

Interview with Justin Sirois

Katherine Villarreal interviews *Falcons on the Floor* author Justin Sirois for *Dark Sky Magazine*. Their conversation is reproduced here with their permission.

Dark Sky Magazine: What are some of the books you've enjoyed or that have influenced/inspired you? Is there anything else besides books or authors?

Justin Sirois: Dahr Jamail's *Beyond the Green Zone* heavily influenced me to begin a project about Fallujah. His courageous, unembedded journalism was something I had never encountered before, and I knew, after reading his book, that there were stories to tell about the people involved in the conflict — specifically the sieges of Fallujah.

Bing West's *No True Glory* was another book I turned to for a much different perspective. The physicality of his reporting was extremely helpful in imagining the landscape.

I watched every film I could find on the Iraq war. Documentaries like *Iraq in Fragments* and *The Dream of Sparrows*, *Voices of Iraq*, *Operation Dreamland*, and *The War Tapes* were all extremely informative. Most of the Hollywood films about the war have been cliché or poorly produced. There was also nothing notable that was told primarily from an Iraqi perspective. Part of my motivation was to correct that problem — the lack of an Iraqi perspective in literature and art.

DSM: Was it difficult collaborating with someone on a project like this? Was the process easier or harder?

JS: It made the process much easier. Haneen Alshujairy acted as a creative consultant and editor on the novel. I wouldn't have had the courage to begin such a large project without her help. She's a brilliant woman and, thankfully, fluent in English. Out of the 60 or so Iraqis I solicited online, she was, by far, the easiest to communicate with. Also, her father is from Fallujah, and he was also a great help when we were stuck.

The entire writing process transpired over email. I have plans to visit her in Cairo for the first time in the fall.

DSM: Why did the scenes in *MLKNG SCKLS* get separated from *Falcons on the Floor*?

JS: *MLKNG SCKLS* came about after I finished the second draft of *Falcons*. I just couldn't get Salim and Khalil out of my head. I was/am in love with them. So I went back to my notes and drawings; post-it notes stuck to my wall contained seeds of anecdotes and stories that could be developed further. I keep a sketchbook where I actually draw characters and work out scenes, much like a movie storyboard. Ideas and themes that weren't developed in the larger manuscript started coming together. At first I just wrote very small vignettes or flash fiction pieces. Then I started working on short stories like the "uncooking" story.

Adam Robinson of Publishing Genius helped me shuffle them into a real concrete collection. In a way, *SCKLS* is a great teaser/trailer for the novel.

DSM: What is the meaning behind the title?

JS: I can't tell you that. I don't believe in revealing those

particular meanings in the work. Sorry.

DSM: Have you ever been to Iraq?

JS: No. Not yet anyway. I could have flown to Iraq and spent way too much money on a fixer and accommodations, but it was terribly dangerous and still is. It would have been a waste of resources. Even the most talented and resourceful war journalists are frustrated that they cannot cover stories properly over there. It's a shame.

DSM: Often times when I was reading, I felt like I was reading a poem. Do you write poetry as well?

JS: I do come from a poetry background and have a book of poems that came out in 2007. My prose is lyrical at times, I have to admit. I try to keep it as subtle as I can. Composition and the sound of my language are very important to me. It has to fit in the mouth before it fits on the page.

DSM: There's no hidden political agenda in *MLKNG SCKLS*, is that the same case for *Falcons on the Floor*?

JS: I'm glad you said that. I agree, there is no political agenda or opinions in either of the stories. I'm not interested in opinions, really. Left or right, for me all that is boring inside literature. *Falcons on the Floor* is a novel about people struggling to maintain their identity in a time of great violence against their culture. It is not a typical war story. Ultimately, it's a novel about friendship and love and death.

DSM: How did the idea for this book come about?

JS: Interestingly enough, it had nothing to do with Iraq or

two young men leaving Fallujah. I walked out of work one day and saw a man struggling to carry a child's car seat. There was no baby in it or anything. I just watched him heave this big thing across the parking lot and into the building — sweating and panting. Something about it struck me on a simple visual level. Then, all of a sudden, Salim was walking up the Euphrates. I know that's a big jump, from a man with a car seat to a young Iraqi man walking from Fallujah to Ramadi, but that's how it developed.

DSM: What are some print/online journals that you read regularly?

JS: Anywhere that pushes the envelope a bit. I typically end up on news sites, though. HTMLGiant's staff has been extremely generous to me so I go to their website often.

DSM: In a word, describe your writing.

