching, the salmon will be

rising, and you will have a shot at catching them on a dry fly. And it's okay to cheat here, we can translate this literally. It means "today there is a fair chance that you will be having more fun than when you were a boy with your first girlfriend in your first convertible on a warm midsummer night." **(laughter)**

So the guide maneuvers the boat to the middle of the river. He shook the frost off the tip of a rod and cast a gaudy fly called a streamer into the current. He twitched it for a few seconds in imitation of a baitfish. He handed the rod to my friend, my friend felt a tingle in his wrist, a small salmon jumped clear of the water. They moved downstream, anchoring in promising pools, hooking fish of average size every twenty minutes or so. The more fish my friend caught, the more cinematically he could see them. The sixth one jumped, to his eyes, in slow motion. You can learn with a good guide that the way to look into the water is to practice letting your eyes relax just to this side of blindness.

By ten thirty, the sun was glaringly bright, which made the salmon shy. There was a long silence in the boat, a sullen confusion. "Nay the captain is not sick, but . . ." Ian glanced at his watch, time for the ten-thirty bite. A big fish struck, somersaulting half a dozen times. Now my friend was thinking Ian had supernatural powers. It was one thing to speak eloquent guidespeak, it was something else to summon fish at will, to command the waters. But, after all, it's a matter of betting the odds, like Scheherazade. Ian bent over a little plastic box containing his secret collection of flies tied by himself, stroked them contemplatively with his finger stubs. He pulled on the oars to negotiate a deafening run of rapids. He dropped anchor again upstream of an inky whirlpool.

“Moby-Dick lives here,” he said. Over the past few years in this very spot, three of his clients had hooked a huge fish. The fish had bolted upstream like lightning. Once, only once the fish jumped, and they saw it. It was big. How big? Ian spread his arms in the universal fishermen’s metric of “big.” Continuing to narrate the tale, only without words, he selected a fly from his secret plastic box and tied it to the gossamer nylon leader at the end of my friend’s line. The fly was no bigger than an eyelash or a comma in 12-point Courier. Watching Ian handle the tiny fly with his pork chop fingers—“this is just not possible,” my friend thought. “The equipment is absurdly wrong.” He felt he was watching a conjuring act.

“Cast just behind that boulder,” Ian said. My friend cast just behind that boulder. The fly slithered underwater and disappeared and when it had drifted far enough downstream to straighten out the line, my friend gave it a tug; he felt a thump, a profound alarming pause. Before he understood what was happening, the salmon had run downstream the length of a football field. The line vibrated. Ian stared at the line with priestlike gravity. “He’s going to strip your reel. You hold up the anchor. We have to chase him. Remember to bow.”

The rule when playing a salmon is to give him slack when he jumps. The gentlemanly way to give slack is to bow in the direction of one’s opponent, as to royalty, or a god. The fish, aware of Ian’s game plan, raced back upstream and sped past the boat. He was at the tail of the rapids now, flashing in the water, and when the line tightened again, he vaulted

skyward, spiraling incredibly like a tossed silver football. He was very big. My friend bowed. The fly came free and flew back in his face. My friend's heart broke. Numbly, he patted his throat in search of the fly, being careful not to tug at it and hook himself. He studied the fly for a long time. Eyelash, comma, escaped slave from an ant colony. He knew there were flies half the size of this one and they worked. True.

Sometimes, he told himself that his heartbreak was trivial, but this was not true. Even more miserably he thought, well, heartbreak, trivial or tragic, is the common denominator of memorable stories. He smiled at his own sigh. There came a moment when he calmed down enough to truly see the fly. It was all there, everything, the brittle antenna, the fuzzy thorax, the many, many legs, a concoction of feathers and a mote of rabbit fur. Its proper name was obscure—"caddis nymph size 16," but in fact it was the thing itself, the mot juste. The promise is that life is open ended.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Very nice. Thank you. **(applause)** Joe. Joe Sacco, you are third.

JOE SACCO: Most of—I don't know, I mean, I'm a cartoonist, so my work is done with drawings and prose put together. And at some point I felt compelled to go to the Middle East and compelled to write about the Palestinian issue. I mean, it's something I had to do. Initially what I decided when I was thinking about the Middle East and the Palestinians I was thinking, "how am I going to approach this subject?" And one of the first things I did was read human rights reports. There's an organization called Al-Haq,

and I read these things and I thought, what I'll do is illustrate these testimonies of what life was like under the occupation. And on further really examining it, I thought, "this testimony, which is really courtroom quality, would be really dry for the average person. Not just dry, but sort of overwhelm them with horror." And I thought, "this isn't the way to go about this," and I decided I'd go myself and spend time with the Palestinians and not approach them as Victim with a capital V. That was always a worry, that even when you read about these things, you're obviously impressed by how people are suffering and all this, but there's more to life, even under suffering.

