

16 APRIL 2012 The Daily Star

REVIEW

What else happened on this day in history?

Jad el Hage's 'One Day in April' is marked by a fine premise and flawed execution

By Niamh Fleming-Farrell
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: History weighs heavily upon certain dates. Yet on April 13, 1977, two years into the Lebanese Civil War, the last thing on Krikor Krikorian's mind is the Ain al-Roumaneh bus massacre – the event that, history books tell us, started it all.

Instead, the Armenian-Lebanese photographer – the narrator of Jad el Hage's "One Day in April" – is preoccupied by his son's first steps and bemoaning that not only must he work, he is also being dispatched on assignment to the rural Bekaa with a journalist he hates.

Hage wastes no time hinting that the root of Krikorian's animosity is a woman and an artistic dispute. There is little doubt that for this particular character, April 13 is about to be labored with even more significance.

Hage's slim volume is the third in a loose trilogy of English-language novels the writer has produced about the Civil War. "One Day in April" is a clear attempt at excavating a number of the groups that made up, and continue to make up, Lebanon's complex society.

Koko, the nickname that Krikorian goes by, is made to be a window onto the Armenian culture of Burj Hamoud. It is a robust culture based on

the triumph of survival, albeit tarnished by a deep sadness.

In what reads as one of the narrator's most authentic musings, Koko reflects on how members of his community sing their children lullabies that detail the 1915 Armenian genocide. "Is there," he wonders, "another people who sing the saddest songs so happily?"

Koko narrates how he left school at 12 and, following his parents untimely death, was raised by an uncle with a run-of-the-mill photo shop. This relatively uneducated, working-class background is somewhat incongruous with the cosmopolitan world in which he finds himself – taking photos for a Lebanese broadsheet called "The Daily Sun" surrounded by the array of artists and eccentrics with which his work puts him in contact.

For the past two years, Koko has been documenting Lebanon's Civil War, a gruesome awakening to humanity's ability to do violence to itself. But the experience that has had the greatest impact on him took place prior to the war – his encounters with writer, filmmaker and self-proclaimed thinker Nader Abi Nader and single-minded painter Najla.

Najla was his lover. Abi Nader was the friend who stole her from him.

Koko summarizes his contemporaries – those libertine Lebanese who frolicked in Beirut's taverns and restaurants with so much ease before the war – as comprised of "sophisticated bourgeois," "weirdos" "literati" and other "arty arty" sorts.

Hage also showcases the tribal society of the Bekaa Valley.

As the book opens, Koko is assigned to accompany Nader in cov-

ering a "huge wedding" in the region. He is told the guest list is largely made up of fugitives and ex-cons who, in the chaos of the conflict, escaped Lebanon's prisons.

What Koko finds in the Bekaa is a highly informed society that lives in an idyllic natural environment, bound by its own moral codes. These folks claim they have found the solution to Lebanon's conflict. In the excitement of the wedding – and before he knows the details of the plan – Koko seems to find the idea plausible.

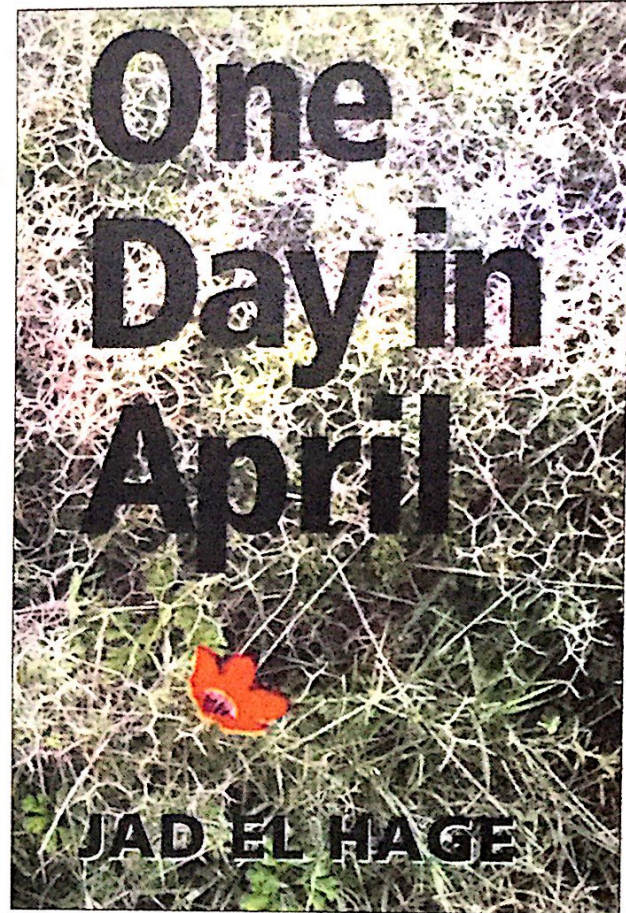
What seems wholly implausible from the outset are Hage's characters.

Koko is simultaneously a once almost friendless schoolchild, some manner of boy wonder photographer, an opportunist petty criminal – inspired by Garo, the legendary Armenian hero of the underworld – an artist, a passionate lover, and a caring father.

The narrative doesn't plumb the multiple facets of Koko's character particularly well. The tone of chest-thumping self-congratulation in his narration will be unappealing to many, and downright irritating to many more. Readers may yearn for a narrator with greater depth and fewer disparate character traits.

Hage's other characters fail to rise above trite stereotypes. Najla – the artist who captured Koko's heart only to betray him with his best friend – could scarcely be a more tortured soul. She works in frenzied stints and her every mood is governed by the state and progress of her art. From her rotating lovers to her sudden disappearance Najla is, in every way, a cliché.

Nader isn't much better. He is an archetype of psychologically fragile genius, capable of brilliance but



doomed – with a little help from his penchant for various mind-altering substances – to become lost in the minefield of his own psyche.

Though in its execution this novel is undermined by shortcomings, its central premise is a triumph of sorts.

Set on April 13, the infamous bus massacre is but a headline in the daily paper and a handful of relatives gathering to remember. On this April 13 – still

early in a conflict destined to drag on, by conventional reckoning, for 15 years – other events override the memorial.

These events will transform this day into an anniversary for other tragedies. It's a timely reminder that history has no firm hold on any particular day.

Jad el Hage's "One Day in April" (Quartet Publishers, 2011) is available in select Beirut area bookshops.