

## BOOKS

# The lost souls of Libya

A writer's search for the truth about his missing father reveals the horrors of Gaddafi's rule, says *Duncan White*

## THE RETURN

by Hisham Matar



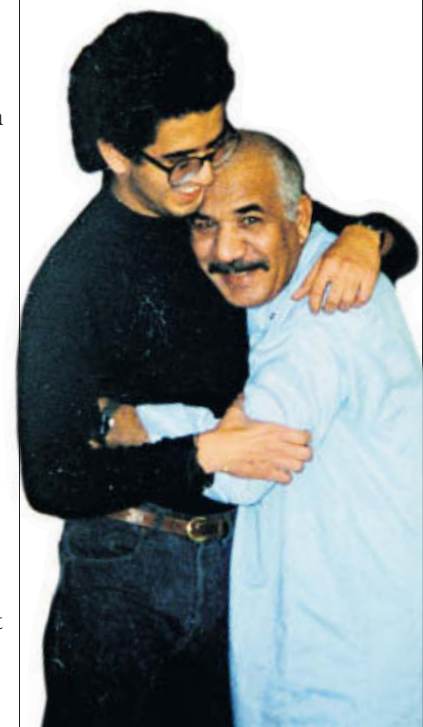
288PP, PENGUIN, £14.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

In March 2012, with Gaddafi dead and Libya transformed by the Arab Spring, the novelist Hisham Matar returned to the country he had left at the age of eight to try to find out what had happened to his father. In 1990, Jaballa Matar, a leading dissident, had been taken from his Cairo flat by Egyptian secret service agents, handcuffed, blindfolded and bundled into a car. A deal had been cut with the Gaddafi regime and Jaballa was handed over to Libyan agents at Cairo airport. He was flown by private jet to Tripoli, where he was locked away in Abu Salim, a prison known as the "Last Stop".

Matar was a 19-year-old student in London at the time his father disappeared. The family only learnt that he had been taken to Libya when Jaballa managed to smuggle out three letters and a cassette tape during the first years of his incarceration. After 1996, though, communication ceased. In retrospect this was an ominous sign, as years later it emerged that in June of that year 1,270 Abu Salim inmates were massacred in the prison courtyard. Yet just when Matar began to give up hope that his father was alive, another prisoner claimed to have seen Jaballa in 2002. When the Gaddafi regime fell in 2011, the opportunity arose to return to Libya and seek the truth about his father's fate.

*The Return* is his account of that trip and it is a truly remarkable book. From the raw materials of his anger, his suffering, and his grief, Matar has built a testament



Hisham Matar with his father Jaballa before his arrest by Gaddafi

land he used to call home. He is suspicious of "the drunkenness of return" and worries what sobriety will bring, but drinks it all in none the less.

The restiveness of Matar's mind is reflected in the digressive structure of the book, which sweeps between cities and decades often within each chapter, blending national history with family anecdotes, memories with documents. The reader is forced to construct the linear narrative of events from this apparent disorder and it is only as the book unfolds that you realise this disorder has itself been contrived and the fragments and stories are part of a coherent whole that culminates in the thrilling tension of the final act.

It is a book with a profound faith in the consolations of storytelling. Matar meets the uncles and cousins who had been sent to Abu Salim for conspiring with his father, listening to them tell of life inside the jail and the fleeting contact they had with Jaballa. From mobile phone footage he reconstructs the last days of a cousin who fought in the revolution; from family lore he tells the story of his grandfather who fought against the Italians in the first decades of the 20th century.

In one of the most important passages of the book, Matar reluctantly agrees to give a reading at Benghazi library. As people are taking their seats, an old man hands him a bound volume of a student

## 'Gaddafi organised a literary festival and arrested all who attended'

magazine from the Fifties. In it are short stories written by Jaballa when he was an undergraduate. Matar knew his father loved poetry, but had no idea that his father had written prose. He reads the stories to the assembled crowd.

