

Awardee: Emily Nasrallah

Writer, Lebanon

Emily Nasrallah is one of the most well-known writers in the Arab world. In her works written for adults and children, she has found a poetic language to describe everyday life in war-torn Lebanon. In this way, she has contributed over the years to reconciliation between the different populations in Lebanon. Besides war, her main themes are the life of village women and migration. Her first novel, *Birds of September* (1962), is not only read regularly in Lebanon's schools today, but is also considered a classic of Arabic literature.

Born in 1931, Emily Nasrallah grew up in a Christian family in a village in southern Lebanon. After studying education at the American University in Beirut, she worked as a teacher, then as a journalist and freelance writer. In 1962, her debut novel, *Touyour Ayloul* (*Birds of September*), was published and went on to receive three Arabic literary awards. In addition to novels, essays and short stories for adults, Nasrallah has also published seven children's books. Her writings' mainly focus on village life in Lebanon, women's emancipation efforts, identity issues in the Lebanese civil war and migration. Many of her books have been translated into other languages, including English, Spanish, Dutch, Finnish, Thai and German. Although her home and possessions were destroyed in various bomb attacks during the Lebanese civil war, Nasrallah refused to go into exile. Together with a group of female writers, described as the "Beirut Decentrists", the mother of four remained in Beirut, where she still lives today.

Many of Emily Nasrallah's books examine the lives of women who, in their quest for equality and free personal growth, are torn between the restraints of family and village on one hand, and the freedoms of a more urban lifestyle on the other. While her characters often fight against established social constraints, they also struggle to find alternative social alliances. For example, *Al-Rahîna* (*Das Pfand*, 1974/ German edition 1996) tells the story of Randa, who, as a young woman, learns that at birth her parents promised her in marriage to a powerful landowner. When she tries to escape the marriage, however, her attempts are futile. As the civil war raged in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, Emily Nasrallah's novels and short stories became pleas for help from a disintegrating society. In her award-winning children's book *Yawmiyyat Hirr* (*What Happened to Zeeko*, 1997, English edition 2001), she describes everyday life during wartime in embattled Beirut from the perspectives of a tomcat and a girl named Mona. The more distanced perspective of the cat enables the author to report in detail about the horrors of the war without trivializing.

Emily Nasrallah has participated in many international events, including the Internationale Literaturfestival Berlin in 2005. She is also one of the jury members for the Young Arab Authors project of the German-Arabic literature forum, MIDAD.

Quotes by Emily Nasrallah

“Die meisten meiner Werke entstanden unter Bombardement. Man konnte nichts machen, nirgendwo hingehen. Deshalb versuchte ich dadurch zu überleben, dass ich meinen Verstand von den Kämpfen ablenkte und mich geistig beweglich hielt. Einmal schrieb ich eine Kurzgeschichte, während wir uns im Flur versteckten. Um gesund zu bleiben, schrieb ich alles auf, was ich hörte und fühlte. Es war ein Nerventest, um zu sehen, wie lange ich einen klaren Kopf bewahren und in dieser Situation nicht in Panik verfallen würde.” (Emily Nasrallah in Nelda LaTeef (ed.), *Women of Lebanon: Interviews with Champions for Peace*, Jefferson 1997)

“Ich selbst habe immer die Vorstellung, die Literatur in Literatur für Frauen und Männer aufzuteilen, abgelehnt, ich muss aber zugeben, dass das meiste, was arabische Frauen geschrieben haben, als wichtigsten Inhalt ihre Selbstentfaltung hat: ihren Kampf um Freiheit und Gleichheit, ihre Reisen, in denen sie ihre intellektuellen und schöpferischen Errungenschaften überprüften. Sie haben über ihre Kämpfe gegen Männer, die Herren ihres Schicksals, und gegen die Gesellschaft, die ihre Person und ihre Bemühungen verniedlicht, geschrieben.” (Introduction, *A House Not Her Own*, short stories, 1993)

“Some people say that the war time should be rubbed out from our memories and be forgotten once and for all. This is their opinion; but I believe we should remember, so that we may learn a lesson, and so that the past may be a warning for generations to come.” (*What Happened to Zeeko*, English edition 2001)

Quotes about Emily Nasrallah

“Although the war is the ‘most child-hostile reality’ imaginable, there are ways to give even children an understanding of it. Emily Nasrallah has found a good solution that makes political violence comprehensible. In her novel *What Happened to Zeeko*, she describes a civil war from the perspective of a cat who understands the language of his human ‘family,’ but observes their fear from a certain distance.” (Sieglinde Geisel in her review of *Kater Ziku lebt gefährlich*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 25.05. 2005)

“Her major theme in the beginning was the role of women in Arab culture, and she proudly points out that her dreams have become reality. She herself had to fight hard for the right to go to university, and thus became a pioneering authority on women’s emancipation.” (Christine Lötscher, “Zugvögel als Symbol für die Freiheitsliebe”, *Tagesanzeiger*, 04.02.2006)

Publications (translated into German)

1988: *Septembervögel*, Lenos Verlag, Basel.

1991: *Flug gegen die Zeit*, Lenos Verlag, Basel.

1996: *Das Pfand*, Lenos Verlag, Basel.

1998: *Kater Ziku lebt gefährlich*, Verlag Nagel & Kimche, Zürich/Frauenfeld.

Awards (Selection)

1962: Laureate Best Novel / Poet Said Akl Prize / Friends of the Book Prize, *Touyour Ayloul/Birds of September*

1998: LIBBY Children's Book Prize, *Yawmiyyat Hirr/What Happened to Zeeko*

2002: Poet Said Akl Prize, *Riyah Janoubiyyeh/Southern Winds* (Essays)