JS: SCCNCT.

Haneen Alshujairy Interview

Publishing Genius Press's founding editor interviewed Haneen Alshujairy, an Iraqi refugee who consulted on the writing of *Falcons on the Floor* for HTMLGiant. Their conversation is reproduced here with permission.

HTMLGiant: How many English words do you know? From what I've heard on the radio, it seems like you are very fluent.

Haneen Alshujairy: Thank you! Well, I haven't counted them yet, but I'm sure the number of the ones I don't know is much more than the number of the ones I know. It does sound like a good idea to start counting though.

H: How much do you understand the culture of the US?

HA: My understanding of the U.S mostly comes from Hollywood, I've watched tons of movies since I was a kid, I also read a lot of books by American writers, and other than Justin I've made like 5 or 6 online friends who were Americans. But I gotta give the biggest credit to Hollywood.

H: What is it like in Cairo? Like, what's a typical day consist of?

HA: Well, my life is not very interesting. A typical day for me would be a 9 am - 4 pm school, a couple of hours at home with my family after that, then hang at my friend's apartment. We sometimes drive 30 minutes to go to Cairo – I live in 6 October City, so when we have enough energy left we go to one of the cafés that has a view on the Nile—awesome places in there! Or if a good movie was showing we'd skip that and go straight to the cinema.

H: What kind of music and stuff do you have over there?

What about Iraq? In *MLKNG SCKLS* there's a reference to the Monkees and I thought incorrectly that it was a mistake on Justin's part. So is American culture fairly popular in Iraq?

HA: Egyptian songs are very popular in all of the Arab world, Egyptian movies also, you find everything though, every taste, here or Iraq, you can find people who are obsessed with Egyptian music, Iraqi songs or English songs, Spanish, even the Turkish songs has its fans. In the novel though we tried to show that Salim's mom influenced his taste in general cause a typical Falluji won't probably know much about the Monkees.

H: Can you describe a football?

HA: A ball played by foot :)

H: Can people actually read Arabic? It seems bewildering.

HA: Oh, I can read AND write Arabic. It's not that hard.

H: How did you decide to be a dentist?

HA: That was more of a family decision—my parents thought I'd rock as a dentist. They kept talking me into it till I decided oh, what the heck, let's do it! Here the average you make in the last year of high school determines the type of college you can go to, so if you get a high score everyone around you will want you to be a doctor! For social status and such . . .

H: What is it like, not being able to live in your own country? Why did your family leave?

HA: I hate it, but I know us leaving was the best decision my parents ever made, 'cause it was getting worse by the second. I mean the situation over there. When I talk to my friends

who are living there still and they describe the way they live, it makes me feel very grateful to be on the other side, the safe side, I mean. We left 'cause it wasn't safe anymore, the kidnapping in exchange for money was starting to be a trend, people were too scared to leave their homes, and my dad saw that it was only gonna get worse. So we went to Jordan. We thought it was only gonna last a couple of weeks and then we'll be able to go back, but just like my dad imagined it didn't. It's been 7 years now.

H: Do you resent American interference in Iraq?

HA: Yes.

H: In 1996, when asked about the hundreds of thousands of children suffering and dying under US-led sanctions during the Saddam regime, Madeleine Albright said, "We think the price is worth it." You were about 7 at the time, right? So she was talking about you. Do you know about this? Albright was our Secretary of State under a relatively respected President, Bill Clinton, so that was kind of our official opinion. So, what is it about the USA that you want to understand?

HA: I didn't know about that, I do remember my father cursing that lady a lot though. Now I can see why.

H: Why *don't* you hate us?

HA: Unfortunately, there are many of us who do hate you, but for me, I hate the bad actions that the governments did, same time I do believe there is good in the people, governments are not the people, and you just can't hate a whole country only judging by it's government's actions. I've talked to many, many Americans who have shown their love and support to Iraqis and helped many Iraqi families. I couldn't possibly hate that.

H: Are you a Sunni or Shiite?

HA: Sunni.

H: How much does this matter to you?

HA: It doesn't. Up until the war no one cared about that. But after the war people seemed to care, which I think is one of the very bad things that the war has brought to us.

H: I heard recently on public radio that literature is making a resurgence in Iraq, now that the Saddam regime is out. What plans does the Understanding Campaign have for literature there?

HA: We want to support Iraqi universities with reference books, which are very needed, and we also wish to make donation programs to support other libraries in Iraq that could use our help.

H: Thank you for that, and for sharing with us.

HA: Thank you.