One of his father's stories is about a boy who suffers a series of tragedies, but ends with his being resolved to "work and survive". The phrase is exactly the one Matar would hear in his head "with the hard force of a warning bell" at his darkest moments in the preceding decades. "I heard it when I stood at the edge of the Pont d'Arcole, a bridge in Paris, staring into the water. And I hear it still today."

Amid the frustration of his search for his father, the stories represent "a profound discovery". "They were," he writes, "a gift sent back through time, opening a window on to the landscape of the young man who was to become my father." From the silence of the past voices and stories emerge and, in recuperating them, Matar engages in an act of resistance.

Gaddafi, like all tyrants, feared writers because their narratives competed with his own (Matar himself was told he had a "red light" over his head by a member of the Libyan secret service). In 1977, he organised a literary festival and arrested all those who attended. It is telling that when the regime finally



fell, more than 150 newspapers were published in Benghazi alone. *The Return* is an act of defiant remembering, an artistic rejection of the official lies and elisions of the Gaddafi regime. In his pursuit of justice, Matar sets his deliberate and elegant sentences against the senselessness of the totalitarian.

Essential to Matar's work is that those sentences are written in English. While Arabic was his first language, he was born in New York City (where his father worked for the Libyan Mission to the United

Nations) and after fleeing Libya he attended British and American schools in Cairo before going to boarding school in England. He attended Goldsmiths College and has been based in London since.

English is his second language, then, but one with which he has lived and worked for most of his life. He says writing in English affords him a certain distance, helping him to be "restrained", even when writing about the most traumatic subjects.

There is much with which

father of the protagonist is a dissident who disappears, yet this is Matar's own experience heavily refracted through fiction. In writing *The Return*, he forces himself to imagine what his father went through, to tame the rage he feels coursing through him "like a poisoned river".

The one thing he cannot do is visit Abu Salim prison. There are many gripping twists and turns in this book, but no definitive resolution. Matar still does not know what happened to his father, but the evidence strongly suggests that he was murdered during the massacre at the prison in 1996. Documentary proof has been destroyed and the search for witnesses proved fruitless. There is not even the hope of finding Jaballa's remains: the bodies of the victims were initially buried in mass graves, but were later exhumed, ground up and poured into the sea.

Yet for Matar there is a strange kind of consolation in believing he was killed that day. "I have always preferred to think of him dying with others," he writes. "He would have been good with others. His instinct to comfort and support those around him would have kept him busy. If I strain hard enough, I can hear him tell them, 'Boys, stand straight. With hardship comes ease. With hardship comes ease.' Those other options of him dying alone – those terrify me."

The story of the pursuit of his father turns out to be a way of telling the story of Libya itself. The grinding cycles of hope and despair are writ large in the history of the country. When Gaddafi staged his coup in 1969, Jaballa was imprisoned for a few months, along with other high-ranking military officers, but he remained hopeful the new regime would build a modern society to replace the insular monarchy that had succeeded brutal Italian colonialism. Gaddafi's cruelty did profound damage to Libya's self-esteem, but the revolution in February 2011, the year before Matar returned to the country, offered a new generation hope.

This is the tragic irony of *The Return*. All the plans for a new stable Libya, the modest ambitions of the ordinary Libyans he meets, sit in the shadow of what author and reader know is coming. "I had never been anywhere so burdened with memories, yet also so charged with possibilities for the future, positive and negative, and each just as potent and probable as the other.

The entire country was poised on a knife-edge. In less than two years, the streets of downtown Benghazi, around the hotel where I lay striding into the ceiling, would become a battleground. The buildings, now occupied with families and their secrets, would stand as ghostly skeletons, charred and empty."

The situation is again bleak. Warring militias and theocratic mercenaries of Isil are battling for control. Those Libyan newspapers that flourished in the spring of 2012 are gone and the targeted assassination of foreign journalists means few risk reporting on what is happening. Once again Libya's story is at risk of going untold.

