



Outstanding Contribution to Literature (Magazines) Award 2008
Acceptance Speech written by Margaret Obank
11th March 2008, Manchester Central Library
Speech given by Philip Sadgrove on behalf of Margaret Obank*
Publisher and editor of Banipal, magazine of modern Arab literature

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Colleagues

I am almost at a loss for words to describe the honour and pride, the exultation and excitement I feel at Banipal magazine being selected by the Incwriters judges as No 1 out of so many terrific literary magazines. Of course you know that Banipal magazine concentrates solely on showcasing and presenting authors from the Arab world in English translation. Anything to do with Arab literature – that’s us. It’s not a “normal” literary mag in that sense. But on the other hand, Banipal is here in the UK, struggling to get shelf space in book shops, to bring in subscriptions, and to hold readings, alongside all the many, many other literary magazines up and down the country.

So, to my mind there are two great rewards bestowed on Banipal by the Incwriters’ award, and that is not counting the actual reward. First is that the magazine has been recognised, selected and celebrated by our peers in literature in the UK. This is a magnificent reward. It is a real, and I feel 21st-century, credit to the literary scene in the UK that a magazine devoted to writers who write mainly in Arabic can be judged on a par with completely British and local magazines. I have the highest regard for Incwriters Society, they are doing such valuable and necessary work. Thank you so much, Incwriters.

Second, and equally magnificent, is that the Award recognises and celebrates what we have been trying for 10 years to achieve. The current issue is Banipal 30 and so this year we are celebrating 10 years of publishing. When I started Banipal in 1998, I said there were 3 reasons for doing so: Firstly, because Arab literature is an essential part of world culture and human civilisation; secondly, to deepen the dialogue between different cultures, and thirdly, for the pure joy and excitement of reading beautiful poetry and imaginative writing. These cornerstones have guided Banipal’s translation and promotion of contemporary Arab literature, we will be circulating the Arab press and all our translators and authors and editors with this news, and they will be so thrilled. Thank you so much, Incwriters.

This award to Banipal celebrates Arab literature in English translation, and also, I think, the power of literary translation. Literary translators allow different cultures to know each other and see into the each other's souls; and in that sense I do believe they are the interpreters of human values – and the true peacemakers. A special thanks to Incwriters for giving literary translators such a plug with this award.

I would now like to thank all of those who have made the continued publication of Banipal possible, not least my ever-resourceful husband, the Iraqi author and journalist Samuel Shimon, who will turn his hand to anything to do with literature. I would like to thank all our contributing and consulting editors for their support and loyalty, and all our translators.

I would also like to thank Arts Council England for supporting the magazine, and especially the two Banipal Live UK tours of Arab authors.

Finally, finally, a big thank you to Libby Tempest, our host this evening, who twice hosted Banipal's Arab authors here at Manchester Central Library on the two tours.

* Margaret is a Trustee of a new International Prize for Arabic Fiction (a sort of new Arab Booker prize) and its inaugural Prize Ceremony was yesterday evening in Abu Dhabi, at the Abu Dhabi Book Fair. It was with sadness that she couldn't attend the Incwriters Award Event but sent Philip Sadgrove to represent Banipal.

<http://www.banipal.co.uk/>
Banipal celebrates 10 years of publishing this year.