So I went and I spent a lot of time and through the drawings what I try to do is show something of their lives. So, for example, a very typical situation I wouldn't know a guy—I just met a guy, and about an hour later we're in his home and I'm meeting his family and they're feeding me. This is a very typical thing with Palestinians, they're—I mean, they're known for their hospitality. And obviously, I mean, my, my—I'm trying to find out what's going on with the occupation, so I'd be asking a lot of questions, and in the drawings, the way I approach it is to have all this political stuff being in word balloons above pictures of us talking, but in—all the stuff is political above, but below in the background of the drawings, there are people holding their children, there are people—you see the layout of all the food. In other words, I'm trying to show the hospitality and show how they love their families like we love our families and not make such an issue of it.

There's something that, you know, it's funny being on a panel like this and talking about breaking down barriers. Because, I mean, I have to confess, too, that I'm a Westerner, and I always—I see things through a Westerner's eyes and sometimes things shock me that I see and I think, "how am I going to sort of put this into my story?" I'll give you one example, it's from my forthcoming book. It's about the feast, the Eid al-Adha, which is—it's the feast that sort of commemorates Abraham not sacrificing his son. And I was very fortunate to be in the Gazan town of Han-Yunes when they're having the feast and what they do—you know, like a couple of days beforehand they're bringing sheep and rams into the—down the streets and they're tying them up, and they're going to sacrifice these animals and I was with a family and they had bought a bull and the way it works—in this particular case, there were seven related families and they all put their money together to buy this large bull, and they're going to sacrifice this thing. Now, I'm a Westerner, so I need to approach this—and I'm writing for a Western audience—and I'm thinking, "this is going to make me quite queasy." Because the way I see meat—I mean, meat is supposed to come in Styrofoam, sort of, with cellophane around it and with a bar code. **(laughter)** And, you know, they're about to sacrifice a large animal.

And it was kind of horrible—I mean, for me, because I'm not used to it, and I'm—you know, I'm a weak-kneed Western person, and I approached it—I just decided, "I'm going to document this as I see it," so initially, especially, it's going to shock the reader, too. If you pick up the book maybe you'll be a bit shocked, because one of the bulls broke loose nearby and they had to sort of wrestle it to the ground in the street and kill it there. And there's always sort of the ideal, that was always repeated over and over to me. The ideal

is with one slash of the knife you kill the animal, it has to be a clean cut and maybe there's some Platonic sort of form of a beautiful killing of animal like this, but I never saw the ideal reached, because it was always a bit painful and always took time.

And it *is* shocking. The blood was literally running down the street, because everyone down the street is doing it at the same time, it's all going on at once and the butcher is—people have contracted butchers to come and do some of the killing or they're sort of amateurs and trying to figure out how to do it themselves. And the kids—unlike, say, my nephew, who would probably faint at the sight of it, the kids are literally playing in the blood. They're dipping their hands in it and then making handprints.

I want to show all this but I want to show it in a way that shows sort of the beauty of what's going on, too, because, at the same time, here are these seven families, male representatives of all the families are there, these people don't know how to—they don't really know what they're doing. But they're all going to take part. Once the butcher's done the dirty work, which I show in really graphic detail, they all lend a hand. There might be a doctor here or a lawyer or, you know, a laborer—none of these people really know how to do this in their normal lives. And they're, you know, I show them flaying the carcass and cutting off the different pieces and just going through the whole process and the kids are all there with buckets of water, sort of pouring it over the carcass so to drain the blood and to squeegee out the blood, and you realize everyone is taking a hand, it's sort of this real community event.

But it goes even beyond that, because then what they do is meticulously weigh out the portions and they have the different cuts of the meat, I'm sure there are people in the audience here who could tell me more about this than I can tell you, but—They take different cuts of the meat and that separate that and they divide that among the seven families, and they do it by lot so that no one feels cheated in any way, and I was the one who—because I was the outsider who got to choose who got what cut, or who got what portion of the meat, and then each family takes that large amount of meat that they have been given and they go home and they further divide it. They divide it into thirds. One third remains with the family, one third goes to relatives and friends, and one third is given to the poor.

And in the comic, you know, I have the woman of the house, the mother, giving a plastic bag full of meat to one of her sons, and mentioning a name of an old woman, an old poor woman who was blind, and she said, "make sure this gets into *her* hands." She didn't want any relative to intervene, it's like, "make sure she gets it," so I want to show sort of the whole beauty of it, but always taking into account that I'm a Westerner seeing this, that it makes me a little queasy somehow, but there's something about it that really is a, you know, a wonderful thing. And that's kind of—you know, that's just an example of how I try to make drawings work as a way of, you know, showing what's going on and showing the humanity of—

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Very nice. Very nice. Well, I'll ask a quick question to each of you and I promise to open the floor for your questions if you have questions or

comments. Peter, coming from Dubai and Saudi Arabia, there is, I would say, a new generation of writers who—almost they try to identify their audience mainly in the West and English readers. They want to publish in English. They look for people like you, in fact. Many of them ask me, "Do you know Peter?"

PETER THEROUX: How happy they must be when they found out that you do.

(laughter)

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Speaking of, you know, breaking down barriers in communication, creating communications with the West, and in particular the United States, is it a healthy move? Is it—it sounds to be a peculiar question, you know, but what would you make of such a trend if it's truly a trend? I mean, almost every day any writer, young writer, would like to publish in English.

