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## Behind the scenes: LGBT Characters in Middle Eastern Literature



By [Olivia Snaije](#)

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Bracelets from the first Gay Pride held in Beirut in 2017

It's painful and in some cases even dangerous being gay in the Arab world. Maintaining socio-cultural norms and keeping up appearances in public is of utmost importance. The result is that Arab and Muslim societies are for the most part LGBT-phobic. But homosexuality and its history in the Arab and Muslim world has been far from a straightforward issue—though it becomes, of course, a straightforward issue when it results in persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, and even execution.

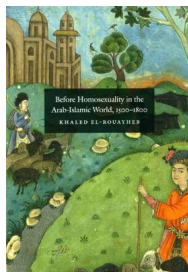
Historically, Arabic-Islamic cultures have sometimes celebrated homosexuality, and there are sources documenting this, as shown in the scholar Khaled El-Rouayheb's book, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. Gay men fleeing persecution in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries often ended up in

Morocco, and in the 20th century Tangiers became a destination for gay and bisexual men, many of whom were writers, such as André Gide, Jean Genet, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Paul Bowles, Joe Orton, and Gore Vidal.

More recently, governments have used morality as an excuse to persecute gays in order to appease growing Islamist movements, but often it is the attitude of families and society at large that is the most difficult hurdle for gay people to deal with, writes Brian Whitaker in a recent [article](#) in the *Guardian*. At the same time, the Lebanese LGBT organization [Helem](#), the first of its kind in the Arab region, is more than 15 years old, and the first gay pride event was held in Beirut in 2017.

In literature from the greater Middle East, gay characters have had varying degrees of presence. They're increasingly making appearances in contemporary literature. This reading list offers a few examples of non-fiction books for historical and sociological context and a round-up, by no means exhaustive—feel free to add other examples in the comments section—of novels with gay people as main characters, or in the periphery.

*Banner image courtesy Helem*



## Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-

By [Khaled El-Rouayheb](#)

Attitudes toward homosexuality in the premodern Arab-Islamic world are commonly depicted as schizophrenic: visible and tolerated on one hand, prohibited by Islam on the other.

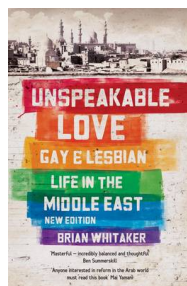
Khaled El-Rouayheb argues that this apparent paradox is based on the anachronistic assumption that homosexuality is a timeless, self-evident fact to which a particular culture reacts with some degree of tolerance or intolerance. Drawing on poetry, biographical literature, medicine, dream interpretation, and Islamic texts, he shows that the culture of the period lacked the concept of homosexuality.

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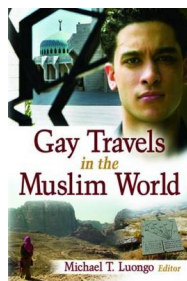
## Unspeakable Love

By [Brian Whitaker](#)

Homosexuality is still taboo in the Arab world. While clerics denounce it as a heinous sin, newspapers, reluctant



to address it directly, talk cryptically of 'shameful acts' and 'deviant behaviour'. Despite growing acceptance of sexual diversity in many parts of the world, attitudes in the Middle East have been hardening against it. Guardian journalist Brian Whitaker paints a disturbing picture of people who live secretive, often fearful lives; of daughters and sons beaten and ostracised by their families or sent to be 'cured' by psychiatrists; of men imprisoned and flogged for 'behaving like women'; of others who have been jailed simply for trying to find love on the Internet. Amid all the talk of reform in the Middle East, homosexuality is one issue that almost everyone in the region would prefer to ignore.



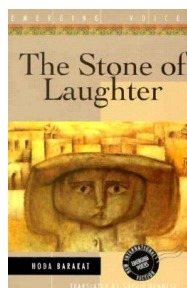
## Gay Travels in the Muslim World

By Michael T. Luongo

This thought-provoking book tells both Muslim and non-Muslim gay men's stories of traveling in the Middle East during post 9/11 times. The true, very personal tales reveal how gay men

celebrate their lives and meetings with local men, including a gay soldier's story of his tour of duty in Iraq. Insightful and at times sexy, Michael Luongo's book challenges readers' preconceptions and assumptions about both homosexuality and being Muslim, while showing the wide range of experiences—good and bad—about the regions as well as the differences in attitudes and beliefs.

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## The Stone of Laughter (Interlink World Fiction)

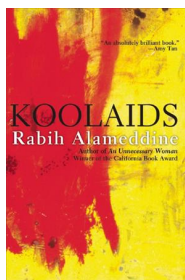
By Hoda Barakat

*The Stone of Laughter* brings forth the contradictory history of a city under fire through the life and dilemmas of a gay man. It is a bold and radical novel, full of black humor and cynical

observations about life in war-torn Beirut. In 1990, when it first appeared in Arabic, it was hailed by critics throughout the Arab world as the best novel set against the background of the Lebanese civil war. The fractured narrative is woven around Khalil, a gay man who tried to avoid ideological or military affiliations as he finds himself

confronted with the collapse of his civil society. His only contact with the world at large is through his friends at a newspaper, for whom falling bombs meant great stories rather than tragedy and destruction. Khalil struggles to keep himself away from the war but is inevitably drawn in as he realizes that in a city of war, no one can remain neutral.

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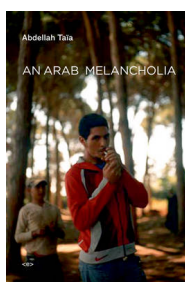
## Koolaid's

By Rabih Alameddine

In Rabih Alameddine's first novel, *Koolaid's*, he details the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the Lebanese civil war in Beirut on a circle of friends and family during the eighties and nineties,

It tells the stories of characters who can no longer love or think except in fragments. Clips, quips, vignettes and hallucinations, tragic news reports and hilarious short plays, conversations with both the quick and the dead, all shine their combined lights to reveal the way we experience life today.

