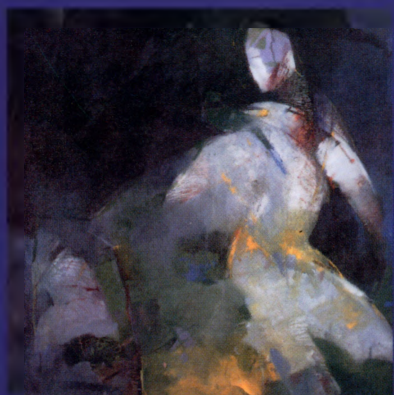


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# The Secret Life of Saeed

## the pessoptimist

*by Emile Habiby*

*translated by Salma K Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick*

*"An entertaining and thought-  
provoking minor classic."*

—Kirkus Reviews

I S R A E L



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*by Emile Habiby*  
*translated by S.K. Jayyusi and T. LeGassick*



Interlink Books

An imprint of Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.  
Northampton

This edition first published in 2003 by

**INTERLINK BOOKS**

An imprint of Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.  
46 Crosby Street, Northampton, Massachusetts 01060  
[www.interlinkbooks.com](http://www.interlinkbooks.com)

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Habibi, Emile.

[Waqa'i'al-gharibah fi ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi al-Nahs al-Mutasha'il. English]

This secret life of saeed the Pessoptimist / Emile Habiby ; trans. by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick.—1st American ed.

p. cm. — (Emerging voices)

ISBN 978-1-56656-415-1

I. Jewish-Arab relations—Fiction. II. Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. II. LeGassick, Trevor.  
III. Tide. IV. Series.

PJ7828.B53 W313 2001

892.7'36—dc21

2001039601

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Cover painting "Woman," 1988, by Masudul Hassan,  
courtesy of The Royal Society of Fine Arts, Jordan National Gallery of Fine Art,  
Amman, Jordan.

This English translation is published with the cooperation of PROTA (the Project of Translation from Arabic); director: Salma K. Jayyusi, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

To request our complete 40-page full-color catalog,  
please call us toll free at 1-800-238-LINK, visit our  
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# *BOOK ONE: SAEED, THE ILL-FATED PESSOPTIMIST*

So, you men!  
And women!  
You Sheikhs, Rabbis, Cardinals!  
You, nurses, and girls in factories—  
How long must you await  
The postman with those letters  
You so anticipate,  
Across the dead-dry barriers?  
And you, you men!  
And you, women!  
Don't wait still more, don't wait!  
Now, off with your sleep-clothes  
And to yourselves compose  
Those letters you so anticipate!

Samih al-Qāsim





One:

## Saeed Claims to Have Met Creatures from Outer Space

In his letter to me, Saeed, the ill-fated Pessoptimist, pleaded. "Please tell my story. It is surely as weird as the story of Moses's staff, the resurrection of Jesus, and the election of the husband of a lady bird to the presidency of the United States.

The fact is I've disappeared. But I'm not dead. I wasn't killed at the border, as some of you imagined. Nor did I join the guerrilla movement, as those who knew my virtue feared. Nor am I rotting long-forgotten in some jail, as your friends may suppose.

Now, now! Patience, please! And don't ask, "Who is this 'Saeed' fellow?" Or, "Since he drew no attention throughout his life, why should we give him any now?"

All right. I know my place. I'm not one of your so-called leaders, someone thought worthy of notice by an elite. What I am, my dear sir, is—the office boy!

Didn't you just break up at that Israeli joke about the lion that sneaked inside the offices of the executive committee of the *Histadrut*, the Labor Union Confederation? First day it ate the director of union organization, but not one of his colleagues noticed. Next day it devoured the director of Arab affairs, but the rest didn't miss him.

So the lion went on roving happily about, munching contentedly. Finally it ate the office boy, and then they caught it right away.

Yep, I'm that office boy, honored friend. So why didn't you notice I'd gone?

No problem. What matters is that my disappearance, for all its weirdness, was something I'd been expecting all my life. Anyway, the miracle did occur, fine sir, and I did indeed meet with creatures from outer space. I'm in their company right now. As I write to you of my fantastic mystery, I'm soaring with them high above you.

Now don't be a skeptic. Don't say the Age of Miracles is past. What makes you always get things upside down?

By those heavenly hosts with whom I abide, I swear this age has got to be the strangest since the destruction of those errant ancestors of ours, the peoples of Aad and Thamood.<sup>1</sup> But we're used to the wonders of today. Why, if our forebears were to arise and hear the radio, see television, and witness a jumbo jet landing at an airport, spitting and roaring in the pitch-black night, they would think us polytheists for sure.

