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Palestinian Author Ghassan Kanafani, 45 Years After his Death Continues to Inspire



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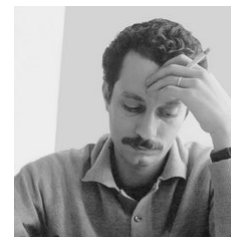
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Celebrated novelist and short-story writer Ghassan Kanafani was 36

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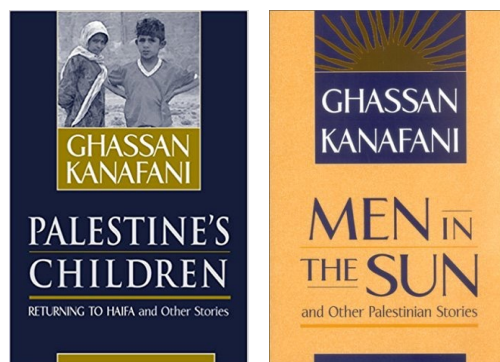
years old when he turned the key in his small Austin 1100 on a street in Beirut in July 1972, detonating a several-ton plastic bomb and killing the author and his young niece.

One of Palestine's best-loved writers, Kanafani, born on April 8th, 1936, lived a passionate, sometimes frenetic life in exile, outrunning death as he wrote short works that, as Elias Khoury says, "start at the end in order to reach the beginning, as if the tale were a stolen moment, as if an entire character could be stripped down to a single utterance before disappearing."

As a boy, Kanafani was already shadowed by death: He was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and forced to leave his Akka (then in Palestine) home in 1948, a twelve-year-old refugee. He studied literature at the University of Damascus and moved to Kuwait to work as a teacher before settling in Beirut, where he met his wife, the Danish activist Anni Høver. Kanafani spent his last decade based in Lebanon, working as a journalist, editor, and a leader in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, a prolific Kanafani, wrote, edited, mentored other writers, gave interviews, attended conferences, worked on the PFLP's political platform, and had two children. The diabetes didn't often slow his pace, although Rasem al-Madhoon writes, in his reflections on the author's life, that Kanafani once fainted during a Cairo conference for the Arab Journalists' Union. Al-Madhoon describes Kanafani as an impassioned writer who would "frequently write and tear up the pages he wrote, aspiring always for something more beautiful and expressive."

Kanafani must have struggled, as Elias Khoury did, with his roles in the political resistance and as an author. But Kanafani reportedly told a Scandinavian radio station that while, "In my political work I defend the organization to which I belong...in my stories I give my characters the freedom to express their own positions without reservation."



Some critics have said Kanafani's writing was limited by his politics, calling his classic novel *Returning to Haifa* "agitprop" whose time has passed. Yet his short works, particularly *Men in the Sun* (1963) and

Returning to Haifa (1970), continue to resonate down through the decades, inspiring engaged responses in visual art, celluloid, on the stage, and in other novels.

A film based on *Men in the Sun*—Kanafani’s classic novel of dispossession, opportunism, and migration—was released in 1972. According to its director, Kanafani was able to see the film shortly before he died. In the years following his assassination, Kanafani’s work continued to strike a raw nerve. In 1977, Israeli authorities banned the performance of a theatrical adaptation of *Men in the Sun* set to be staged in Nazareth.

But it is Kanafani’s controversial and beloved *Returning to Haifa* that continues to spark the keenest discussion, literary reaction, and re-interpretation. Haifa-based Palestinian novelist Emile Habibi railed against the novel when it first came out. Elias Khoury writes that Habibi blew cigarette smoke in his face when Khoury defended the book.

Iraqi-Israeli novelist Sami Michael’s 2005 Hebrew novel *Doves in Trafalgar* was a response to Kanafani’s *Returning to Haifa*. In Kanafani’s short novel, a five-month-old baby is accidentally left behind in Haifa in 1948 in the chaos of evacuation. The baby, Khaldun/Dov, is raised by the Israeli couple who move into the abandoned house. In their “returning,” Khaldun/Dov’s Palestinian parents are finally able to meet their son.

Michael had criticisms of *Returning to Haifa*, particularly of the women’s voices, which he felt were muted. But he told the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, that he saw himself as the abandoned boy, referring to his childhood in Baghdad, his Arabic mother tongue, and then, when he emigrated to Israel, after a flight that lasted only a few hours, he suddenly had a different identity. Michael described his relationship with the book as “like love. You can’t explain why you fell in love with someone.”

Susan Abulhawa’s popular and controversial 2010 novel *Mornings in Jenin*, written in English, also takes *Returning to Haifa* as a jumping-off point and inspiration. It too, centers around 1948, when one of the infants of the family is taken and raised as David by an Israeli Holocaust survivor.

Theatrical adaptations of *Returning to Haifa* have continued to strike a nerve. In 2011, Israeli playwright and journalist Boaz Goan told *The Washington Post* he was “shattered” by Kanafani’s short novel, particularly for how it lends sympathy both to the Israeli and the Palestinian characters. This led Goan to adapt the work into a 95-minute play, largely in Hebrew, that premiered in 2008, later traveling to audiences in the US.

Kanafani’s work has also influenced visual arts: The great Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi published a collection of work entitled *Drawings from the Land of Sad Oranges*, based on Kanafani’s short stories. Azzawi later said in an interview with *The Telegraph* that “Kanafani made me aware of the importance of being part of what is happening in your generation. You cannot be an outsider.”

Even now, almost 45 years after Kanafani’s death, his work continues to be a touchstone for engagement and anger. In 2016, the first Ghassan Kanafani Writing Scholarship was launched, and several Kanafani-inspired theatre works were staged around the world. Also in 2016, a Canadian teacher was suspended for calling Kanafani a martyr at a non-school event.

Readers around the world were robbed of Kanafani’s mature works by the bomb attached to his car in 1972, reportedly a retaliatory act by the Israeli Mossad. But while Kanafani’s life was brief, he did leave us works that are still being embraced, chewed over, argued with, and engaged in Arabic, Hebrew, English, and many other languages of the world.



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M Lynx Qualey is a court poet, roving scribe, ghost writer, and itinerant scribe with a focus on Arab and Arabic literatures. Writes for The Guardian, The Chicago Tribune, Deutsche Welle, The ...
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