

## The Maze of the Last One: A Novel about the Last Jewish Family in Iraq

**Mohammad al-Ahmed**

**Christopher Marrs, Translator**

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*Compromised innocence builds an intimate tale of a violent time.*

A translated work from prolific Iraqi author Mohammad Al-Ahmed, *The Maze of the Last One* examines the tumultuous postwar political climate in Iraq, as witnessed by a young boy, Mohammed, lamenting the disappearance of his vibrant Jewish neighbors. An engaging journey of self-discovery, Al-Ahmed's novel is rife with postcolonial questions surrounding memory and identity.

The Yacoub and the Dandis have been intertwined for generations. Their religious differences are rendered negligible by near-familial commitments and joint business ventures. Young Mohammed, in fact, thinks of Sanaa, the beauty next door, as an aunt, and the peace and curiosity he feels in her home is unequalled elsewhere.

Mohammed becomes intent on gathering this record after the Yacoub, fearful of encroaching violence, are forced to flee to the new state of Israel. In the Iraq they leave behind, the tombs of great Islamist scholars are uprooted over rumors of Jewish blood; those known to be Jews are killed in alleyways and at home. Mohammed is aware enough of these dangers to be sympathetic to the Yacoub's plight, but their exit still leaves a wide hole in his life that only memory can fill. Al-Ahmed skillfully weaves such dilemmas into a reluctant coming-of-age tale.

As his neighbors' books and goods disappear at the hands of careless looters, Mohammed writes down everything related to the Yacoub, from memories to rumors, all the while certain that his record can't be comprehensive: "I recorded events in my own way. I selected the events I could, picked those that were worth preserving. Were I to record everything exactly as it happened, a single hour would fill dozens of pages." His articulated resignation belies quiet despair, with readers becoming voyeurs to his awkwardly managed inner turmoil. This articulation of compromised innocence proves affecting.

At the periphery of Mohammed's inquiries is a young boy called Maccabeus, rumored to be the illegitimate son of Yehuda Yacoub, for whom many search with little success. But the secrets of Maccabeus's disappearance may change everything that Mohammed thinks he knows about the last Jewish family in his town, if not about himself. Heartbreaking final revelations will leave readers with much to mull over.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Summer 2014)

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