From One Reader to Another

An invitation to read internationally

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writers in Translation programme, English PEN is teaming up with The Reading Agency and Free Word to invite book groups to read and discuss titles from the World Bookshelf, a unique online showcase of the most exciting contemporary literature available in English translation.

There are over 100 books on the World Bookshelf but here is a suggested reading list to get you started:

- *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt, Arabic)
- *Dreams from the Endz* by Faïza Guène (France, French)
- *Arab Jazz* by Karim Miské (France, French)
- *Compartment No.6* by Rosa Liksom (Finland, Finnish)
- *The Lady from Tel Aviv* by Rabai al-Madhoun (Palestine, Arabic)
- *Vango: Between Sky and Earth* by Timothée de Fombelle (France, French)
- *The Devil’s Workshop* by Jachym Topol (Czech Republic, Czech)
- *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* (for younger readers) by Fabio Geda (Italy, Italian)
- *Bronze and Sunflower* (for younger readers) by Cao Wenxuan (China, Mandarin)
- *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* by Saša Stanišić (Bosnia-Herzegovina, German)
- *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* by Alain Mabanckou (Congo, French)
- *The Goddess Chronicle* by Natsuo Kirino (Japan, Japanese)
- *Allah Is Not Obliged* by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast, French)
- *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim (Iraq, Arabic)
- *Morning Sea* by Margaret Mazzantini (Italy, Italian)
- *Sworn Virgin* by Elvira Dones (Albania, Italian)
- *A Perfect Crime* by A Yi (China, Mandarin)
- *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck (Germany, German)
- *The Sound of Things Falling* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Colombia, Spanish)
- *The Whispering City* by Sara Moliner (Spain, Spanish)

Share your thoughts about these books by leaving a comment on the website or by getting in touch on Twitter: @englishpen, @readingagency, @FreeWordCentre
The Iraqi Christ by Hassan Blasim

A soldier with the ability to predict the future finds himself blackmailed by an insurgent into the ultimate act of terror... A deviser of crosswords survives a car-bomb attack, only to discover he is now haunted by one of its victims... Fleeing a robbery, a Baghdad shopkeeper falls into a deep hole, at the bottom of which sits a djinni and the corpse of a soldier from a completely different war...

From legends of the desert to horrors of the forest, Blasim’s stories blend the fantastical with the everyday, the surreal with the all-too-real. Taking his cues from Kafka, his prose shines a dazzling light into the dark absurdities of Iraq’s recent past and the torments of its countless refugees.

About the author
Hassan Blasim was born in Baghdad in 1973, and studied at the Academy of Cinematic Arts. In 2004, a year into the war, he fled to Finland. As well as being the director of numerous short films and one Kurdish feature film, Hassan is a poet and short story writer with several collections published, as well as work published in magazines, websites and anthologies, including Prospect magazine and Madinah. He is a co-editor of the Arabic literary website www.iraqstory.com.

About the translator
Jonathan Wright studied Arabic at Oxford University in the 1970s and has spent 18 of the past 30 years in the Arab world, mostly as a journalist with the international news agency, Reuters. His first major literary translation was of Khaled el-Khamissi’s best-selling book Taxi, published in English by Aflame Books in 2008.

1. The Iraqi Christ is full of fascination with texts and theories of writing. Discuss how Blasim references books, reading and writing in the collection.

2. ‘A story’s a story, whether it’s beautiful or bullshit.’ The Iraqi Christ is one of the few examples of contemporary Iraqi fiction to be translated into English, yet Blasim’s characters are ‘waiting in queues to tell their stories’. What is the significance of translating a collection of fiction about and from Iraq into English? What does the book say about telling a story – both the story itself and the voice telling it?

3. Blasim intermeshes supernatural elements – a sentient dog, a poetry-teaching djinni – into the stories. How did you react to these flights from realism?

4. From a clairvoyant soldier to a forehead-tattooed extremist leader, Blasim’s deftly woven characters capture the inseparability of religion and death in 21st century Iraq. What is the significance of religion in The Iraqi Christ?

5. Which story did you like best? Why?