

## PICK OF THE SYLLABUS

## Civil War in Lebanon

Bruce Masters, professor of history, selects *Beirut Blues* by Hanan al-Shaykh, translated by Catherine Cobham



I rarely have the opportunity to incorporate fictional works into my syllabi in teaching courses on Middle Eastern history. For much of the pre-modern period, fiction in Muslim cultures was confined to poetry. However beautiful the imagery invoked by

Muslim poets in Islam's classical age, poetry remains a notoriously fickle medium through which to teach history. But in teaching a course entitled "The Arab World in the Twentieth Century," I have found that novels and feature films from the region help to provide Wesleyan students with cultural insights that might otherwise be absent from the classroom. One such novel is *Beirut Blues*, the bittersweet account of Lebanon's turbulent civil war, written by Hanan al-Shaykh. Al-Shaykh is a secular, Shia Muslim woman whose novel provides a voice to two segments of the Arab population, women and the Shia, which until very recently have been overlooked by most people in the West.


For me, personally, the novel evokes a time and place that I came perilously close to experiencing firsthand. In the early '70s, I was living in Cairo. But like most Westerners residing in the "Mother of the World," as Cairenes call their home, I would "escape" to Beirut whenever possible. For a young American seeking to imbibe Middle Eastern culture, that city seemed too good to be true. It was at once a vibrant center of Arab culture and a place where you could find all the creature comforts of home. In what turned out to be the city's halcyon years, I could imagine no better future than a lifetime spent in Beirut. I was actively seeking gainful employment there, but on my last visit in the spring of 1975, the barricades started to go up. Although my Lebanese friends assured me it was only a "passing phase," I decided to return to the United States and graduate studies, a choice that ultimately led me to Wesleyan.

It is in those turbulent weeks of the spring and early summer of 1975, when the fighting started and individual residents of the "Paris of the Levant" had to decide whether to stay or flee, that *Beirut Blues* begins. The novel is narrated in the first person and it is presumably largely autobiographical. It unfolds as a series of

letters the author writes to friends and former lovers now safely in Europe, and the Arabic title of the novel *Barid Bayrut* simply means *Mail from Beirut*. But as the novel progresses, the intended recipients of the author's letters become more fanciful, including one to the war itself and to the jazz singer, Billie Holiday, whose music provides a *leitmotiv* that runs through the novel. Although there is a plot line embedded in the letters, the choice of framing the novel in that genre allows the author to provide the reader with free-flowing meditations on war and survival that would otherwise be out of place in a strictly narrative novel.

Certain that the fighting is only a temporary glitch in her normal ebb and flow of life, the author decides to stay in her family's house in the Shia neighborhood of Dahiyeh. Gradually, however, her Beirut shrinks with the erection of the barricades separating Christian East Beirut from the Muslim West and further still as each religious community closes in on itself for protection. Multiple militias spring up to enforce religious identity in the name

of communal conformity and solidarity. The author finds the blossoming of headscarves on the heads of friends who formerly wore the most current of Western fashion and the omnipresent posters of the Ayatollah Khomeini stifling. She flees to her grandparents' ancestral village in the Shia south only to find that the PLO forces have turned a once rural Eden into a battlefield with the Israelis. The villagers curse both sides equally but are powerless to influence the outcome. The author does not slide into the easy explanation of the civil war offered by so many Lebanese, however, that Lebanon simply exploded due to the intrigues of outsiders. Rather her scathing description of the Lebanese militias cultivating opium poppies on fields confiscated from the peasants of her village demonstrates that all sides are equally culpable in her opinion. After a harrowing return to Beirut in the company of a former lover who is also an official in the PLO, the author finally decides to leave her beloved city with him for Paris. But as the flight is called and he boards the plane, the author is overcome with nostalgia for the old Beirut that perhaps will never return and decides to stay.

*Beirut Blues* sheds light on the various conflicts in the Middle East—between Israel and the Palestinians, between Sunnis and the Shia, between secularism and a politicized Islam—by giving a human face to those ordinary men and women who are caught in the midst of a struggle but who do not seek to choose any side. Through her eyes, the reader is drawn into the downward cycle of destruction that is characteristic of civil wars. We become empathetic to her plight and each of us must ask the question of whether in her place we would stay or flee. But strangely, the novel is ultimately optimistic as the author finds moments of joy and love in the midst of despair and death, and we share in her hope that the Beirut she knew and loved will one day return. 



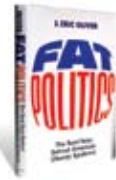
# BOOKS

## Just Published

Our seasonal selection of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

**J. ERIC OLIVER '88**

*Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic*  
(Oxford University Press, 2006)



In his engaging new study, Oliver challenges the notion that an “obesity epidemic” in the United States causes hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. He finds that health bureaucrats and medical researchers with ties to the pharmaceutical and weight-loss industries have distorted evidence to wrongly portray obesity as a major health problem for financial gain. Oliver argues that Americans concerned about their health should focus more on the kinds of food they eat and exercise, rather than how much they weigh.

