



Yalo

Elias Khoury , Peter Theroux (Translation)

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Yalo propels us into a skewed universe of brutal misunderstanding, of love and alienation, of self-discovery and luminous transcendence. At the center of the vortex stands Yalo, a young man drifting between worlds like a stray dog on the streets of Beirut during the Lebanese civil war. Living with his mother who "lost her face in the mirror," he falls in with a dangerous circle whose violent escapades he treats as a game. The game becomes a horrifying reality, however, when Yalo is accused of rape and armed robbery, and is imprisoned. Tortured and interrogated at length, he is forced to confess to crimes of which he has little or no recollection. As he writes, and rewrites his testimony, he begins to grasp his family's past, and the true Yalo begins to emerge. Ha'aretz calls Yalo "a heartbreakingly beautiful book . . . hypnotic in beauty."

Yalo Details

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From Reader Review Yalo for online ebook

Arda says

The first part of this book was a bit annoying: Here is our main character Yalo being interrogated, and he tells the interrogator what he is thinking. Then he tells us that he doesn't in fact tell the interrogator what he was thinking. Then he tells us "I said those things," and then says "I didn't actually say those things." This on-again off-again was starting to get on my nerves.

Moreover, a big chunk of the book is sexual in all kinds of ways: Yalo is aroused by the lovers who park their cars next to the building he guards, and his voyeurism of their love-making stimulates all kinds of possibilities for theft, assault, and rape. We know from the get-go that the character is a rapist, but the book would continue to get on my nerves as it includes certain justifiable and excusable rape-scenes. I realized that it's all part of getting into the character's psyche and understanding his mental state of mind, but the inconsistency of narrating what's going on, together with the over-abundance of sexuality and the *GASP! Are you trying to justify rape!!* questioning were preparing me to dismiss this book...

But I kept reading. And I'm glad I kept on reading, because as Yalo tries to unravel his own doings, find his voice and search for "what really happened," "what kind of person does this make him" and "where is he coming from", Elias Khoury, despite some inconsistency, still proves to be a great story-teller.

The writer, together with the alter-egos, multiple personalities and psychosis of Yalo, journeys into the harshness of life in the aftermath of Lebanon's civil war. Deep themes are present in this book, including the inevitability of betrayal and deceit. There are also some religion and traditional inflicted themes that have to do with the perception of sin, obedience, women, and sexuality. Also, the characters go through their personal losses in their difficult battles with reality in symbolic ways. For instance, Yalo's mother is obsessively fearful that she can't see herself in the mirror anymore; his grandfather loses his sense of taste, and the girl he loves, Sherin, would have a broken voice.

Yalo not only becomes obsessive with the telling of his story, but also that of his surroundings, including his mother, a woman whose crime was that she loved a man who didn't deserve her; his grandfather the "Siryoyo" priest who could not erase sin from earth and battled with his sense of identity; as well as Sherin, the girl he believed he loved, who was surrounded with cowardly men. Yalo keeps re-narrating the story, always giving it a different edge, a different side, some sort of hope for a better ending, but the inevitability of the consequences, and the lack of choice in the matter start to get more difficult as the pages turn; and the last pages start to feel heavier and heavier, which is exactly what good books of literature are made of.

Short summary from Guernica web magazine through Amazon: Yalo is a former sectarian soldier arrested for theft, assault, and rape in the aftermath of Lebanon's brutal civil war. As torturers attack his body and mind to elicit a confession, he creates a series of new narratives, a stream of explanations that simultaneously reinforce and undermine each other by their very number. He justifies, he apologizes, he admits, he denies, and the picture we have of the events recounted becomes more and more distorted and fractured. Yet all this disorientation serves a purpose: the Guardian quotes Khoury as saying that when he started writing, he didn't know what "postmodern" was. "I was trying to express the fragmentation of society," Khoury said. "Beirut's

past is not of stability, but of violent change. Everything is open, uncertain. In my fiction, you're not sure if things really happened, only that they're narrated. What's important is the story, not the history."