PETER THEROUX: I think that's just normal and I think any—I would guess that any writer who knows what she or he is doing will write universally enough so that no matter what the dialect or the subject matter, it will be accessible to people. I've never seen a problem of writers writing in Arabic doing it any differently because they want to be read in the West. In fact, the writers I've translated, from the way they write, it's as if they have made it as impossible as it can be for it to be translated easily into English, **(laughter)** so I want to meet some of those people. **(laughter)**

This has been an issue, seriously, I know that there—not in the Arab world as I know it, but in Turkey, Turkish critics say that Orhan Pamuk, if people are familiar with his work, which is really great—they say he's not writing for Turks, this is just too high-flown. He's writing to get the Nobel Prize. Well, "this guy wants to be translated. He's writing for sophisticated readers in Europe and North America and, you know, he kind of forgot he's a Turk." I don't particularly like that argument, but the best writers are—have something universal. There's a, you know, there's a shared, a common humanity that's there in the better writers.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Naguib Mahfouz, you translated some of his great work, when he wrote *Awlaadu Haaratena* he didn't really identify Western audience to write for, and he wrote local issues, about local problems, then he became a universal novel, if I could say that.

PETER THEROUX: Correct. It was universal as he wrote it and it was serialized in those early days when it came out in an Egyptian newspaper in installment, by installment. I—maybe other people—

RAJA ALEM: I'd like to answer—

PETER THEROUX: You probably can add something, because—

RAJA ALEM: Because when the new generation writing, they want to address the West—they are not addressing the West. They're—this is the language they are used to. They are used to English. They are reading in English, so when they write, they write what they know. For example, today, when we were in East Harlem she showed us her son's room. She said, they are not decorating their room the way I used to decorate my room, photos of rock stars and so on. Because they are decorating their Facebook, the page of their Facebook, so our people, our new generation is not living in—like Naguib Mahfouz in Al-hara or in Egypt in Cairo, small Cairo, they are living in the world, that's why when they write, they write the language of the world. They are not addressing especially the West, they are addressing their generation.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: So in your case, Raja, did you find bigger audience, you know, the readership in the Arab world is among the lowest in the world. Did you find new exciting, more appreciating, more appreciation—

RAJA ALEM: It's not more appreciation. It's wider, a wider range of readers. For example, being here is part of my being translated. So, I would not be addressing you, if I'm not translated. So it's a matter of breaking, breaking walls. The more that you are translated to more languages, the more you are there in world.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Tom, any comment?

TOM MCDONOUGH: Well, I mean, I was very touched by what Joe said about being conscious of being a Westerner, or a European mind and really being fascinated by this place and these things which are exotic to us and, you know, coming as a Westerner to Arab culture with images like, you know, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in *Sinbad the Sailor* and that sort of thing, you know, which is one kind of blindness. The other kind of blindness is that it's really hard to see. When I went to Jeddah for a few weeks with my wife Wendy to—and met Raja and Sadhia, I was very frustrated, because I make a living as a cameraman, and I really couldn't see anything there, you know, not that there was much to see in the visible realm, you know. But and so then when I started working with Raja and reading this stuff, I said, "Oh, oh my. This is about Mecca," you know. I mean, how else would I get to see that? I'm not Sir Richard Burton, I'm not going to smuggle myself into the place, it's not going to happen, you know. It's forbidden, it's haram, so there's that fascination, but you know it was like a great education and I don't—

Then, when we sent the book out, the first book that we did which never got published, we sent it out, my agent got very exciting, he said, "oh, this is great, when can you get her over here, when can we start touring, yadda yadda yadda," well, he was the only other white guy on the planet who thought he could make sense of this book, so it was just too nuts. Publishers would say, "What is this?" And I would say, "Well, it's a novel about Arabia," and there was no spot, there was no place on the shelf for it. Well, there were places on the shelf for the other books, so there's a sort of incomprehension and kind of blindness, but we've had a good time.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Interesting. I want to move to a different point, Joe. Do people or some people accuse you of you know serving a political agenda in your writing? Are you afraid someone will say well, maybe you are promoting a certain agenda because you write about the Palestinians and now you are writing about Gaza, you write about Palestine. I mean, why do we write if we have in mind such a political controversy?

JOE SACCO: Well, I guess people accuse me of it, but I kind of accuse myself of it, so I feel like I do have an agenda. I'm not—I don't feel myself objective in that American journalistic way where every—both sides are going to get fifty percent of the discussion. I mean, in my own mind, I've sort of gone through it and decided that one side of the story hasn't been told very well. And I guess there is an agenda. The agenda is try to tell the side that isn't being told well and, you know, one of the reasons I embarked on this whole thing is that I have a degree in journalism and especially, you know, when I got out I was very politically minded and I had all the right opinions about Central America and about this and that, but the truth of the matter was I had my own prejudices, especially in regards to the Palestinians, and it's not—these were not overt kind of prejudices, but they were the ones you just sort of pick up from the media, which were basically anytime you heard the word "Palestinian" you had "bus bombing" with it or "hijack" or something else and to me that was my only association with Palestinians and it took a long time to sort of change my own perspective on things, and it came from reading books, from living in Europe where people have a more nuanced approach to what's going on.

