



Susannah Tarbush reviews

One Day in April

by **Jad El Hage**

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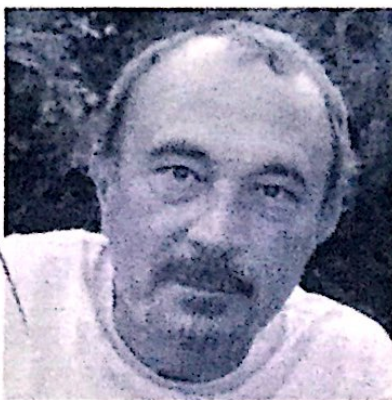
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The cruellest month

Lebanese author and journalist Jad El Hage's new novel completes what his publisher terms his "informal civil war trilogy." The trilogy began with *The Last Migration* (Panache Publications, 2002), exploring the Lebanese émigré experience in 1990s London. Next came *The Myrtle Tree* (Banipal Books, 2007), which takes the reader to a village in Lebanon early in the 1975-1990 civil war.

One Day in April is set in Lebanon on 13 April 1977. Its first-person narrator is an acclaimed Lebanese-Armenian photojournalist Krikor Krikorian – known as Koko – who works for the *Daily Sun* newspaper in Beirut. On the morning of this day the newspaper instructs Koko to travel to the Bekaa Valley where he is to meet the writer Nader Abi Nader in order to cover a big wedding. The two men are to go to a village that hosts a number of fugitives, among them former prisoners who freed themselves from Raml prison.

Koko is aghast at being given this joint assignment with Nader, "the bastard who'd robbed me of my first love". At the beginning of the civil war Koko had been close to Nader, who had studied experimental theatre in Poland, and had worked on Nader's film project portraying the Mediterranean as the "Blue Pirate".



Jad El Hage

But the friendship had turned to hatred after Koko's (and Nader's) free-spirited painter lover Najla Helou betrayed him. Najla vanished from Koko's life and Koko married Arsiné, a childhood friend and fellow Armenian. He is now the devoted father of a baby son who on that day in April

has taken his first steps. And yet “the imprint of my time with Najla still lingers inside me, a shard of unfinished business”.

El Hage has set his novel on the second anniversary of the killing of Palestinians on a bus in the Ain al-Rummaneh suburb of Beirut, a massacre widely seen as the spark of the civil war. And April is also the month in which massacres of Armenians in Turkey began in 1915. Koko observes: “April is the cruellest month indeed, the month of genocide, when Armenians throughout the world remember their massacred forefathers . . .”

As in his previous novels, El Hage delights in the details of everyday life. He brings a strong human dimension and a humorous touch to his portrayal of characters caught up in the chaos and bloodshed of the Lebanese civil war. Writers, filmmakers and artists try in vain to use their creativity to combat the growing sectarianism. The real-life restaurateur and cultural activist George Zeenny organises an anti-war arts festival in the streets of Beirut.

During his drive to the Bekaa, Koko recreates in flashback his passionate love for the notorious red-haired Bohemian artist Najla, who believed “monogamy was hypocrisy and marriage a silver coffin for cowards”. In the Bekaa, with its wild landscape, thriving cannabis industry, its outlaws, and glimpses of a so-called white witch, Koko enters a different world. He encounters a now-vulnerable Nader, and must decide how to deal with this detested love rival. He learns that the Bekaa wedding is intended to reconcile feuding tribes and that the fugitives from prison have proposals to stop the escalation of violence in Lebanon.

The narrative is occasionally overcrowded with information, as in some almost ethnographic descriptions of Bekaa life and traditions. But the reader’s interest holds right to the novel’s disconcerting, even shocking, conclusion. This is a fitting finale to El Hage’s achievement of a highly readable trilogy that gives unique visions of Lebanon and a civil war whose repercussions continue to resonate.

