

## Wild Poppies

**Haya Saleh**

**Marcia Lynx Qualey, Translator**

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Syrian refugees fight to survive in Haya Saleh's moving novel *Wild Poppies*, about how brotherhood endures wartime.

Omar is fifteen. His father was martyred in a bombing. Omar and his remaining family shelter at his aunt's home. Left in charge as the eldest son, Omar waits in line for water rations at a refugee camp. His brother, Sufyan, is headstrong and evasive; his periodic disappearances raise questions. As deprivations mount, including food, medicine, and money shortages, Omar recalls his father's hunting and Sufyan's shooting prowess. He watches his brother slip away with strangers. Their mother warns them about lurking dangers, and news programs show that armed gangs are recruiting people.

After this tense opening, Sufyan recounts incidents from his perspective. The dual narration reveals each brother's motivations: both believe that they're acting for the good of their family. Both let misunderstandings strain their love. Sufyan does not realize how naïve he is; he believes himself to be adult. His involvement with religious men who promise to help him if he agrees to bring his friends to an education center signals his slow indoctrination. When it's evident that the boys are being trained to fight against "infidels," Sufyan plots his escape. A public execution and another bombing further heighten the brothers' struggle to reunite.

This poignant novel is astute in showing how the brothers' hardships steer them toward harm. Still, the boys are clear-eyed in detailing their experiences, and they learn to set their moral boundaries in time with their experiences. As they continue to experience losses because of the volatility around them, their family's courage becomes a matter of necessity.

Set during the Syrian War, the striking novel *Wild Poppies* is about the persistence of a family's bonds.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2023)

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