So at some point I was kind of shocked, shocked at myself, but also shocked at the media, and I felt—you know, I'd studied journalism, so I felt almost let down by my supposed peers, let down in getting these perceptions, and then there was that just urge to sort of write it. I mean, the strange thing is, you know, I'm a cartoonist, so how am I going to do it? And, you know, I thought, "Oh well, what the hell? I'll try it and see where it goes," not thinking there was going to be any commercial success to it. But yeah, I had a—it is an agenda, it's to tell other people's stories or to let them tell those stories, and if that's an agenda, I'm fine with it.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Great, let's take a few questions. I think we have half an hour for questions or comments, please. Wait for the microphone, please.

Q: I'm addressing my question to Joe and I want to relate to you an experience that I had with the Eid al-Adha and the slaughtering. First, I think I should identify myself. I'm the widow of Edward Said and there was a Japanese group who asked to make a film on Edward's life. The person, the director of the film, had wanted to meet Edward, had contacted him, had made an appointment, and Edward passed away one week before the appointment, so after Edward passed away, he came to us and asked us if we would approve of making a film, and he took his *Out of Place* and followed his footsteps, so to speak, he went to Cairo, he went to Beirut, he went to Palestine, he saw his house in Jerusalem, et cetera. And we said, "before the film is going to be released, we would like to look at it." And in the film there was a big section in the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp

in Lebanon and one of the picture was the Eid al-Adha and how they slaughtered the animal for the Eid.

And when I looked at it, it was for me the first time I looked at it. An ordinary scene—I grew up in the Middle East, when we were kids they used to do this, et cetera, but then I had another thought—I said to myself, "in the West people will view this in a totally different way. It will be viewed as 'look how, you know, they butcher the animal, et cetera, et cetera,'" and I asked them to remove it and the associate producer was a Syrian who lived in Japan and he disagreed with me and he said "it had a beauty to it, you should leave it." But I insisted.

But then I analyzed about it afterwards. Was I censoring them? Was I building barriers? Was I doing this because I lived in the West and began to see it from a Western point? So it is sometimes—you know, how shall I put it?—do we become more complicated when we move from one place to the other and create barriers, or—I don't know. I mean, I don't know what I'm basically trying to ask.

JOE SACCO: I appreciate that very much, actually. I appreciate that.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: That's a really interesting point and again it takes us back to the ideal of writing in the original language—do we write, you know, for our own audience in the Middle East or I keep in mind my audience in the United States and how can I quote unquote enhance the image of Arabs or Muslims, et cetera.

JOE SACCO: Oh, I never try to enhance the image of Arabs or Muslims, actually. I mean, there are many things that are said that I keep thinking, "well, this isn't really going to help your case with the Western audience," but to me there's a difference between being objective and being honest. And I think as a jou—I have that sort of journalistic mind that feels if you hear things enough times, you should put it in even if you think people are shooting themselves in the foot with a Western audience. But you have to show the context of why they're saying that—that's really the important thing.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Sure, but I'm concerned about the young writers in the Arab world who would write to publish in English. Do they really focus on the arts of writing itself, regardless of how people in the West will look at it? Raja.

RAJA ALEM: I think, as I was trying to say before, I try it both ways. When I write in Arabic, I'm a different person. When I write in English, I'm a different person. So I think I see things differently. Immediately when I start writing in English, I see things as if they are filtered, I know how they would be received. And why not? Why not we adopt all visions, all angles of seeing one aspect, so I think we should write with that in mind. Why not, if this would make us approachable?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Yeah, but you know, some people, some publishers, actually, or some critics are very critical of certain publishers in the Middle East who

look for certain writers in Saudi Arabia, for example, because of the *Girls of Riyadh*, opened a huge door to write about quote, unquote taboos.

RAJA ALEM: Because I see this people look at this wave—I call it a wave when there are maybe twenty books, suddenly ten, twenty novels all about sexual things, about—I don't see this as negative. I see as if it's like an explosion, as if people were oppressed and suddenly they wanted to say that we are here. Because we are raised to be like a property to the society—our bodies, our wills, our needs didn't belong to us not like in the West. You, for example, you are like individuals, when you go do things, you do things for yourself. But we, when we are in a public scene representative of the society. What the new generation now is doing is they are claiming their individuality, and they are expressing this in their books. So I see this as a very positive wave, it's like breaking the surface to allow the wave to calm down and bring more of the real thing.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Even if *Girls of Riyadh* sell more than your books?

RAJA ALEM: Yeah, even so. I was frustrated when it was selling more—

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: I was just teasing you, obviously.

RAJA ALEM: I know, but it's a positive sign.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Peter, do you agree?