**VLADIMIR SERGEEVICH TRUBETSKOI (AUTHOR), SUSANNE FUSO, PROFESSOR OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (TRANSLATOR AND EDITOR)**

*A Russian Prince in the Soviet State: Hunting Stories, Letters from Exile, and Military Memoirs*  
(Northwestern University Press, 2006)



This new collection contains memorable stories and memoirs by a member of one of Russia's most ancient and distinguished noble families. Trubetskoi (1892–1937) served in the navy and in a cavalry regiment, and fought with distinction in World War II. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he supported a large family by working as a musician and a writer. He and his eldest daughter were executed in 1937. Fusso notes that his writings “offer an inspiring example of how a person can live through large-scale social and political upheaval with grace and true nobility.”

**MATTHEW VON UNWERTH '92**

*Freud's Requiem: Mourning, Memory, and the Invisible History of a Summer Walk*  
(Riverhead, 2006)



In a little-known essay by Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” he wrote about a summertime conversation in 1913 with poet Rainer Maria Rilke and writer and psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salomé in which they discussed mortality and eternity. Freud's essay inspired author von Unwerth to write this book, which explores Freud's provocative ideas on creativity, mortality, and transcendence, and investigates how key experiences and people influenced Freud's creative process.

**AYELET WALDMAN '86**

*Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*  
(Doubleday, 2006)



In Waldman's compelling second novel outside her successful Mommy-Track mystery series, narrator Emilia Greenleaf mourns the loss of her infant daughter to SIDS and has conflicting emotions over being a stepmother. Waldman challenges the conventions of motherhood in presenting a heroine who finds her newly acquired son insufferable and must learn to connect with him to help preserve her marriage. Waldman makes vivid use of the novel's Manhattan setting, particularly the Upper East and West sides and Central Park.

**ROBERT WILDER '88**

*Daddy Needs a Drink*  
(Delacorte Press, 2006)



This often funny and frank collection of essays explores the chaos and rewards of parenthood without sentimentality. Writer and teacher Wilder addresses a wide range of topics with refreshing honesty—picking baby names, competitive parenting, sleep deprivation, answering kids' embarrassing questions, and more—and reveals his love for his wife and children even when being a father threatens to drive him crazy.

**SETH LERER '76, EDITOR**

*The Yale Companion to Chaucer*  
(Yale University Press, 2006)



This new collection brings together specially commissioned essays on Chaucer's poetry and highlights the best and most inventive work in Chaucerian studies today. The book contains information on the history and textual contexts of Chaucer's work, on the ranges of current critical interpretation, and on the poet's place in English and European literary history.—David Low '76

## OF NOTE:

**Matthew Greenfield '90** and Laurence Dumortier are the publishers at Cloverfield Press, a boutique publishing house dedicated to bringing new literary and artistic voices to a discerning public. The press recently published three new books: Henry Baum's *Gentleman Reptile*, Justus Ballard's *The Cubist Infant*, and renowned Japanese author Haruki Murakami's *Tony Takitani*. Each volume contains a carefully-selected short story paired with a striking illustration. The endpapers and dust jackets are hand-printed with a letterpress. For more information, see [www.cloverfieldpress.com](http://www.cloverfieldpress.com).

## WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Elizabeth Willis, assistant professor of English**  
*Meteoritic Flowers*  
2006



Willis's fourth poetry collection was inspired by the scientific pastorals of Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin and respected physician, poet, philosopher, and botanist. She arranges her collection as cantos with lyrical interludes, shifting between prose and lyric verse as she celebrates the pleasures of the natural world and engages with contemporary culture.

## POETRY

**Elline Lipkin '88**

*The Errant Thread*  
(Kore Press, 2006)

**Loren G. Smith '63, translator**

*Flame of Love: Poems of the Spanish Mystics St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila*  
(Alba House, 2005)

## NONFICTION

**Douglas K. Charles, professor of anthropology and archaeology, and Jane E. Buikstra, editors**  
*Recreating Hopewell*  
(University Press of Florida, 2006)

**William Foster MALS '86**

*Looking for a Face Like Mine*  
(Fine Tooth Press, 2005)

**Kathryn Greene-McCreight '83**

*Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*  
(Brazos Press, 2006)

**Ole R. Holsti MAT '56**

*Making American Foreign Policy*  
(Routledge, 2006)

**Jeffrey Marshall '67**

*Elder Law in Pennsylvania*  
(Pennsylvania Bar Institute Press, 2005)

**Mark Roseland '78, MALS '79**

*Toward Sustainable Communities: Resources for Citizens and Their Governments*  
(New Society Publishers, 2005)

**Robert Sharlet '57 and Ferdinand Feldbrugge, editors**

*Public Policy and Law in Russia: In Search of a Unified Legal and Political Space*  
(Brill/Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005)

**Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis '89, editors**

*The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*  
(Duke University Press, 2006)



**Jeffrey Wishik MA '76, MD, JD**

*Medical and Legal Aspects of Neurology*  
(Lawyers and Judges, 2005)

**Richard Zweigenhaft '67, P '00 and G. William Domhoff**

*Diversity in the Power Elite: How It Happened, Why It Matters*  
(Rowman and Littlefield, 2006)



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