

Roundabout of Death

Faysal Khartash

Max Weiss, Translator

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A heartwrenching and shocking work of historical fiction, Faysal Khartash's *Roundabout of Death* focuses on the human cost of Syria's civil war.

Set in the coffee shops, apartments, and street corners of Aleppo and Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, the novel follows Jumaa, an unemployed Arabic teacher who struggles to live peacefully in a dangerous city. The story revolves around death, which comes in all forms: the deaths of parents and children, the death of culture, and the death of Syrian city landscapes. These deaths are presented as artifacts of Aleppo, with its public hanging space, desecrated statues, and bombed out apartments and city squares.

The book's short chapters read like self-contained stories about Jumaa, his family, intellectual friends who pass time in cafés, and notable people in Aleppo and Raqqa, like the shabbiha militiamen who sport Russian firearms as they loom in town squares and the corners of shops, and Miss Beauties, a woman who wanders the city, and who is raped and used by intellectuals and shabbiha alike.

Khartash's idiomatic expressions and unusual sentence constructions preserve the culture and nuances of the source language, making the text and, by proxy, the realities that so many people face, accessible. Precise language elucidates the book's themes: when Jumaa experiences Raqqa under ISIS rule, he hears a car "blasting religious anthems about the virtues of jihad." This is juxtaposed with the daily blasting of bombs, which interferes with the citizens of Aleppo's daily lives. Other blasts are seen during Jumaa's stay in the city, too, highlighting its dangers—not because of bombings, but because of the religious extremism of ISIS.

Roundabout of Death is a powerful novel that takes a humane view of Syria's devastation.

GEORGE HAJJAR (May / June 2021)

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