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## An Arab Melancholia

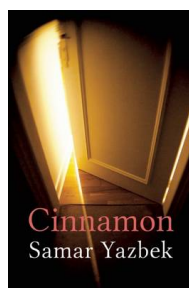
By Abdellah Taia

Moroccan author Abdellah Taia wrote this autobiographical portrait of a gay Arab man, living between cultures, seeking an identity through love and writing, spanning 20 years. Beginning in Salé, near Rabat in the mid-1980s, a

teenager dreams of being miles away from his neighborhood, a place he both loves and hates, the home at which he is not at home, an environment that will only allow him his identity through the cultural lens of shame and silence. Running is the only way he can stand up to the violence that is his Morocco. The novel traces the emergence of Abdellah Taia's identity as an openly gay Arab man living between cultures.

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## Cinnamon

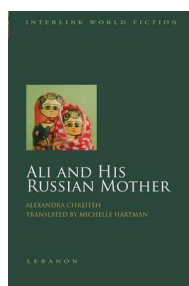


By [Samar Yazbek](#)

Known mostly for her non-fiction work, Samar Yazbek's novel treats the theme of a sexual relationship between two women, the wealthy Hanan al-Hashimi, and her maid, Aliyah. The novel opens with Hanan discovering Aliyah having sex with her husband.

Banished from her mistress's villa in the small hours of the morning, Aliyah's route back to her old neighbourhood is paved with the memories of the family she left behind and the mistress she betrayed. Exhausted by the night's events, both maid and mistress seek refuge in sleep. In their dreams, the women's memories—of troubled childhoods, loneliness, love and their lives together—combine seamlessly to narrate the story of two Damascene women's search for security and tenderness. From the tin roofed shack of Aliyah's family home, to the isolated grandeur of Hanan's imprisoning villa, the characters' recollections journey through Damascus, painting a portrait of the city in all of its contradictions: poverty and luxury, dormancy and change. *Cinnamon* is a tale from the inner world of the women of Damascus.

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## Ali and His Russian Mother

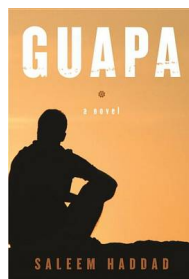
By [Alexandra Chreiteh](#)

Alexandra Chreiteh's *Ali and His Russian Mother* is at once an ordinary and extraordinary story of two young people in Lebanon. At the outbreak of the July War in 2006, the novel's unnamed young protagonist

reconnects with her childhood friend and develops a little crush on him, as they flee the bombs unleashed upon their country by Israel. Displaced, along with a million others across the country, she and her Russian mother have joined an evacuation for Russian citizens, when she again meets up with Ali, her former schoolmate from the South, who also has a Russian (Ukrainian) mother. As the two friends reunite, chat, and bond during a harrowing bus caravan across the Syrian border to Lattakia, en route to Moscow, Chreiteh's unique, comic sense of the absurd speaks to contradictions faced by a young generation in Lebanon now, sounding out taboos surrounding gender, sexual, religious, and national identities. Carrying Russian passports like their mothers - both of whom married Lebanese men and settled there - they are forced to reflect

upon their choices, and lack of them, in a country that is yet again being torn apart by violent conflict.

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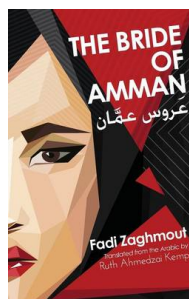


## Guapa

By Saleem Haddad

A debut novel that tells the story of Rasa, a young gay man coming of age in the Middle East. Set over the course of twenty-four hours, *Guapa* follows Rasa, a gay man living in an unnamed Arab country, as he tries to carve out a life for himself in the midst of political and social upheaval. Rasa spends his days translating for Western journalists and pining for the nights when he can sneak his lover, Taymour, into his room. One night Rasa's grandmother — the woman who raised him — catches them in bed together. The following day Rasa is consumed by the search for his best friend Maj, a fiery activist and drag queen star of the underground bar, *Guapa*, who has been arrested by the police. Ashamed to go home and face his grandmother, and reeling from the potential loss of the three most important people in his life, Rasa roams the city's slums and prisons, the lavish weddings of the country's elite, and the bars where outcasts and intellectuals drink to a long-lost revolution. Each new encounter leads him closer to confronting his own identity, as he revisits his childhood and probes the secrets that haunt his family. As Rasa confronts the simultaneous collapse of political hope and his closest personal relationships, he is forced to discover the roots of his alienation and try to re-emerge into a society that may never accept him.

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## The Bride of Amman

By Fadi Zaghmout

*The Bride of Amman*, a controversial bestseller when first published in Arabic, takes a sharp-eyed look at the intersecting lives of four women and one gay man in Jordan's capital, Amman—a city deeply imbued with its nation's traditions and taboos. When Rana finds herself not only falling for a man of the wrong faith, but also getting into trouble with him, where can they go to escape?

When Ali is pressured by society's homophobia into a fake heterosexual marriage, how long can he maintain the illusion? And when spinsterhood and divorce spell social catastrophe, is living a lie truly the best option for Leila? What must she do to avoid reaching her 'expiry date' at the age thirty like her sister Salma, Jordan's secret blogger and a self-confessed spinster with a plot up her sleeve to defy her city's prejudices? These five young lives come together and come apart in Amman.

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