

Arab literature is also Israeli

Adding a special category for a work in Arabic to the Sapir Prize would be a step toward expanding Israel's literary space so that it includes everyone.

Chassia Chomsky Porat and Azar Dakwar

The winner and runners-up in the competition for the Sapir Prize for Hebrew Literature for the best novel of 2013 were announced last week. The prize winner receives 150,000 shekels (about \$42,000). The four other short-listed writers, as well as the author of the book chosen as the best debut novel of the year, each receive 40,000 shekels.

According to Mifal Hapayis, Israel's national lottery, which initiated and finances the annual competition, the Sapir Prize, which is analogous to the British Man Booker Prize, was established "to encourage literary excellence and promote reading culture in Israel." An important component of the prize is the Sapir Foundation's commitment to translate the winning novel into Arabic and into another foreign language of the author's choice.

In Israel, many important literary works are written in Arabic, too. Ala Hlehel, Raji Bathish and Samir Naqqash, to name but a few, are among the country's

outstanding Arabic writers. For the most part, however, the non-Arabic-reading public is not even aware of their works, even though Arabic is one of Israel's official languages, and the mother tongue of its Arab citizens (one-fifth of the population) and of many Jews as well. A brief glance at the list of candidates for the Sapir during its 14 years of existence shows that 168 authors have participated in the competition. But since the prize's inauguration, in 2000, only one Arab author has ever been short-listed: Sayed Kashua, who writes in Hebrew.

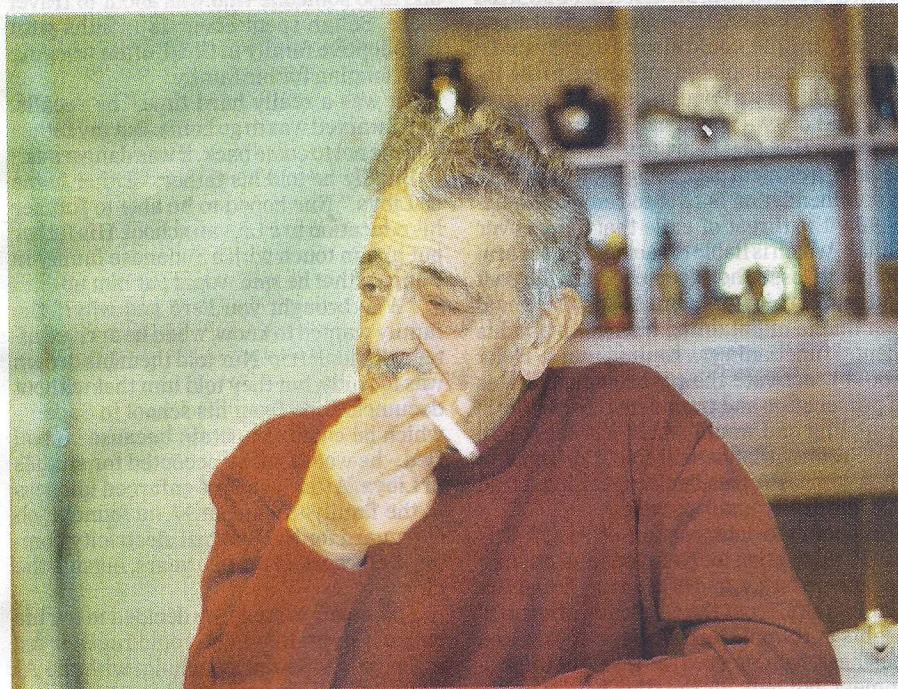
According to the website of Mifal Hapayis, the rules were changed in 2006 so that novels written by Israelis in foreign languages and were translated into

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Hebrew and published in the past five years, can also be nominated. The change was meant to open the competition to authors who write in Russian, Arabic, English and other languages.

The problem is that since the closure in 2009 of Andalus Publishing House, which did exceptional and important work in translating and publishing in Hebrew books originally written in Arabic – Arabic literature written in Israel simply does not exist in the cultural world of Hebrew readers. Moreover, books are nominated for the Sapir Prize by their publishers, and there are very few publishers of Arabic literature in Israel. In any event, the judges generally do not read Arabic, so they cannot read these works – whether they have come out in Israel or were published in neighboring countries.

The nominations, the competition and the judges' statement explaining their choices receive extensive media coverage. The authors gain exposure and copies of the winning book are distributed to public libraries all over Israel. This promotes Hebrew works written in Israel, makes their authors better known, and offers



Emil Habibi. A good choice for a special Sapir Prize for Arab writers.

Yaron Kaminsky

them a chance to win a handsome sum of money as well as prestige.

On the other hand, authors who write in Arabic, both Arabs and Jews, are in effect excluded from the monetary prize and public exposure. They generally publish their works abroad, but for the literary world in Israel they simply do not exist.

"Literary excellence" and "promotion of the reading culture" are reserved for Hebrew literature.

Mifal Hapayis is a public-benefit corporation that is mandated to work on behalf of all of Israel's citizenry and required to distribute its profits on an equal basis. Therefore, its investment in promoting lit-

erature should address the cultural and linguistic needs of all citizens of Israel, not only those of Hebrew-readers. For this reason, as a step toward expanding the literary space so that it includes everyone, it is important to add to the Sapir Prize a special category for a work in Arabic, named for an Arab writer citizen of Israel (the late Emil Habibi would be a good choice).

The panel of judges would include Jewish and Arab authors, and other intellectuals and scholars who are immersed in Arabic; the winning work would receive media coverage comparable to its Hebrew counterpart. One component of the prize would be the work's translation into Hebrew, and its publication and marketing, as well as distribution to public libraries.

Summaries of the Arab works nominated for the prize would be published alongside those of the Hebrew prize, along with the grounds for their submission and the judges' considerations for short-listing candidates and for selecting the winners in both categories. This would expand the shared literary space and help it flourish.

Arabic literature written in Israel would receive exposure to and recognition by the non-Arabic-reading public. It would also provide writers with an incentive to write works in Arabic – books that would certainly enrich the cultural life of the society in Israel in general.

The writers are co-directors of the Shared Public Space project of Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel.