

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 25 Area Studies		
Title of case study: Winning the Man Booker International Prize 2019: Giving a voice to new writers in Arabic and building publisher interest		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 Oct 2014 – 31 Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Marilyn Booth	Khalid bin Abdallah Al Saud Professor, Study of the Contemporary Arab World	October 2014-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 20 May 2019-31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Marilyn Booth's translation of Omani novelist Jokha Alharthi's <i>Sayyidat al-Qamar/Celestial Bodies</i> won the 2019 Man Booker International Prize. The first Arabic-language work to win the MBI, it is the first-ever novel by an Omani woman to be translated into English. The award inspired young writers in the Gulf, especially women, and boosted Gulf literature globally, with translations of this novel now underway into 21 languages. The translation sparked new awareness of a small Middle Eastern country (Oman), with its history of slavery and modernisation. Finally, the prize strongly boosted the finances and status in the publishing world of the small press that published it and gave prominence to independent publishing in Scotland.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Underpinning research comprises the winning translation (R1, 2018) and another since Booth joined Oxford (R2, 2016); an edited volume (R4, 2019) and an article on translator-author-publisher negotiations (R3, 2017).</p> <p>Booth's prize-winning translation practice resulted from research specific to the translation and broadly within Translation Studies, as well as running translation masterclasses. Historical work on translations' importance to the emerging modern Middle East feeds into Booth's work translating contemporary Arabic fiction. Booth consulted works of Omani history, anthropology, literature and language in English, French and Arabic; familiarised herself with premodern literary works quoted in the novel (medieval poetry); researched Omani expressions and material culture, woven into the translation through use of Arabic juxtaposed with contextual phrases in English making the Arabic legible to readers. This strategy is an outcome of Booth's long history of literary translation (teaching, practicing, theorizing) (R3).</p> <p>Booth was not commissioned by a press. Receiving the novel from its author (the last stages of whose DPhil Booth supervised), Booth took the initiative to translate it without having a publisher. This demonstrates the role literary translators play in bringing works to global attention through vigorous advocacy, often unremunerated.</p> <p>Booth's translations are underpinned by study of translation historically. Since 2015, she has co-convoked five workshops on translation in the multilingual Ottoman Empire, yielding one book (2019, reviewed as 'represent[ing Translation Studies]' best practices' in a review in the <i>Journal of Arabic Literature</i> 51 [2020], 369-91 and another volume in progress. Booth and co-convenors secured funding (from New York University Abu Dhabi; University of Edinburgh-AHRC; University of Oxford; Charles University, Prague). Booth translates extensively for her historical research and contributes to student-focused anthologies.</p> <p>Booth has a long history as a literary translator and translation activist. She was shortlisted novelist Hoda Barakat's nominated translator, 2015 Man Booker International Prize; shortlisted for the Ghobashi Banipal International Award for Arabic Translation (2020); an invited assessor</p>		

for PEN Translates! subventions (2014-); judge, American Association of Teachers of Arabic translation prize (2019).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** [Translation, available on request] 2018. *Celestial Bodies*, by Jokha Alharthi. (*Sayyidat al-qamar*, Beirut, 2012), trans. Marilyn Booth. (Dingwall, Ross-shire: Sandstone Press, 2018) ISBN 978-1912240166.
- R2.** [Translation, available on request] 2016. *No Road to Paradise*, by Hassan Daoud (*La tariq ila al-janna*, Beirut, 2013), trans. Marilyn Booth. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016). ISBN 9789774168178.
- R3.** [Chapter, available on request] 2017. Marilyn Booth, 'Three's a Crowd: The Translator-Author-Publisher and the Engineering of *Girls of Riyadh* for an Anglophone Readership' in Farzaneh Farahzad and Luise von Flotow (eds), *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons* (London: Routledge), 105-19. ISBN 9781138651562.
- R4.** [Edited Book, listed in REF2] 2019. Marilyn Booth, ed., *Migrating Texts: Circulating Translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press). ISBN 9781474439008. Booth wrote: 50-page introduction based on original research and synthesis of scholarship in Arabic, French, English; chapter based on original research, Arabic and French.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Modelling translation practices: Awarded to author and translator equally, the prize recognises translation as creative co-writing, essential to a work's success beyond its original language. In the award announcement, panel chair Bettany Hughes noted, 'The translation is precise and lyrical, weaving in the cadences of both poetry and everyday speech' (E3.i). In *The Guardian*, panel member Maureen Freely (chair, PEN England) said, 'Why did my fellow judges and I choose *Celestial Bodies*? Firstly, because the prose is gorgeous. Marilyn Booth's translation is precise and lyrical, bright with the music of the spoken word' (E3.ii). An article on Booth's translation noted: "Booth falls in line with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy in that she abounds in the blending of the native language of Alharthi's characters with English... the adaptation of the English language... enable[s] it to carry the culture weight of the land the characters in the novel represent. ... It is said of Salman Rushdie that this use of 'Chutnification' epitomizes his use of language Halwa is to Oman what chutney is to India and so we can rightly say that if Rushdie 'chutnifies' English ... Booth 'Halwawafies' English..." (E11). Booth's innovative and sensitive mode of translation was highlighted by reviewers and booksellers (E12.i). *Banipal's* reviewer observed: 'The respect in which [Booth] holds the work is evident throughout her translation.... Arabic fragments are for the most part incorporated seamlessly into the English text ... readers of the English come away with a deeper appreciation of the richness (and sometimes rhyme) of the original language ... [and] better understanding of the culture' (E10).