But we're used to these wonders. We don't raise an eyebrow if kings are deposed or if they stay. Brutus is no big deal now, no subject worth writing about. "Et tu Brute," indeed! The Arabs certainly don't say, "Et tu Baybars"; Qutuz,<sup>2</sup> the sultan this hero Baybars murdered, could only, after all, mutter a grunt in Turkish. And now our great hero Abu Zaid El-Hilaly<sup>3</sup> bends to kiss royal hands. But the sultans have no cause for concern. "I'm no Qutuz," say the kings. And their slaves repeat, "This is no age for Baybars!"<sup>4</sup>

The moon is closer to us now than are the fig trees of our departed village. You accept all these wonders—why not mine too?

Easy there, easy! Don't press me for more details yet. Everything in its own time. Please don't pester me with questions about my companions, how they look, dress, organize, and think. Oh, it all makes me feel so superior! I now know what you don't. Why shouldn't I put on airs?

As for why they chose me alone of all God's creatures—well, I'm not sure I am the only one ever to meet with them. When I asked them what they would think of my informing you of what has happened to me so that the world might know, they just smiled and

said: "We have no objection. But the world won't find out. Your friend won't believe you. You see, all that descends from the sky is not necessarily divinely inspired. This itself is one of your 'miracles.' "

So, although I might not be the only one, I most certainly have been chosen by them. And you too, my fine friend, are chosen as well. I have selected you to relate my weirdest wonder of all. You may well puff with pride.

Why did they choose me? Because I chose them. I spent my whole life searching for them, waiting for them, relying on their protection, until meeting them became inevitable.

You find this peculiar? Never mind. In the so-called Age of Ignorance, before Islam, our ancestors used to form their gods from dates and eat them when in need. Who is more ignorant then, dear sir, I or those who ate their gods?

You might say: "It's better for people to eat their gods than for the gods to eat them."

But I'd respond, "Yes, but their gods were made of dates."

## Two:

### Saeed Reports How His Life in Israel Was All Due to the Munificence of an Ass

Let's start at the beginning. My whole life has been strange, and a strange life can only end strangely. When I asked my extraterrestrial friend why he took me in, he merely replied, "What alternative did you have?"

So when did it all begin?

When I was born again, thanks to an ass.

During the fighting in 1948 they waylaid us and opened fire, shooting my father, may he rest in peace. I escaped because a stray donkey came into the line of fire and they shot it, so it died in place of me. My subsequent life in Israel, then, was really a gift from that unfortunate beast. What value then, honored sir, should we assign to this life of mine?

I consider myself quite remarkable. You've no doubt read of dogs lapping up poisoned water and dying to warn their masters and save their lives. And of horses, too, racing the wind bearing their wounded riders to safety, only to die of exhaustion themselves. But I'm the first man, to my knowledge, to be saved by a mulish donkey, an animal unable either to race the wind or to bark. I truly am remarkable. That must be why the men from outer space chose me.

Tell me, please do, what makes one truly remarkable? Must

one be different from all the rest or, indeed, be very much one of them?

You said you never noticed me before. That's because you lack sensitivity, my good friend. How very often you have seen my name in the leading newspapers. Didn't you read of the hundreds imprisoned by Haifa police when that melon exploded in Hanatir Square, now Paris Square? Afterwards every Arab they found in Lower Haifa, pedestrian or on wheels, they put in jail. The papers published the names of everyone notable who was caught, but merely gave general reference to the rest.

The rest—yes, that's me! The papers haven't ignored me. How can you claim not to have heard of me? I truly am remarkable. For no paper with wide coverage, having sources, resources, advertisements, celebrity writers, and a reputation, can ignore me. Those like me are everywhere—towns, villages, bars, everywhere. I am “the rest.” I am remarkable indeed!

## Three:

### Saeed Gives His Ancestry

Saeed, the ill-fated Pessoptimist—my name fits my appearance precisely. The Pessoptimist family is truly noble and long established in our land. It traces its origins to a Cypriot girl from Aleppo. Tamerlane<sup>5</sup>, unable to find room for her head in his pyramid of skulls, for all its reported dimensions of 20,000 arms length by 10 high, sent her with one of his lieutenants to Baghdad, where she was to clean herself up and await his return. But she made a fool of the man. They say, and this is a family secret, that this was the cause of the infamous massacre. Anyway, she ran off with a Bedouin of the Tuwaisat tribe named Abjar, of whom a poet has said:

*Abjar, Abjar, son of Abjar,  
Divorced his wife when he couldn't feed her.*

He divorced her when he found she had deceived him with Loaf, son of Hunger, from the Jaftlick lowlands, who in turn divorced her in Beersheba. Our forefathers went on divorcing our grandmothers until our journey brought us to a flat and fragrant land at the shore of the sea called Acre, then on to Haifa at the other side of the bay. We continued this practice of divorcing our wives right up until the state was founded.

