PALESTINE BOOK AWARDS

Sunday, July 12 2015

About Us | Community Guidelines | Contact Us | Events | Palestine Book Awards | Middle East In London



HOME

NEWS

ARTICLES

BLOGS

MEDIA REVIEW

REPORTS

RESOURCES

WEEK IN PICTURES

2015 Shortlist

Announced >>

Interviews ▶ Drawing her own story from Douz to Rome

Drawing her own story from Douz to Rome

Naima Morelli Sunday, 12 July 2015 14:11



Takoua Ben Mohamed



















"I don't actually read that many comic books," laughs Takoua Ben Mohamed. "And I have never set foot in a comic book fair." Don't mistake what she says for a snooty, "I don't read comic books, I only make them." Make what you'd like to see in the world, they say. More broadly, make something that embodies what you want to see in the world, whatever the medium you choose. It just so happens that the world of speech bubbles and comic strips is Takoua's cup of tea.

The Douz-born 23-year-old graphic journalist arrived at comics via an unconventional path. The masters of the genre - Joe Sacco, Marjane Sartrapi, Guy Delisle, Ari Folman – are, of course, her guides. At the same time she is used to

presenting her work in political or cultural conferences and an academic context, rather than in a more classical editorial setting. "My strips aren't bound to the comics' world per se," observes Takoua. "People come to my work through themes that are dear to their heart. They are happy to see these issues presented in a different way."

Her approach to graphic journalism can't be disjoined from Takoua's personal story. She grew up in Douz, Tunisia, under the Ben Ali dictatorship. Her father was a political opponent and had to leave the country when Takoua was just four months old. "My father figure growing up was my uncle, who was also in prison as an opponent of the regime," she explains. "For a long time I didn't know where my father was, I didn't know what he looked like. I never spoke to him on the phone because there were spies everywhere." When Takoua's father finally relocated to Italy, his family joined him.

"When I met him I couldn't believe he was my father. I'd had my uncle as a reference point, darker-skinned like me. My father is lighter and has blue eyes. I was like: 'He isn't my father!' My mother swore: 'He is your father!' [laughs]. It was hard to get used to the idea, but I never had any resentment towards him. I have always respected him." It was her father who suggested that Takoua start "Intercultural Comics", marrying her passion for drawing to her burgeoning political activism. "I took up the idea and at fourteen I created my first strip, called 'Me and My Hijab'."

Wearing the hijab in Rome proved to be a big challenge for Takoua as she was growing up. Everything, she says, started with 9/11. "I saw the attitude of the people around me changing. My sisters who wore the veil started being treated differently. After a year I decided to wear the veil as well. Wearing it on the first day of high school, two kids shouted at me: 'Taliban! Terrorist!' I didn't even know what terrorist meant back then."

Instead of discouraging her, the episode strengthened her resolve to wear the hijab. "I was only 11 years old at the time, still quite young to wear the veil. But I have always felt part of a revolutionary family, which taught us to do and say everything we wanted." One of her sisters, who is now a parliamentarian in Tunisia, was a role model.

Learning about somebody's story can prompt people to change their world view; this is the philosophy at the heart of Takoua's comics. She has first-hand experience of this. "When I was in first grade I had a classmate who was a self-declared fascist," she tells me. "As a Muslim, foreign and dark skinned, I was a pariah for him." One day he heard Takoua talking with classmates about being harassed on a bus because she was a Muslim. He grew curious and asked questions. "After school he waited for me and brought me home. I was so surprised!"

This quickly became a habit. "On our way we talked a lot. He really got to know me, beyond my outward appearance. We became friends; we even skipped school together. The friendship changed his mind about fascism. He ultimately realised that he didn't even know what it was about. He changed his opinion of foreigners." It was a discovery on both sides. "I found out that people can change. You just need to know each other's stories." Incidentally,

Latest News

Egypt army: 252 militants killed in Sinai over 10 days

The Egyptian army has killed scores of militants in the northern Sinai Peninsula within the past ten days, a military sp...



UN-backed Libya peace deal signed in Morocco

A UN-proposed peace deal for Libya was signed late Saturday in Morocco by some parties to the country's ongoing politica...



