

# Review: 'One Day in April' by Jad El Hage

*Set during the early years of the Lebanese civil war, Jad El Hage's third novel in English explores love, freedom and forgiveness. In doing so, it transcends British expectations of Arab authors, writes Samir El-Youssef*

Krikorian, the protagonist and narrator of *One Day in April*, is a Lebanese Armenian photojournalist. This simple statement of facts evokes so many images of past and ongoing tragedies that one wonders whether a small story could possibly comprehend. But Jad El Hage's brilliantly crafted and sublimely narrated novel is neither the story of the genocide suffered by Armenians, nor the devastating war from whose thralls the Lebanon is yet to be freed. Rather it's a story of reconciliation and forgiveness; indeed, an attempt to escape the past, its grudges and hostilities.

The one day of the title is 13th April, not in 1975, the official start of Lebanese civil war, but two years later when old rivals meet to end hostilities. Krikorian and Nader, a freelance writer, are old love rivals, who have been sent to cover a wedding in a small village near the historical city of Baalbek. The wedding itself is meant to bring an end to a long tribal vendetta. It's a venture into an outlawed part of the country where tribes have their own code of conduct, fighting and making peace regardless of the state's authority. However, in a country which has been wracked with two years of civil war, this traditionally lawless land now seems quiet and civilized, so much so that members of vindictive clans have offered to solve the political problem of the whole nation. The very occasion is meant to be an example of how to overcome historical prejudices and confessional hatred. Sadly the example was not followed, but it turns out to be an opportunity for Krikorian to free himself from his grudge towards Nader, the man who had deprived him of Najla, his first love and teacher in the meaning of passion and lust.

Using an Armenian photojournalist as a protagonist and narrator might seem an exotic choice. But Jad El Hage worked and knew very well people like Krikorian as much as he knew people like Nader and Najla; the hardworking journalist among artists whose fantasies made them totally oblivious to the fragile world around them. Having dropped out of school and become a reporter at sixteen, El Hage was soon recognised as one of the remarkable generation of poets in the Arab world. He enjoyed the golden age of Beirut when the Lebanese capital became both the capital and shelter of Arabic culture. He also witnessed how the marvelous city was gradually destroyed, and how hundreds of Arab writers became nomads and exiles.

For the last three decades, El Hage himself has been on the move; from Beirut to Sydney, from Athens to Paris, and then to London, where he resided for more than ten years. In between he never stopped globetrotting. Indeed, El Hage sees Krikorian through his own nomadic life. Krikorian is a universal homeless character. Born and brought up in a country which was not his own, he could not yearn for his ancestral homeland without getting ironic or romantic. He's a photographer by talent and profession. In his eyes, the world is repeatedly reduced to a photo of a single place or incident; it couldn't easily be replaced by an imaginary homeland.

Krikorian sees the world through the lens of his camera. To be a photographer in the Lebanon, whether during its golden age or its rapid slide into war, is to have the eye glued to the camera lens, clicking away until the eye and the lens become one. Such a way of looking at the world engenders a further tension, and reveals a deeper source of rivalry, between Krikorian and his old friend Nader. Krikorian is compelled by what's visible within the frame of his lens, while Nader keeps wandering into realms of fantasy and imagination. Each faithful to his own vision and craft, the men fight over love and work.

Najla is an exhibitionist artist and she prefers Nader not because she loves him more than Krikorian, but because he is the better companion for the long run. Nader is just like her. He enjoys enough wealth and sense of belonging to play out his artistic fantasies. At the end we realise that Najla has made the right choice for both herself and Krikorian. Krikorian eventually finds the companion with whom he at least can feel at home. El Hage is no stranger to the disparity between these two ways of looking and living. A poet and novelist who had to earn his living as a reporter and broadcaster, he experienced first-hand the split between the two different visions. It's in this sense that *One Day in April* is an intellectually autobiographical novel.

Though written in English, it's very unlikely this book will receive the attention it deserves. British literary media is unwilling to show any interest in an Arabic novel unless it is about political oppression, Islamic fanatics or female circumcision. Krikorian, Nader and Najla are anything but oppressed or fanatical, and they probably have never heard of female sexual mutilation. Indeed they are the kind of people who live freedom to the full, and though they end up paying the high price of early silence or death, they seem to have made the right choice.

Samir El-Youssef is a Palestinian novelist living in England, this review was published on his blog.