Anglophone publics: Challenging stereotypes, building knowledge: Consistently, print and broadcast media noted *Celestial Bodies*' challenge to stereotypes – from Bettany Hughes ('The style is a metaphor for the subject, subtly resisting clichés of race, slavery, and gender') (E3.i) to many reviewers, e.g., *The Irish Times*: 'Celestial Bodies deftly undermines recurrent stereotypes about Arab language and cultures' (E3.iii). Hughes revealed, '**We felt we were getting access to ideas and thoughts and experiences you aren't normally given in English. It avoids every stereotype you might expect in its analysis of gender and race and social distinction and slavery**' (E3.i).

Stereotyped and racist views of Arab societies have long focused on 'woman' as emblematic of an alleged cultural-political 'lag'. Through translation and research, Booth makes Arab women's voices audible to Anglophone audiences. A feature in *The Atlantic* on initiatives to highlight Arab women's work said, 'Arab women ... face twin obstacles: the West's own gender biases, and the reductive narrative of the Arab woman. This is why it was such a victory when the International Booker Prize jury chose an Arab novel—one written by a woman—to receive the award for the first time in the prize's history.' (E5).

Reviewers and readers saw *Celestial Bodies* as facilitating a more informed public in its historical depth, focus on Omani women, and empathetic characters. The *Scottish Herald* said, ‘**The first novel by an Omani woman to be published in English**, its confidence and élan show how much we are missing, cut off from swathes of the Arab world by a cultural gulf that diminishes our understanding of this rapidly modernising region’ (E3.iv). Book vlogger Nishant Mittal said, ‘we know Oman’s capital is Muscat... but that is not all... there are cities... and little villages where people live and dream and where people think of achieving something and going somewhere... it’s not rosey [sic] at all, it talks about slaves, about the revolutions that happened there, but it also talks about a spark in those women, so feminism... starting in bits and spots’ (E3.v). Another vlogger commented (prior to the Booker win) ‘...the questions I am left with are part of the lush after-taste of having sunk so deeply into this novel about people that live in such a different culture to mine and I want to re-read it.’ (E3.vi). Freely’s *Guardian* article said, ‘it refuses, graciously but absolutely, to play by the rules. In breaking with the stories that have shaped and so badly distorted our understanding of her homeland, Alharthi creates a world in which we can see our own lives reflected....’ (E3.ii). Thrillist said: ‘This novel is terrific, but above all, it is important. ... the first book of Omani fiction to ever be published in America. ... It’s riveting, and gorgeously translated. It should also, as long as the U.S. remains entrenched in Middle-Eastern conflict, be mandatory reading.’ (E3.vii).

Before and following the award, Booth’s public engagement work sought to **expand awareness of Arabic literature in translation and Omani culture and history**. Booth spoke at: Shortlisted translators’ session, Foyles; author-translator panel, South Bank Centre; winners’ panel, Waterstones Piccadilly, (all London); the Hay Festival and Dubai Litfest, February 2020. (Events April-July 2020 were cancelled due to COVID-19.) Broadcast interviews included the BBC World Service; ‘Amanpour’ with Christiane Amanpour, CNN and PBS; with Sulayman al-Mi’Mari, Oman State Broadcasting (in Arabic); Nasher News (UK/UAE). Dubai Tourism produced a professional video of Booth’s and Alharthi’s session at Emirates Airline Festival, Dubai, ‘Arab Writers Going Global’, for Emirates Airline passengers.