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Ronald Morton says

This book is written in shadows pierced by a flashlight beam, dancing with illuminated colors. The text clogs your nostrils with the stench of pine sap, and incense, and blood and excrement. The words coat your tongue with the tastes of cuttlefish ink and sanctified wine clotted with blood and fills your throat until you choke.

This book is written in shadows pierced by a flashlight beam, but the flashlight is taken away and the hood is draped over your head and tightened around your neck. It straddles the line where laughter turns to tears and the two become indistinguishable. It is a meditation on memory and forgetting and the ephemeral spaces between waking and sleep.

This book is written in shadows pierced by a flashlight beam. It yearns for the light to be turned off, and for the empty spaces and gaps to be filled. This is a book drenched in darkness yearning for illumination.

DubaiReader says

I cannot believe I am still reading this book! (Nearly a month later).
It churns and churns, repeating itself endlessly, maybe adding a little more detail with each telling.
And the torture, I hate reading about torture; maybe I have my head in the sand but it distresses me that people can be so cruel to each other.
Mind you, the main character isn't much better, he may be a product of the Lebanese Civil War, but he's a nasty piece of work too - a rapist who doesn't even realise that what he's doing is rape.

What I'm finding truly fascinating is that, by chance, I have two different translations and I keep swapping between the two. Humphrey Davis's version is very much more poetic, it has more of an Arabic feel to it, while Peter Theroux seems to write for a more Western audience, less flowery but sometimes too direct. I'd struggle to say which version I prefer and I'm definitely spending too much time comparing them.

Just under 100 pages to go and I guess I'm going to struggle through to the end now. The book group has been and gone, so I'm just doing this for myself(?!). I need to know how Yalo will end up, though I can't say I really care if he meets a grisly end.....

16th December and I finally finished. It didn't get any better, although someone from the book group promised me it would. If Elias Khoury's intention was to highlight the fate of the lost children of a generation, then I'm sure he would have benefited from taking the chance to spend more time with his characters actually on the streets. It seems to me that this endless repetition of Yalo's story just wastes the opportunity of having someone concentrate on your book.

I'm assured that Khoury's book 'Gate of the Sun' is a wonderful read, but I think it'll be a while before I come back for more of this.

2 starts just because I finished.

Heba says

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Rida Hariri says

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Jeruen says

An edited version of this article was first published as Book Review: *Yalo* by Elias Khoury on Blogcritics.org.

A serial rapist meets a torturing interrogator in wartime Lebanon. Yet he soon realizes that the ultimate source of pain is his own head, which can cause a much greater suffering than the devices that his prisoners used to inflict pain on him. This is a novel that is heavy on passion, blood, and violence. Definitely not for the squeamish reader.

At the outset, we are introduced to Daniel, but more fondly known as Yalo. We soon learn that he is a prisoner, he was arrested not so long ago, and he is being held in a cell somewhere in Lebanon. The interrogators are trying to fish out a confession from him, and since he wouldn't cough up, they resort to

torture. Torture in this case involves feral cats, chairs, bottles shoved in one's rectum, and even psychological torture, as reflected in the episodes when Yalo is made to write his life story, as his "survival" depends on it. Without revealing how this book ends, I should say that this is a tragedy.

So, why would one want to read this novel? Well, I think the experience of reading this novel should be less about wanting to know what happens in the end (I already told you above, this is a tragedy), but more about what happens as we head to the end. The journey of reading this book is an end in itself. How?

First, this novel provides a great way to know how the mind deals with pain. There is a great difference between the mental state of Yalo when we first met him at the outset, and at the dual-bipolar Yalo that we encounter at the end of the novel. This difference is reflected in the way the narrative is structured: at the outset, an unknown third-person is narrating Yalo's story. But near the end, Daniel becomes Yalo's alter ego and narrates the story as if he is looking at Yalo (himself) from the outside. In other words, Yalo to some degree, has an out-of-body experience.

Additionally, this novel also gives a great description on the psychology of torture. The story happens within a short period of time: Yalo isn't incarcerated in that Lebanese prison for years. However, due to the things that were done to him (which I won't elaborate), the notion of time for Yalo is blurred, making what for us is an hour seem like an eternity. This novel does a good job in providing a window to the mind of the tormented, and leaves the reader deep in thought, wondering why some humans can be capable of doing these horrendous things to other humans.

A third reason why I think this was a good book was its way of handling the truth. Yalo is an unreliable narrator, or at least, the interrogators would like him (and by extension, the reader) to think. Yalo is given the task of writing his life story, which will be in essence a written confession with respect to the crimes that the interrogators want to charge him with. The interrogators tell him that "they know everything". Yes, there is a contradiction: if they know everything, then why would they want Yalo to still write it for them? However, Yalo writes his story, in fear of further torture, and every time, the interrogators tell him to rewrite it, as he "left some details". So Yalo resorts to imagination and invention. This plot device makes it really hard for the reader to determine which is real and which is fictional. To some degree, I believe that this is one way of saying that there are things in which we really cannot know what the truth is. Truth is relative, and somehow, people have the ability to make things true, at least in their heads, if they really want it to.

One final word, regarding this novel's scope. This novel isn't your broad-and-shallow type of novel: the story isn't developed by the addition of new events as time moves forward. Instead, this novel is narrow-yet-dense. As I mentioned earlier, time doesn't move forward too much here. Instead, the past is constantly dug up, memories are retrieved, confessions are elicited, and we get to know what happened sometime in the past with respect to a character page after page of this amazing narrative.

By the comments that I have given above, it is obvious that I liked this book. I cannot think of a negative aspect about this book, with the sole exception that the topic isn't really my main interest. As much as I liked the way the novel is structured, and as much as I like the way the narrative was set up, the topic just didn't pique my interest as much as I wanted it to. Hence I am giving it 4 out of 5 stars. That being said, I am open to the idea of reading more books by Elias Khoury and by Middle Eastern writers in general.

See my other book reviews [here](#).

Charbel says

Daniel, nicknamed Yalo, is accused of rape, robbery and just about anything else you can think of. He is tortured until confession and is then ordered to write down his life story. He revisits several moments of his life, dealing with subjects such as love, adultery, pedophilia, rape, treason, abandonment, heritage and just about anything else you can think of. It is dark, depressing, sad, and a total waste of time.

The characters in the book are simplistic, except for Yalo himself, who is so complex that no logical mortal mind can decipher whether he is guilty or not! The description was unattractive, and sometimes even nauseating. The plot was stale and repetitive, making the reader put down the book every 25 pages.

My biggest issue, however, was with the denouement. The book begins in the interrogation room, and proceeds to reveal what actually happened in the past, except for the fact that it does not (ouch!), and only manages to confuse the reader. Had it been approached properly, such a writing style would have been compelling, but instead, it just feels like you're reading the same thing over and over and over again with small insignificant details added each time.

Would I have felt differently about it if I had read it in Arabic?

I doubt it, for the translation was probably the only decent aspect of the book (first time ever, I know!).

In conclusion, I did not like it and I would not recommend it.

Whitaker says

Finishing this book, in which torture plays a prominent role, at the same time as the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on the use of torture by the CIA seemed serendipitous—at least to the extent of compelling me to write a review. It goes without saying that if you are at all squeamish, if depictions of a cat clawing apart a man's genitals or a broken bottle being shoved up said man's rectum make your stomach churn, then you might prefer to read something else.

Still, those should not be reasons to avoid this book. The use of torture is not gratuitous. Nor is its stomach churning effects simply used to display the brutality of the police system in Lebanon. The torture and its effects on Yalo, other than being simply themselves, are also the anthropomorphic representations of the civil war on Lebanon and Beirut.

Identity is at the heart of the fractured narrative, and the identity of the protagonist and of many others in this novel, are as equally fractured as the narrative. And, which I think is Khoury's point, as is Lebanese society. Yalo's endless revisiting of his broken past as forced confession and as a means of reconstructing a broken identity must reflect as well, surely, the attempts to reconstruct Lebanese society, to give it a new meaning and a new ending.