# At home with the Wildes

Can Oscar Wilde's fate be traced back to the easy-going chaos of his early family life, asks *Matthew Adams*

## THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF WILDE

by Emer O'Sullivan

512PP, BLOOMSBURY, £25, EBOOK £21.99



★★★★★

Emer O'Sullivan sets out her stall at the beginning of her absorbing and uneven book: "Biographies of Oscar Wilde typically treat him in isolation. He is seen as an outside personality and everything tends to be reduced to personal terms. What gets overlooked is the vibrant and tumultuous milieu in which he grew up."

In *The Fall of the House of Wilde*, O'Sullivan wants to redirect our attention to that milieu in order better to understand the figure it produced. Accordingly, the picture she paints of Oscar is accompanied by portraits of his parents, William and Jane Wilde; of the political and cultural life of Britain and Ireland; and of friends, enemies and loved ones.

William Wilde, the leading eye-and-ear surgeon of his age and a highly influential author of works of folklore, medicine and archaeology, was a prodigy of industriousness and intellect. He was also kind and loving, but susceptible to recklessness in matters of the purse and the bed. His death burdened the family with terrible debt; he had several illegitimate children; and, in a foreshadowing of the crisis that would befall his famous son, he was dramatically diminished by a court case arising from accusations of sexual misconduct – in his case, rape. Oscar's mother, Jane, was an active Irish patriot, an advocate for women's rights, and an accomplished poet.

The home that Jane and William provided for Oscar and his siblings, Willie and Isola, was characterised by a passion for curiosity, conversation and freedom of thought. Oscar was regularly exposed to the bohemian literary dinners that his parents held at their house in Dublin, and O'Sullivan suggests that it was there that he began to acquire the conversational brilliance and intellectual confidence for which he would later be renowned. When we find Jane, herself a dazzling speaker,

Behind it all, it is possible to see a latent desire to self-destruct



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declaring that as a family "We are above respectability!", we might easily be listening to Oscar.

The qualities cultivated in Oscar by his parents, together with the foibles he learnt and inherited from them, also help to enrich our understanding of the great calamities of his life. For Oscar, and for the reputation of his family, these were damning events, and their attendant mysteries have been puzzling biographers for generations. What drove Oscar into the arms of so volatile and damaged and bullying a character as the young Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie")? Why, when he discovered that Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, had left a card on which he accused Oscar of "posing as sodomite [sic]", did Oscar take the disastrous decision to sue the marquess for libel? How did he manage to endure his sentence of two years' hard labour? And why, after Bosie had cost him his liberty, career, health, reputation and family, did he persist in returning to him?

Such questions are essentially unanswerable, but O'Sullivan's book draws interesting links. In Oscar's sexual recklessness, we see the example of his father. In his decision to sue Bosie's father, and in his resolution to face trial, imprisonment and disgrace, we see a determination to protect his lover, coupled with courage and a hatred of injustice that is reflected in his mother's immense capacity for forbearance and protectiveness. And behind it all, it is possible to see a latent desire for self-destruction that smouldered in the soul of his father, burned in the heart of his brother, and flickers ominously in Oscar's work and conversation.

The broad focus of *The Fall of the House of Wilde* means that O'Sullivan's account of Oscar's life frequently feels rushed. When she does pause to reflect on his sensibility, it is often to emphasise his shortcomings: his vanity, his thoughtless treatment of his devoted wife, and his tendency (of which O'Sullivan makes too much) to form relationships with people he believed would be of professional and emotional use. Oscar is made to look more calculating than he was. It also diminishes the affective force of his fall.

When in the 1890s he embarked on the legal proceedings that would lead to his ruin, Oscar had two popular plays running in London and was lauded in Britain, America and on the Continent. Within a few years of imprisonment, he was living in exile: destitute, lonely, unable to write, isolated from his family, beset by anxiety and panic attacks, shorn of all joy, enthusiasm, courage. "I am finished," he said to a friend. "I hope the end will come quickly." And come quickly it did.