PETER THEROUX: Yeah, I agree. I am familiar with *Girls of Riyadh* and its publishing history and how it's sold. The criticism—we know what the criticism is—it's a trivial book. Well, there can't be chick lit? Like, you know, Arabs can't—young Arab women can't write for other young women around the world who lead very similar lives? I mean, they're mostly wealthy and privileged and it didn't reflect the Arabian Peninsula or the Saudi Arabia that people expected to see. Well, you know, it's another voice that's out there. I think it's positive, too.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Okay, let's take—wait for the microphone, please.

Q: I will confess to being a little confused. Early on this evening you said that the readership in the Arab world was very, very low. We here in the West hear that many things are directed to the street in the Middle East. Who exactly are these young Arab writers writing for in the Arab world?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Like the young writers in the Arab world, whom do they write to? Am I correct?

Q: Are they writing to just the privilege few who are literate or to what are often referred to as the streets of the Middle East?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: All right, let's take one more question before we go back to the stage. The lady.

Q: I'm an educator and an arts educator and I would like to know the panel's response to what efforts do you think should be undertaken to introduce more American children to the joyous writing in the Arab world and how can we get the schools to integrate your rich work as part of a curriculum?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: I think I will embarrass Anna and ask her to talk about her fascinating experience teaching high school students here in New York the Arabic language. Microphone.

ANNA SWANK: Hi again. So, this is the first year of this but Friends Seminary, which is a Quaker school here in New York has just started an Arabic language program, which is the first of its kind in a private school in New York, so besides teaching Arabic language, we are trying to incorporate Arabic culture as well. Of course, the question on everyone's tongues at the beginning was, "How will you confront politics in the classroom?" So when you're teaching language, obviously, the response is pretty simple, "well, no, we're going to deal with nouns and verbs and adjectives here."

But in the culture class, the task has been to focus on arts, and so the curriculum that we're devising, we travel around the Arab world, going to each place, and it's an activity that is cultural and not political—no history, and sometimes they complain, you know,

the twelve-year-olds, “We’re done with Iraq? We didn’t talk about the wars!” “Well, no, we’re not going to talk about the wars here, we’re going to watch a movie.” So I think it needs to be indirect when you’re dealing with that age group, you know, say, “Okay, we will do Iraq, we’re going to watch one movie. Now we’re talking about Syria, we’re going to make hummus. We’re doing Lebanon, we’re going to listen to a song.”

So it’s a work in progress, and we’re hoping that other schools will catch on to this as well, but I think that, as you work in arts education, I think doing it through the arts is really, really key at this point, especially when you’re wanting to start with younger and younger children. So, hopefully, we’ll see this trend catch on.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Very nice, very nice, any more questions?

RAJA ALEM: I’d like to answer the question of the gentleman who said—you were asking who are they addressing, the new generation. I think I put myself in their place. When I started, when I was in Mecca, I was a teenager, I started publishing when I was in high school. I don’t know when you ask me now why you started writing. I wanted to cross. When you start writing, when you start art, when you start doing anything, you want to cross. This is what everybody now is trying to do, to cross, to themselves, to each other, to the world, because we are part of this. So I cannot say they are addressing the West or addressing the East, they are addressing themselves first.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Tom.

TOM MCDONOUGH: I would love to sell as many books as *The Girls of Riyadh* sold, I wouldn't have to write anymore. But I've got to say I could not read that book. I'm much more old-fashioned than Raja. I'm happy there's a wave of frankness, but the person who wrote that book, in my estimation, is not a writer. But I have to say that also I was very aware in trying to sell the books that I was doing with Raja, I became aware of certain things, the certain spectrum of books from the Arab world, or *about* the Arab world, that American publishers could *get*, you know, like, when you pitch a movie, you do a two-sentence thing. The first book of course was Abused Arab Woman Tells All. We've all read that book, you know, and I frankly think *The Girls of Riyadh* is a version of that. But and there are a few of those and then there was the nonfiction book, which is really What Arabs Think, Why They Think It, and What They Should Be Thinking, you know. **(laughter)** So, but apart from—if your book could not be put in that slot, if it was a strange story about seventeenth-century Mecca, you know, there was this—it didn't matter how it was written, I think, it didn't matter, that's my take on the market, you know. But I think there are, you know, good writers out there writing about this material. And good as a friend of mine said who is in publishing, "good is good," so we have hope.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Isn't it in the some ways, the process of marketing books, a few months ago I was in Dubai with Ibrahim Al-Koni who is one of the most prominent novelists in the Arab world, and he was working actually in the same area where Rajaa Alsanea was, Rajaa is a dear friend, so I'm not criticizing her, but that was what happened, like, literally tens of journalists and people were rushing after Rajaa Alsanea

but Ibrahim Al-Koni**,** few people recognized him. And I told him about the idea of marketing the books. I think we are in an age of marketing, and bestseller culture doesn't reflect the quality of writings, but it sells at the end of the day.

TOM MCDONOUGH: It's like movies, I mean, I make my living in the movie business. I'm not going to argue about the numbers, and I think really what we're talking about. We're all kind of serious writers and serious artists here, in the case of people like that, serious people, we're talking about numbers that are so small that really why are we doing it? We're doing it because we're just throwing ourselves off the cliff and flapping our arms and seeing what's going to happen, you know, we're just doing it. I've got no objection to making lots of money, you know.