After the first misfortunes, those of 1948, the members of our

great family became scattered, living in all of the Arab countries not yet occupied. And so I have relatives working in the very Arabian Aal Rabi court, with posts in the Bureau of Translation—both from and into Persian, I might add. And I have one who has specialized in lighting the cigarettes of different kings. We also had a captain in Syria, a major in Iraq and a lieutenant-colonel in Lebanon. The last mentioned, however, died of a heart attack when the Intra Bank there, the country's biggest, went bankrupt. The first Arab to be appointed by the government of Israel as head of the Committee for Distribution of Dandelion and Watercress in Upper Galilee is from our family, even though his mother, so they say, was a divorced Circassian girl. And he still claims, so far unsuccessfully, distribution rights for Lower Galilee too. My father, may he rest in peace, did many favors for the state before it was founded. These services of his are known in detail by his good friend Adon (Mr., that is) Safsarsheck, the retired police officer.

After my father fell a martyr on the open road and I was re-deemed by the ass, my family took the boat to Acre. When we found that we were in no danger, and that everyone was busy saving their skins, we fled to Lebanon to save ours. And there we sold them to live.

When we had nothing left to sell, I recalled my father's behest to me as he breathed his last, there on the open road. "Go," he had said, "to Mr. Safsarsheck<sup>6</sup> and say to him: 'My father, before his martyrdom, sent you his compliments and asked you to fix me up.' "

And fix me he did.



## Four:

### Saeed Enters Israel for the First Time

I crossed the border into Israel in the car of a doctor affiliated with the Arab Salvation Army. He used to flirt with my sister in his clinic in Haifa. When we emigrated to Tyre, in Lebanon, we found him awaiting us. And when I came to suspect what was going on between him and my sister, he began treating me as his dearest friend. Then his wife began to fancy me.

One day, the doctor asked me, "Can you keep a secret?"

I replied, "Like a star over two lovers."

"Then hold your tongue, for my wife won't hold hers."

And so, for my sister's sake, I held mine.

When I revealed to him my desire to sneak into Israel, he promptly volunteered to take me in his car. "It will be better for you to go," he said.

"And for you too," I responded.

"God bless you then," he said.

And my mother did bless us farewell.

We reached Tarshiha just as the sun and the villagers were abandoning it. The Arab guards stopped us. When the doctor showed them his papers, they greeted us warmly. I still felt scared though. But the doctor joked and swore with them, and they laughed and swore back.

In Maaliya we slept. But before dawn I awoke to hear whispering

coming from the doctor's bed nearby. I held my breath and made out a woman's voice whispering that her husband would not be awake that early. I told myself that this could not be my sister since she as yet had no husband. So I went contentedly back to sleep.

We lunched at the home of that woman's father in Abu Snan, which was at that time in no-man's-land; that is, it was territory frequented only by spies, cattle merchants, and stray donkeys.

They hired an ass for me and I rode it down to Kufr Yasif. This was in the summer of 1948. And it was riding this donkey as I descended from Abu Snan to Kufr Yasif that I celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday.

They directed me to the headquarters of the military governor. I entered it still riding the donkey. It proudly mounted the three steps at the building's entrance. Soldiers rushed towards me amazed. I shouted, "Safsarsheck, Safsarsheck!"

A fat soldier ran toward me shouting, "I am the military governor, dismount!"

"I am so-and-so, the son of so-and-so," I replied, "and I shall only alight at the door of Mr. Safsarsheck." He swore at me violently but I shouted, "I claim sanctuary with Adon Safsarsheck."

But he merely cursed Mr. Safsarsheck.

So I dismounted from the donkey.



# The Secret Life of Saeed the pessoptimist

by *Emile Habiby*

translated by *Salma K Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick*

WINNER OF ISRAEL'S PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

**T**his contemporary classic, the story of a Palestinian who becomes a citizen of Israel, combines fact and fantasy, tragedy and comedy. Saeed is the comic hero, the luckless fool, whose tale tells of aggression and resistance, terror and heroism, reason and loyalty that typify the hardships and struggles of Arabs in Israel. An informer for the Zionist state, his stupidity, candor, and cowardice make him more of a victim than a villain; but in a series of tragicomic episodes, he is gradually transformed from a disaster-haunted, gullible collaborator into a Palestinian—no hero still, but a simple man intent on survival and, perhaps, happiness.

The author's own anger and sorrow at Palestine's tragedy and his acquaintance with the absurdities of Israeli politics (he was once a member of Israel's parliament himself) are here transmuted into satire both biting and funny.

**Emile Habiby** was one of Israel's best-known Arab journalists and writers. He has published several highly acclaimed novels and plays and his work has been translated into German, French, and Hebrew. He died in 1998.

**Salma Khadra Jayyusi** is one of the Arab world's most distinguished literary personalities. She is widely known for her poetry and literary criticism. **Trevor LeGassick** is a scholar and professor of Arabic literature at the University of Michigan.

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WORLD FICTION

\$12.95 (in Canada, \$20.50)

Cover illustration by Masudul Hassan  
Cover design by Juliana Spear

ISBN 1-56656-415-8



9 781566 156415 1