

Author Michael Malone at Looking Glass Books

- ✘ Michael Malone believes he was always meant to tell Kaci's Mohand Saoud's story.

Already a writer and poet, Michael was on his way home from the bookshop where he worked one night when he stopped off at a café in Ayr. It was late in the evening, he was the only customer, and he got chatting to the North African owner. Then he went home.

Two weeks later, the organiser of his local writers' club told him that someone had been in touch, asking if Michael would write his father's life story. Michael said he was too busy. Time passed; Michael gave a talk at the club: in the audience was that same Algerian, Bashir Saoudi. Michael and Bashir met, but Michael was still hesitant; he had plenty of writing on his plate already.

Michael was at that time in touch with a psychic, Joan Charles, in connection with another book he was writing. She called one day to discuss the research she was helping him with and told him that every time she tried to email him, she typed Martin instead of Michael. She didn't know anyone called Martin. And the only Martin she could think of was Martin Bashir. The next morning, in the shop, the only book on the counter was *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon's classic text on the colonisation of Algeria.

- ✘ Michael was hooked.

On Thursday, Michael was at Looking Glass Books to introduce *The Guillotine Choice*, a story that starts in 1920s Algeria and ends – if it ends at all – in modern day Cambridge, where Bashir now lives. It is a story of a man's, and a country's, honour, suffering, oppression and ultimate liberation.

At the age of 17, Kaci was an assistant to the accountant of a hydroelectric station near his home in the village of Maillot, leading the Frenchman up into the hills on his visits to the plant. The Frenchman was known to carry gold to pay the workers; one day he was murdered for it. Kaci was the obvious suspect, and the lack of conclusive proof didn't bother his colonial rulers; he was charged with complicity to murder, but told that he could walk free if he named the real killer. The Berber code of honour is strong; family ties are everything. Kaci knew that his cousin Arab had committed the crime, but he also knew that if he spoke up, Arab would be sent to the guillotine. He chose to remain silent, and was sentenced to 20 years hard labour on Devil's Island, French Guiana.

✘ In France at that time, any sentence of over eight years was automatically doubled. For those sent to Devil's Island, this was followed by 'in perpetuity' – men were freed, but not allowed to leave the island because the French wanted people to populate it. Few others would choose to live there.

Devil's Island was a notorious place. Over 9,000 convicts were sent to it every year, but its population remained at that figure because so few survived. Transported by boat on which they were kept in a cage with no sanitation (the stronger men acquired hammocks 'an exercise in power', the rest had to lie on the floor in pools of excrement), many died in transit. On arrival, sent to barbaric logging camps in the interior, the lethal combination of yellow fever and starvation put paid to most of them within the first few months. It was, says Michael, a brutalising experience for all concerned, prisoners and guards alike.

Algeria gave the French more trouble than its other African colonies, so they practised a policy of divide and rule, encouraging disputes between Algerians to deflect criticism of France itself. They brought Moroccans to Maillot to work in the hydroelectric plant because they did not want the Algerian locals to earn any money; it is said that they wanted to turn

the country into 'a nation of beggars.'

✘ Michael does not seek to demonise the French in telling this story, pointing out that many European countries including the UK committed similar atrocities in the name of colonisation and 'development.' Many French people have praised the book and urged him to publish it in France; they say Algeria's story needs to be told, and France needs to examine its past sins.

Bashir was determined to tell his father's story, and gleaned much of it from other family members on his frequent trips home. Eventually his father relented and allowed Bashir to interview him, but there were still some things about which he never spoke.

Michael has never been to Algeria, although he would very much like to visit. In the ten years that it took Michael and Bashir to complete *The Guillotine Choice*, he immersed himself in research on the country's culture. He calls writing 'an exercise in empathy'; the most important thing is to be able to stand in another man's shoes. He and Bashir eventually decided to write the book as fiction, even though at least 80% of it is true, because there were still gaps in the story. Bashir had already written a hundred pages of the story before he met Michael, whom he chose because he admired his work 'and I can't put two sentences together.' It is a work of collaboration; sometimes Michael had to rearrange the story to make sure it held the reader's attention, but Bashir was always consulted over any changes.

He is delighted with the end product, as you can see below with a video clip of Bashir opening the first copy

[Post](#) by [The Guillotine Choice](#).

Other books have been written about Devil's Island. Henri Charriere's *Papillon* is perhaps the most famous, and was made into a film in 1973. Only one book, however, tells the story

of Bashir Saoudi's father, the story of the ultimate honourable choice made in a dishonourable world.

✘ The Guillotine Choice by Michael J. Malone and Bashir Saoudi is published by Saraband and available from Looking Glass Books.

Michael J. Malone's other books include Blood Tears, Carnegie's Call and A Taste for Malice. His next crime novel will be out in March 2015.

Bashir Saoudi is a computer systems engineer with Cambridge Silicon Radio. He hopes to retire to Algeria one day.

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)