PETER THEROUX: May I add a postscript there? One of the upsides of the success of that book, which I agree, I don't know if that's really an emerging great new talent behind the *Girls of Riyadh*, but the people who published that book have learned a lesson, which is, "we can make money doing this," and they will do more of it. When—at the time of Naguib Mafouz won the Nobel Prize, I swear, you know, because I had done the first volume of Munif's series and got it published, but the publishing wisdom was still books in translation don't sell. We can't put on the front cover translated by so and so. People think it's academic, it's a schoolbook, readers resist it. Briefly, Doubleday, Jacqueline Onassis did two of my things but she got Mafouz first because she had read him in French.

Long story short, they did one book, two books, three books. They were driven by prestige, because he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. They all became best sellers. Then they're like, "Hmm, there's something in this." They started the Mafouz Project so called. Then there were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen books by Mafouz. And they told me, "We're a little bit surprised how much money we're making and feeling a little bit guilty. Can you recommend other authors? We'd like to do more authors from the Arab world and elsewhere in the world, especially women," and Laura Esquivel, a Mexican writer, a best seller in Mexico, which in other days wouldn't have excited people very much, "oh, it was a best seller in Mexico, big deal." They published that and it was a hit, and it was a movie. And so the logic, the marketing and profit logic is "keep finding authors around the globe and publish them, translate them, and promote them," so that's a pretty good benefit.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: All right, I see many more hands, now we have that microphone, go ahead, please.

Q: Since I have the mike, I can go ahead and ask my question, make it fast. Thanks for the speakers for all the comments. But I have one, in fact a couple of questions. I'm just looking at the title Breaking Down Barriers of Fear and Prejudice and I want to twist the title a little bit, how do you break the boundaries and fear from the other perspective. We are talking here about translation which is a great topic to bring in the Arab world to the Western. How about bringing the Western world to the scary Arab world that we are afraid of in the West through for example translating some, I don't know, maybe some

progressive English literature or English writings and try to—I hate the word "marketing"—and market it to the Arab world in a certain way, to do the kind of exchange of that kind.

And the other thing is I would like to thank Joe personally about—I love your work, so, and I think that's a good way of bringing the message—it's a form of translating and it's a form of breaking a kind of barrier through cartoon in addition to the written text. A third question, maybe I didn't get it, but what's the relationship of the salmon with the Arab world? **(laughter)** The story of the salmon, maybe I'm saying the thing that nobody else is saying in this room. Or the story of the salmon and the fishing. But now the challenge is to bring it back—

TOM MCDONOUGH: I said it was a stretch, didn't I?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Wait for their next book, yes. The microphone please, no.

Q: I actually just have a quick comment. I am actually a Syrian American. I was at the BEA this weekend. I am an author and I have just written a book about being one foot in the Arab world and one foot in the American world. It's a very difficult thing. I used to cry when I was younger because I would listen to Madonna and Umm Khultum and didn't know which world to fit. So I have my book, I'm going to be publicizing it, whatever. But one of the things I would ask all of you when you talk to authors, new emerging young Arab authors. I'm seeing a trend and it's a little disturbing that as

alienated as Arabs feel sometimes in the Western world, it's almost as if, as though they're almost overcompensating to become so Western to fit in because they can't stand the pain of rejection of being Arab. And we have a beautiful culture and we have great things in the West, so as you go and tour and speak to many young emerging authors, I would encourage you to make sure that they understand, if you're an Arab and you're American, to be proud of that. I'm seeing a little bit of more emerging things that show such an insecurity and "we're Arab, you know, and we do drugs, and we have sex, and we do everything," and it's very rebellious, and then you lose the beautiful quality of being Arab. So I just wanted to kind of put that out there, since you have influence, to encourage young authors to keep—and being proud of their Arab culture, that's all.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: So, another hand here, please.

Q: Because you're speaking—I mean, I know we're talking about books and book authors—but because you're speaking about the younger generation and you brought up Facebook. And I just thought an interesting thing that I've seen happen is, you know, bloggers—and it's nothing new—but bloggers from the Arab world who have been blogging in English and have been attracting the attention of Western audiences and, I mean, there's this one Iraqi female blogger whose blog turned into a book. I'm a little bit—I'm just curious if you could comment a little bit on that. Because yes, maybe we don't have maybe a culture of readers, and maybe there's always this question of, you know, these young authors when they're publishing their books who are they writing for and they want to be published in the West, but there's this whole realm of, you know, just

blogging on the Internet and people self-publishing and not really waiting for the approval of publishing houses on what sells and what doesn't, and some of them really pick up pretty well, so I just would like to hear some thoughts on that.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Before we get more questions or comments, Joe, would you like to comment on the last comment?

JOE SACCO: I'm not sure I understand how it relates to me, truthfully.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Anybody, are we talking about the using the technology now to publish?

Q: I'm talking about writers. I mean, they're not professional writers—they are young people who are blogging and retelling stories and recounting things from their lives. They're blogging in English, and there is a large number of them from Lebanon and Saudi and Egypt and Iran.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Raja, do you think this is a positive trend?