It all calls to mind Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, the use of shock by torture or other means to tear down and reconstruct a person or a society. Sadly, as we have not yet seemed to have learnt, it is far easier to destroy than it is to create. And, of course, given what we have learnt of the malleability of the brain and of our memories, in the face of excruciating pain, what we know breaks down to the point that we will imagine anything, say anything, believe anything, if it will just make the pain stop.

Which makes me wonder, if your torture has been successful, if it has destroyed a person's personality (i.e., driven him mad), what makes you think you can believe anything that he says is real and not simply insanity?

K. says

This was a struggle.

Yalo/Daniel is very bad at being a person and it shows.

Jennifer says

Translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux

Sometimes following an author's path from one book to another pays off. I liked it better than Gate of the Sun and I will seek out more of his work after this.

The word discursive is the perfect way to summarize this book in one word. With a supernatural ability Khoury wends you through a several dramatic almost tragic event that leaves the narrator in captivity with guards who want him to tell one story. Yalo is accused of stalking a woman and hurting her. At first I was frustrated by the story being told then the narrator being told that was not the true story. He thinks it is the story. I thought it was the story. At that point the reader does not know, and is suspended in belief and disbelief at the same time, marvelous. The frame of history mandates knowing which version of the truth is at stake, presently.

Why did the interrogator shout at him, "What is the truth?"

Should he have replied that the truth was love? But how could he talk to the interrogator of love.

Perspective can be love in one, and not the other, a shame. With platonic reminiscences, a friend tells Yalo he was called more beautiful than a girl by a pederast, something the pederast did not tell Yalo himself.

Yalo is actually Daniel George Jal'u, named by his grandfather, man who moved to Al-Qamishli in Syria at age 15. His grandfather moves to Sweden. Identity cards do not reflect reality. To avoid a labyrinth a single thread should run through the story. Creation of identity and reality is a central theme here.

In Sweden there are over 30,000 Suryoyo speakers, Yalo's grandfather reverts to his native tongue right before he dies. In Sweden.

There they speak Suryoyo in the street, and they have Suryoyo radio and television, but that's no good because a language separated from its land dies.

The theme repeats. A prose poetry interlude falls several chapters later into a strict outline; for example a vague childhood remembrance of blood and a woman and police distills into what that woman actually did right before the police arrived. In that sense narrative tension, the essence of what keeps the reader reading,

repeats, and repeats, and repeats.

Ibrahim Jabarin ??????? ?????? says

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Jen says

This is beautifully written - poetic and nuanced, I can't help but be impressed by the style and the obvious skill of the translator.

I am often wooed by a book on the strength of the language alone. Not here though - I found the story to be tedious and it left me with very little sense of the protagonist (or other characters). I'm sure this is intentional, as it plays to the overt theme of 'versions of truth' and to the deep chaos that defines Yalo. But it didn't work for me.

I was also hoping to get a fuller perspective of the Lebanese civil war, but was equally disappointed in this. Again, a reflection, I'm sure, of the themes of the book and the deliberate obliqueness of the story.

So, while I'm sure that Khoury is successful in achieving what he set out to write, I didn't take as much from it as I'd hoped.

Heidi says

Yalo tells the story of a young man who has been arrested for a series of criminal activities, including rape, robbery and illegal smuggling. While under guard (and the threat of torture), Yalo is ordered to write a confession detailing his criminal activity and instead makes several attempts to write the story of his life.

This stands as an absolutely extraordinary book and Yalo is an incredible character. His inability to adequately recall and write the story of his life serves as an excellent metaphor for the wider scenarios of internal conflict stemming from the Lebanese civil wars. Khoury also excels in portraying seriously

conflicted and multi-faceted characters, perhaps none more conflicted than Yalo himself, a man who can neither be praised nor castigated for his actions and justifications, a man who realizes almost too late the impact that his actions and motivations have for shaping his soul and the path he is destined to take in life...

Truly amazing and heartbreakng piece...