Readers said the book had opened their eyes. One journalist at Thomson Reuters UAE responded on a questionnaire following Booth’s presentations at the Dubai Litfest, ‘I want to read more about the slavery part of Omani history.’ (E6). The Lead Bookseller at Waterstones Oxford said many readers voiced similar views to her, and described the novel’s powerful impact on her (E7). A Master’s student at University of Central Lancashire conducting fieldwork at Aflaj Research Unit University, Nizwa, Oman, interviewing elderly Omani women (via local interviewers), wrote: ‘I want to thank you for such a great translation of Ms. Alharthi’s book... which I have read several times and... made copious notes about. It has helped me with research and given me some tantalizing information about the oasis settlements in Oman.’ (E9). One reader heard Booth on CNN and emailed: ‘You mentioned ... that a lot of Arabic literature has been translated into English. I am very interested in reading some of these books but have no idea how to begin ...’; and, later, ‘I plan to pursue each of them, and look forward to discovering those voices and experiences beyond my own. The portion of the interview discussing the 3 sisters in “Celestial Bodies” emphasized to me the universality of all humanity, especially women.’ (E8).

Strengthening publishers, encouraging translations: In an invited panel presentation in Sharjah (Kalima Project for Translation), novelist Moira Forsyth (Publishing Director, Sandstone) spoke to the impact the prize had on this small press, founded in Dingwall, Scotland in 2002, and publishing about twenty titles annually (E1). Sandstone holds national importance in Scotland as ‘the only literary publisher of any size outside the main urban centres ... of Edinburgh and Glasgow.’ Having published crime fiction and nonfiction, ‘*Celestial Bodies* was the first literary novel we had taken on. We are now looking for other literary fiction in translation’. ‘**The MBI win means that many more literary agents and overseas publishers have now heard of us, and we have credibility with them.**’ (E1) Given the ‘very tight’ profit margins of independent publishing, ‘the significant sales of *Celestial Bodies* have... help[ed] us to plan our future publishing programme’ (E1). Such benefits--a financial boost, strengthened relationships with overseas publishers, increased distribution--were noted by US publisher Catapult (E12.i), whose founding editor wrote in March 2020, ‘We have shipped over 17,000 copies in the U.S. alone, and sales continue to grow week by week. This makes the book one of our bestselling titles of the year and **publishing a work like this is transformative to us as a**

small press. He continues to be 'astonished by the wonderful nuance of Marilyn's translations. As soon as I started reading *Celestial Bodies*, I knew I desperately wanted to bring it to a wider audience.' (E12.i) The subsidiary rights director and Senior Editor for Grove Atlantic (US) commented, 'the Booker has done immeasurable work to raise the international profile of Arabic-language literature by recognizing 'Celestial Bodies'.' (E12.ii)

The prize has **brought attention to Scotland's publishing sector.** Newspaper *Scotland on Sunday* used the prize while evaluating recent successes and challenges for indie publishing. "International publishers and agents have now got the company on their radar", says the chief executive of Publishing Scotland.' (E4.ii) Sandstone's publisher was quoted: "I hope the Man Booker International Prize will bring financial stability ... which we will then risk again" (E4.i). Scotland's *The National* saw the award as emblematic of changes in Scottish culture production, 'a significant boost for Scotland's small publishers.' (E4.ii)

This was possible because the translation's *reach*—in sales and publicity—was broad and sustained. Booth's translation appeared in the US, Canada, Australia/New Zealand, and India, and in large-print and audio editions. It reached **National Bestseller status in the US**—unprecedented for an Arabic novel—and #1 on Amazon UK's contemporary fiction bestseller list. The print run before the prize was 1,000. By December 2019, the publisher reported 'increased distribution across the world' (E1). Coverage of the shortlisting and prize was intense and ongoing, comprising 123 instances of media coverage by the end of the week following the announcement (E2.i); the Booker's management partners' partial coverage list comprised 194 instances within the first two weeks (21/5/19-5/6/19), not including wide coverage in Arabic or other world languages outside Europe (E2.ii). Reviews appeared in major and widely distributed UK and US outlets (*Oprah*, *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, *Guardian Weekend*). Prominent US publications named it an 'anticipated' or 'must-read' title for Autumn 2019: LitHub (9 July, 'a major, exciting literary event'); *The Week* ('25 Books to read in the second half of 2019', 19 Aug.). **Time placed it among their 'most anticipated books of Fall 2019' (5 Sept.), and it was 'Pick of the Week' for the *Boston Globe*, and 'Editor's Choice' for the *New York Times Book Review* (12 Dec.).**