RAJA ALEM: I think it's somehow related to the question about the lady who said how about bringing the English book to the Arab world? I don't think you need to translate the English books into Arabic because all your new generation in the Arab world are reading English books. All the best seller are best sellers there also. So they do not need books to

be translated in Arabic, and if they are translated maybe they cannot read them. That's why the—

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: I might disagree with you, Raja, because the majority of—if you leave places like Dubai and Beirut, and go to places even a country like my own, Saudi Arabia, not everybody reads English.

RAJA ALEM: I think that all the teenagers now are reading in English.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Maybe that's what you see in Jeddah.

RAJA ALEM: Maybe the West is not like the East.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Maybe your own circle. Gentleman, microphone please.

Q: Hi, I'm part Lebanese, part Syrian, I was raised in the Arab culture for most of my life. Currently I've given up mental health and I've reinvented myself as an independent TV producer. I do a show with young people. And I know a lot of young Arab Muslim—it's all about youth, young people, young adults, and I've done a few shows with young Arabs and I have some disagreement with what the woman was saying in the back. You find that today in Bay Ridge and Brooklyn and so many Arab kids, they're very Americanized, but they're very conforming to their own culture in terms of the mores. They're not about to change that in terms of when they should marry, who they should

marry. They're basically Muslims and they believe in the Qur'an, so my point is—and they have the attitudes, you know, towards the Middle East, towards the Israelis, the same you know prejudices and anger. The question is how are these books going to have an effect either on their families, who are very traditionally Arabic, in changing their ways and thinking more Western? Because it's important that they do think more Western, these are the parents of Arab teenagers, and Arab teenagers themselves who are very hostile to the way they are being treated in Palestine and Gaza and the West Bank. What influence are your books going to have on young people today?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Before, I'll take one more question because the time is actually limited. The microphone, please.

Q: I know there's this strong visual culture there with calligraphy and also I believe a strong oral tradition in the Arab countries, so would there be a potential for audiobooks, for people who are not that literate but might enjoy listening to some of these books in Arabic?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Who wants to take the question?

JOE SACCO: I hope not, because they have to look at the drawings. **(laughter)**

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Well said.

JOE SACCO: Someone can answer it seriously.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: The microphone in the back row, please. We'll take a final question and then I'll leave it to each one of you on the stage to have a final word.

Q: I think we're really—I'm a jaded anthropologist that's worked in the Middle East and in the Maghreb who wishes she had enough courage to write and not just teach. I think we're really underestimating the power and the necessity of the Arab novel to an English-speaking audience. It's the only place that hasn't been colonized by the cynicism of the political and academic debate. You must show the lamb being slaughtered at Eid, because where else would you learn how a father teaches the sacrifice, the virtue, the sanctity of life to his children? And that is something that a voice of empathy and identification—the freedom of literature allows that. So many other forms of discussion don't, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Nice one. Good news is I got a good message that we have maybe an extra ten minutes, so please feel free to say anything you like to say **(laughter)** in response to all the good questions we just heard.

PETER THEROUX: Thank you for those views. I would comment to this gentleman: maybe, broadly speaking, the general work that we do collectively has a small incremental effect. I'm familiar with what you're talking about. I feel like I've seen it in Los Angeles, where I've lived longer than I've lived here, and I've seen it in the Middle

East, and I've seen it in New York, which is that you have—I'm the grandson of immigrants, also. The immigrants come and there can be a strong conservative religious effect on people which is good to a point where it—culturally and religiously they know who they are, they don't try to be something else, they don't misbehave, or whatever. There's a deleterious effect—it creates barriers, it creates ethnic, sectarian, racial hatred, so that you have, you know, Arab American parents who are extremely broad-minded but their kids will hate Jews because they watch Al Jazeera or whatever. You have this 360 degrees. Every single author I have translated, and I've only translated, you know, Arab authors. Emile Habiby was an Arab from Nazareth, Haifa, they've all had troubles with religious establishments, every single one of them. Munif, who was Saudi and an absolute atheist, Idris Ali, who was Nubian and being a black Nubian who was mad about the Aswan High Dam destroying Nubia, hates Arab nationalism and basically hates Islam also as an occupying religion in his part of the world. Habiby, yet another Communist, got into a fight—got into fights with religious people. This has been an opposition.

I mean, you can break down barriers between East and West, Arab and Jew and Christian and Europe and I think people of goodwill will always find common humanity. There's a certain bent Jewish, Christian, Muslim, where people exclude others, like "I'm the only person who's right and everybody else, you know, bad," that you just find. To the extent that Joe's work opens up Palestinian issues and tells a story, tells it very, very well, and authors like Raja or any of the authors I translate or other translators translate, opens up a society like ours to have a common understanding to where the Arab world is in literary

and cultural terms, it's the Arabian Nights and the Qur'an and a bunch of Hollywood movies and nothing else and then bus bombings and beheadings and stuff.

