

Hassan Blassim in Edinburgh at the Iraqi Reel Festival



Iraqi writer Hassan Blassim read from his second book *The Iraqi Christ*, which was followed by a lively discussion, at Summerhall last night. Blassim is known as 'The Iraqi Kafka' in his adopted country Finland, and has been called the 'Best writer of Iraqi fiction' by the Guardian.

The venue at the former Royal (Dick) Veterinary College was full to capacity, and Middle Eastern food was provided at the free event. Blassim himself spent some time outside for fresh air, and chatted about his taste for bright colours and painting his shoes bright green in a moment of boredom. At the end of the evening he signed copies of his book, which is also available on the Internet.

Blassim read from the title story of his short story collection of fiction, reading in Arabic, with an English translation on screen for the audience. He then answered questions in an English which was advanced, considering he has only been learning it for the past two years. A translator was present but rarely used.



The controversial story about a suicide bomber in Iraq known as *Christ*, ties together his aim of storytelling as expressing the human angle with his experiences of violence. He said: – "I am interested in what happened to people, and how the war affects people."

The story was a dark and troubling expression of humanity through the interplay between a bomber, the tenderness of a son towards his mother and the universal identification which

makes the unimaginable real.

His writing he said is inspired by the war, as well as literature, film and music. He has been influenced by Tarantino and the violence which he witnessed in his homeland.

South American literature and its "similar problems with dictators" is also important to him.

He explained:-"The writing is important because the war affected people in a way which is not portrayed by the media. The Iraqi people want to know. We don't know anything, only from Western media, no music or literature. I believe culture is a way for people to understand what happened, and to understand Iraq's problems. Violence is one of them, but also religion mixed in with money and oil and corruption."

Blassim said that people were not happy with Saddam's regime, nor the invasion, and that the people themselves were powerless"to change things because of power from outside. At the moment he said: – "All the TV are controlled by the militia and the political parties make people think they are free, but many people die every day. They say it's al Qaeda, they use it to blame all the problems on."

It has been a long journey for Blassim, to be able to express himself creatively, since he walked from Iraq into Eastern Europe. Blassim had to flee Iraq due to controversial views in his work, and is currently living in Finland. He said he has been advised by friends not to return to Iraq. He said:-"I left Iraq for safety reasons. Returning to my homeland would be a real threat as my friend Hadiel Mahdi, a radio presenter, whose views were seen as controversial was shot at his house by Iraqi security forces. Hadiel had wanted discussion for our country, he talked about government corruption, he asked normal questions about Iraqi people, like where does the oil money go? To the militia and mafia."

Blassim has won numerous awards in Iraq for his films, and his

current book has so far been translated into five languages. However he is modest about his achievements, and doesn't feel the praise. He said: – "When you write you feel scared, it's like the first time and you learn everything again. As a result of the positive reviews, I am able to access funding in Finland to continue my work. I want to continue making films for now."

Blassim concluded by saying: – "The Iraq War destroyed many things, but culture never dies because you can't kill hope. We have wonderful culture in Iraq, we never have a chance to show this beautiful face, but we people think it is great. We want to share our thoughts, our humanity."

The event was part of the Iraqi Reel Festival which took place in Edinburgh between 16 and 25 March and across Britain.. For more information [visit the website.](#)