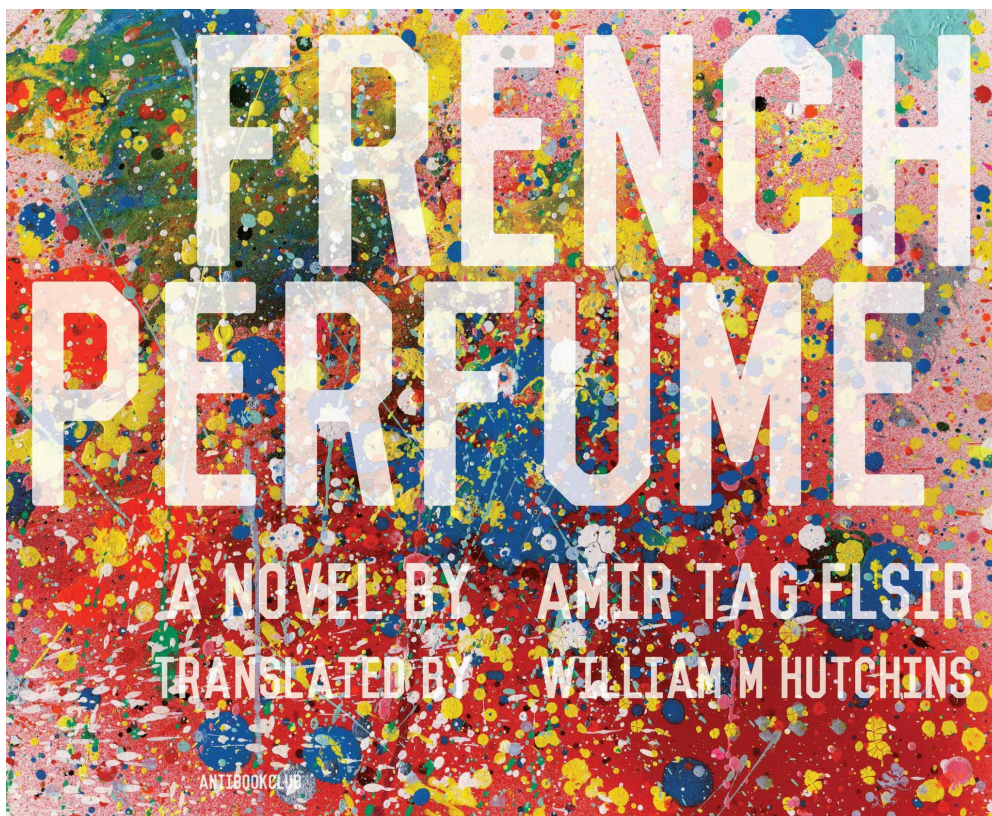




[REVIEW] French Perfume by Amir Tag Elsir

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REVIEWED BY ERIC NOONAN

Amir Tag Elsir is a Sudanese gynecologist living in Qatar; in an interview with *Arabic Literature (in English)*, he says he plans to return to the Sudan when he retires. An exilic quality in Elsir's vision, together with a stripped-down style, recently prompted a *Guardian* reviewer to claim that his novel *Ebola '76* – also published in English translation last year, by Darf – lacks empathy, and that this author writes his characters with “apparent disdain.” If this is true, then we might be excused for stating that such antipathy is an attractive feature (albeit a demanding one) of Elsir's oeuvre, because he replaces humanist values and psychological realism with an unflattering critical perspective. *French Perfume* is Elsir's fifth book to come out in English.

When Katia Cadolet, a beautiful Parisian nurse working for a relief campaign in Zimbabwe, accidentally discovers that a foreign pharmaceutical firm has been manufacturing bogus malaria pills for export to Africa, she becomes an international celebrity and embarks on a publicity tour of the continent. As Katia's arrival in the Sudan approaches, a local administrator delegates responsibility for her visit to a retired railroad maintenance supervisor named Ali Jarjar, tasking him with securing suitable accommodations for Katia in the district where he resides, a working-class neighborhood called Gha'ib (literally, “Occluded”). Ali, a “tall, plump, and almost bald” bachelor with a trail of jilted spinsters in his wake, quickly grows obsessed with “the Frenchwoman:” he trolls her online; paints his house blue – her favorite color – inside and out, along with all his

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possessions; downloads, photoshops and prints pictures of her; spends funds earmarked for her fête on bridegroom attire; exchanges wedding vows with his pictures of Katia in a secret ceremony; and finally escorts the photos into the city and introduces them as his wife, who, he says, is expecting a child. Utterly deranged, Ali is about to claim that spousal jealousy brought on his eruption into violence, accusing his victims of causing Katia to be unfaithful, characterizing himself as a cuckold (he reenacts a scene from a movie he saw in youth) – a role onto which, in his insanity, he projects the collective rage whose repository he has become, as he murders a “male jinn” in the street with a kitchen knife and stabs a photo of Katia, then gets arrested, just in time to watch the nurse herself descend from her car while he’s being driven to jail.

Ali’s running commentary on the ills of his society is the reasonable discourse of a man whose actions pierce the curtain of normalcy and expose the insane reality beyond it: “My cell phone rang briefly with what the screen termed a dropped call.” Loneliness gets the better of Ali and infects his mind, and yet he’s lucid: “Being a madman who mates with a female jinn was much better than being a madman who weds no one at all.” Ali’s plunge into homicide reflects the decline of his world, taking place along with the death of a community leader (“it was hard to fit him into the grave”), the battery of a legendary beauty (“I will kill myself before he touches me again”), the forced conversion to Islam of a Coptic Christian (“he told them he was going off ‘to die’”), the indenture into the Luxembourg porn industry of a

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young emigrant (“he realized the size of the dunghill awaiting him”), and the fraudulent appointment to government office of a candidate whose only qualification for the post is a friendship with his predecessor (“I’m only a former combatant”). William M. Hutchins has translated the Arabic text into a blend of tech jargon, social satire, translatoresque (Ali sometimes speaks like a clumsy English version of an Arabic poem), braggadocio, and storytelling that captures the dramatic and cosmic ironies at work. With its quasi-folkloric antihero, *French Perfume* is a shaky video of a society in disorder, and one hopes that more of this excellent writer’s work will appear in English soon.

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