To tell the story bit by bit and in greater and greater detail, with more and more voices, even with the much-derided *Girls of Riyadh*, somebody who reads that book is going to say, you know, "Saudi Arabia isn't a bunch of guys in mosques, you know, who preach hatred or fly planes into buildings or something. There are people there exactly like me." And as people grow up and feel respected and more and more comfortable, they will, you know, again, they will, the message of common humanity, it does get through. I mean, my mother's people are Italian and my mother just felt dreadful that, you know, someplace like Italy that created so much beauty and art—she was sad that *The Godfather* was a big hit, until she saw it and loved it, too, **(laughter)** because she said, "People think Italians are gangsters." Among whom are Italians controversial now? Everybody eats pizza, and everybody eats hummus, and everybody in France—the biggest racists in France eat couscous and maybe that will have an effect, too. I don't know. That's my summation. I don't know.

(laughter/applause)

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: That is a really good one. But maybe, Raja, you will address the point of the pain of rejection. I mean, do young Arab writers try to write in a way to be accepted in the West?

RAJA ALEM: For me when I started being translated, I felt maybe my books would reach something because they are talking about an original world of Mecca, not everybody could cross to Mecca and see it. But I was disappointed when it didn't get the same reaction, what I expected, maybe because there are like guards to the—guards of the publishing world. They maybe assign themselves as a filter to choose what is good for the audience. So they choose what goes along with the preconceptions. That is why my book *Fatima* was published because it was about an oppressed woman. They haven't published the first book I wrote because it was about religions, about the beauty of the country, beauty of the desert, but nobody wanted to publish it, because it doesn't address what they want to hear.

So I think maybe it's our mistake, because maybe sometimes—Tom said we are serious writers. Maybe we shouldn't be that serious, or maybe the best attitude to writing or to life is like playing like children. They are serious about playing, but they are not grim, so we shouldn't be grim, and our—the problem of our world lately, in the last eight years, it's becoming more grim, about terror, about wars, about terrorism, so maybe *Girls of Riyadh* or such books are being largely distributed because they are light, they do not sing the same horrible song. So maybe we should be in the middle, not to be so grim and not to be so light, so they will reach, the new generation now are playing light, maybe gradually they'll go back to what literature is. But, after all, what is literature, what is art? I think whatever talks to us, we should take it. If the new generation find this appealing, why not?

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Tom, how can your writings influence the young according to what—

TOM MCDONOUGH: That's part of the not so sub subtext here, which is, you know what is the social effect, or social responsibility, or social weight of serious writing? And I can't speak as an Arab, but I can speak as an Irishman, **(laughter)** and I can tell you that—my writing's pretty rarified, but I'm very aware that the very best Irish writing, from Joyce to Seamus Heaney and Colm Tóibín, has coincided with the fight for Irish independence. Why, I don't know. But there are a lot of passionate poems by Yeats, one of which my grandfather is mentioned in—so I take it seriously, but I'm incoherent about it.

But I do want to respond to the gentleman who works in Bay Ridge or is from Bay Ridge. I was raised in Bay Ridge in the forties and fifties in an Irish/Italian community. There were a few Syrians there, but it was Irish/Italian. And in 1958 or so Hugh Selby Jr. published a book called *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which is about Bay Ridge. Okay? Now I was a high school student studying Latin and Greek and took literature very seriously. I wanted to be F. Scott Fitzgerald, and then I read *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. And it was written in street. Street, that's the word for it. And I can tell you that it changed *my* life, and it changed a lot of people's lives. Because it was written—I said, "My God, you can write a strong book in the language that I speak." You know, and there was a dialect, we spoke a dialect, you know? And one other response—to the lady who asked what salmon has to

do with Arab culture? I had not really asked myself that question, but in response I can say that it's powerful, it's beautiful, and it's very hard to capture.

(laughter)

RAJA ALEM: Once I told you that trouts are souls and you said yeah.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Very nice, very nice. Maybe the last word for you, Joe.

JOE SACCO: Oooh.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: That's a trick.

JOE SACCO: That is a good trick. Well, you know, I'm in a fortunate position in that the way I do things, I mean, in comic books, the good thing about them is that people see it and they think that it's going to be an easy read, it's sort of a nice entrée for people who otherwise wouldn't pick up a regular prose book. And of course I read many of prose books, and I don't want that to happen, but I've gotta say, it's sort of benefited me that people think it's just an easy way to get into the subject. And, you know, my mission is to let it seem that way, but then to really present some hard information and try to reach people in that way. And I've gotta say, you know, it's done okay. I mean, the book *Palestine* has done well to make feel that a lot of people might be—a lot of people who

otherwise might not be interested in the Middle East are getting something other than the mainstream media. Which is kind of my goal, was my goal.

SULAIMAN AL HATTLAN: Very nice, before we close the session, just to—the point you raised, the lady who asked about the salmon, also, you asked about the translation from English or from different languages into Arabic. I would say there is a new trend in the Arab world, luckily started in the United Arab Emirates. There is a trend of translation, actually, Hamid Marashi Foundation translated in one year more than four hundred books, in one year, in Abu Dhabi as well, so let's be hopeful maybe this trend will continue and will result in also good books that the young Arabs will finally go back and read in Arabic. Thank you very much.

(applause)