Generating new readers in English, the prize also meant wider readership in Arabic. Readers in centres of literary production (Egypt, Lebanon) have routinely dismissed Gulf-region fiction. The editor at long-established Lebanese publisher Dar al-adab explained: 'In 2010, Dar al Adab reading committee members were very enthusiastic about *Sayyidat al-qamar* and insisted on embracing this talent amongst the publishing house's discoveries of serious voices from the Gulf It took 10 years for the first edition to sell less than 1000 copies. Then... after the Man Booker announcement.... It was one edition after the other. In less than one year we had 8 editions [c.18,000 copies]. **It would be too little to say that the Prize just affected the sales [...]** The readers were thrilled that an Arab writer, and from obscure Oman, not Egypt, not Lebanon, but Oman, got such a recognition from the west.' (E12.iii)

Motivating and sustaining authors: The prize generated excitement in Arab countries, raising authors' hopes for greater reception. It particularly highlighted Gulf literature (and materially, means Alharthi's next novel, also translated by Booth, is now in press with Catapult). Emerging writer and magazine publisher Sharifah Alhinai (*Sekka Magazine*, UAE) said: 'It is not an exaggeration to say that the announcement of the award was a watershed moment for me and numerous other women in the region ... we are the group that is most touched/effected [sic] by these negative and unrepresentative narratives that permeate not only in the world of media, but also in literature in English.... The fact that it has been published in English and has been so well received worldwide also gives us, as journalists, writers, and authors, hope that our own works will also be as well-received. Throughout the years, many of us have time and again been discouraged by publishers and published books in the English-speaking world alike, that written works of ours that do not fit into the ... 'oppressed' or 'rebellious' moulds would not receive attention or be deemed publishable.' (E12.iv). **The novel has secured translation into 21 languages since longlisting, significant since English translations of Arabic literature usually follow after a work has been translated into other European languages. In this case, the English translation led the way in achieving the book's—and Gulf literature's—global reach.**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- E1.** Impact statement from Moira Forsyth, Publishing Director at Sandstone Press, 3 Dec. 2019, delivered at panel presentation in Sharjah.
- E2.** International media coverage of *Celestial Bodies*.
- i) List generated by Sandstone, on 27 May 2019.
 - ii) Man Booker International - Winner Coverage created on 6 June 2019.
- E3.** Selected media coverage endorsing Marilyn Booth's translation.
- i) The Booker Prizes, 31 May 2019.
 - ii) The Guardian, 25 May 2019.
 - iii) The Irish Times, 18 May 2019.
 - iv) Scottish Herald, 22 May 2019.
 - v) Podcast: I Read This Book, 1 Dec. 2019.
 - vi) Shawn The Book Maniac, 31 Jan. 2019.
 - vii) Thrillist, 4 Dec. 2019.
- E4.** Evidence confirming financial benefits.
- i) Dani Garavelli, 'Against All Odds: The Rebirth of Scottish Publishing', *Scotland on Sunday*, 26 May 2019.
 - ii) Stuart Cosgrove, 'The best examples for independence are in day-to-day life', *The National*, 26 May 2019.
- E5.** Kim Ghattas, 'Arab Women Are Tired of Talking About Just "Women's Issues"', *The Atlantic*, 24 Aug. 2019.
- E6.** Email and feedback form from Senior Correspondent Gulf at Thomson Reuters (UAE), 6 Feb. 2020, containing endorsement for Booth's work.
- E7.** Emails from the Lead Bookseller at Waterstones Oxford, 22 July 2019 and 15 March 2020, confirming impact.
- E8.** Correspondence from a reader, 25-26 October 2019, containing endorsement for Booth's work in expanding awareness of Arabic literature in translation to the public.
- E9.** Email from a master's student at University of Central Lancashire, 23 Dec. 2019, confirming reach and impact.
- E10.** Clare Roberts, 'Intriguing relationships in this Omani family saga', *Banipal* 66 (Autumn/Winter 2019): 210-13; quotation, 212-13.
- E11.** Roy P. Veettil, 'The "Halwawification" of English in Jokha Al-Harhi's *Celestial Bodies*: A Stylistic Analysis', *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7: 3 (2020): 389-92.
- E12.** Selected correspondence from international publishers.
- i) Letter from Editor-in-Chief at Catapult (US publisher of *Celestial Bodies*), 6 March 2020.
 - ii) Subsidiary Rights Director and Senior Editor at Grove Atlantic (US), in email from Tenzer Publishing Services to Booth, 10 March 2020.
 - iii) Letter from Publisher at Dar al-Adab (Beirut), 20 July 2020 [contains material in Arabic].
 - iv) Letter from Sharifah Alhinai, Co-founder and Managing Storyteller of Sekka Magazine (UAE), 1 Aug. 2020.