Israel releases Palestinian prisoner Khader Adnan

IMAGES

Israel late Saturday night released prominent Palestinian prisoner and hunger striker Khader Adnan. According to wi...



Turkish president pays tribute to Srebrenica dead

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has offered his condolences to the families of thousands of Bosnian civilians mur...



Egyptian journalists insist on opposing terror act

Egyptian Syndicate of Journalists has renewed its opposition to the terror act, which was prepared by the current govern...



Israel will not talk to Hamas over detained Israelis

Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon said on Friday that Israel will not hold discussions with Hamas over the two



Ghannouchi discloses attempts to eradicate Tunisian Islamists

Head of Ennahda movement Sheikh Rashid Al-Ghannouchi has expressed concern with attempts by some to return to a programm...



More Latest News:

Netanyahu approves the building of new settlements in Ramallah

Over 150,000 migrants arrived in Europe since January 2015

Egypt: 464 death sentences in first year of Sisi's rule John Kerry: Daesh biggest threat to US, not Russia Egypt to buy US surveillance equipment for \$100 million



this was the very year that Takoua started drawing her comic strips.

She is currently working on two comic books: one on the language of the media and the other on the Arab Spring in Tunisia. "When the Arab Spring started I was in Italy, but the following summer I went to Tunisia to do research and interviews. I'm interested in the political situation in the 80s and 90s. I wanted to hear the stories of those who experienced the revolution. I will connect these real life stories I collected to the main character, which is me as a child." After publishing this work, her next step will be to turn it into an animated movie. She believes that the moving image can reach a broader audience, so she is currently studying animation at the Nemo Academy in Florence.

Today Takoua is a symbol for young Tunisians abroad who use creativity as their weapon for cultural dialogue. While she is constantly flying around to participate in seminars and conferences, she didn't expect to be honoured by the Tunisian government for her work. Returning to Tunisia for the first time, in the aftermath of the revolution and after 12 years in exile, was a pivotal moment for her.

"Back then I had obliterated my past life. I couldn't remember my family back home, even if I grew up with them. Thus I also thought they had forgotten about me. But I was wrong." Despite the curfew still in place, the entire extended family was waiting at the airport. "They had travelled from south to north. They were crying and remembering all our names. I didn't expect that."

She and her family visited their old house in Douz. The place had been ransacked and was in ruins. "When we left for Italy we didn't expect to stay there. The idea was to go for a short holiday, so we left everything behind." In the inner courtyard of the house, brushing away the dust on the palm trunks, Takoua found small drawings carved in the bark. Under the desert dust, on the walls of the rooms, she found other drawings, names and scribbles that she and her siblings had done as children. "That was the only thing they couldn't take away. The house was completely empty. But the drawings remained."



Comments

Please respect and abide by our Community Guidelines when leaving comments.



This week in history...

On 6 July 1917, Arabian troops led by T. E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') and Auda ibu Tayi capture Aqaba from the Ottoman Empire during the Arab Revolt



Latest Blogs

Renewed threats against Gaza under the guise of Israeli patriotism



Israeli government funds teen camp run by Im Tirtzu-linked army

Sanctions are not the key to Iran deal; most cases show t The seven nations

been...

In-Depth Articles

Did Al-Jouf fall into

because of treason?

The Houthi victory in

the battle for the city of Al-Jouf, close to the border with Saudi

the supporters of the popular

resistance in Yemen. There have

Arabia, came as a shock to many of

Houthi hands

involved in the Iran nuclear talks are desperately trying to meet a deadline for an agreement which would curtail Iran's nuclear capability, however, Washington's refusal t...

self-serving. Obsessed with securing

their own legacy, and proving how

right they were about some long...



Tunisia needs more

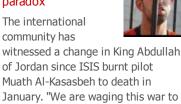


Israel's patronising



King Abdullah's ISIS paradox

on their sleeve...



Tunisians will not be intimidated Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring and remains home to the spark that ignited the entire region. The people participated in a peaceful revolution with their hearts

manipulation of Gaza's narrative



Former Israeli intelligence officer: Sisi's life will end by means of assassination

Our Regular Contributors



Dr Daud Abdullah



protect our faith, our ...

Ibrahim Hewitt



Jessica **Purkiss**



Nasim Ahmed