

Lifestyle

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A picture shows the paddle steamer 'Italie' of the Compagnie Generale de Navigation sur le lac Lemman, commonly abbreviated to CGN, sailing on Lake Geneva past a giant fork sculpture designed by Switzerland's artist Jean-Pierre Zaugg. — AFP

Omani writer wins Man Booker literature prize

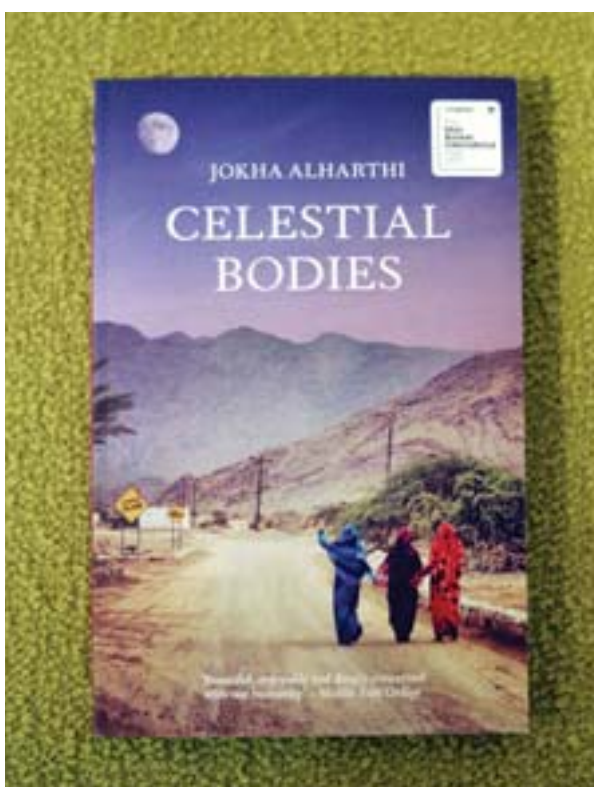
Jokha Alharthi on Tuesday became the first Arabic author to win the Man Booker International prize for her novel "Celestial Bodies" which reveals her Omani homeland's post-colonial transformation. "I am thrilled that a window has been opened to the rich Arabic culture," Alharthi, 40, told reporters after the ceremony at the Roundhouse in London. Alharthi is the author of two previous collections of short fiction, a children's book and three novels in Arabic. She studied classical Arabic poetry at Edinburgh University and teaches at Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat.

"Oman inspired me but I think international readers can relate to the human values in the book—freedom and love," she said. The prestigious 50,000-pound (57,000 euro, \$64,000) prize, which celebrates translated fiction from around the world, is divided equally between the author and the translator. Alharthi's translator was US academic Marilyn Booth, who teaches Arabic literature at Oxford University. The judges said Celestial Bodies was "a richly imagined, engaging and poetic insight into a society in transition and into lives previously obscured".

It is set in the village of al-Awafi in Oman where we encounter three sisters: Mayya, who marries Abdallah

after a heartbreak; Asma, who marries from a sense of duty; and Khawla, who is waiting for her beloved who has emigrated to Canada. The three sisters witness Oman's evolution from a traditional, slave-owning society. "It touches the subject of slavery. I think literature is the best platform to have this dialogue," Alharthi said. The jury said: "Elegantly structured and taut, it tells of Oman's coming-of-age through the prism of one family's losses and loves".

The Guardian said it offers "glimpses into a culture relatively little known in the west" and The National said it signalled "the arrival of a major literary talent", calling the book "a densely woven, deeply imagined tour de force". Jury chair Bettany Hughes said the novel showed "delicate artistry and disturbing aspects of our shared history". "The style is a metaphor for the subject, subtly resisting clichés of race, slavery and gender," she said. Alharthi was up against five other shortlisted authors: France's Annie Ernaux, Germany's Marion Poschmann, Poland's Olga Tokarczuk, Colombia's Juan Gabriel Vasquez and Chile's Alia Trabucco Zerán. — AFP



A copy of 'Celestial Bodies' by Arabic author Jokha Alharthi, translated by Marilyn Booth, which has won the Booker International Prize in London. — AFP photos



Arabic author Jokha Alharthi poses after winning the Man Booker International Prize for the book "Celestial Bodies".

Wingmoms: How bonobo mothers help their sons find love

Anyone who's experienced a mother pushing them to get a move on and produce grandkids might just sympathize with this. A new study has described the outsized role bonobo moms play in their sons' sex lives: from pulling rank to ensure their male offspring get to meet attractive ovulating females, to interfering with male rivals' attempts to mate. The paper was published Monday in the journal Current Biology and found that bonobo males whose mothers were alive and remained in their group were three times more likely to father children.

And the authors credited the success of the "wingmoms" on the nature of bonobos' female-dominant societies, which have long been known for their altruistic and peaceful character, in contrast to more violent and patriarchal chimpanzees. "This is the first time that we can show the impact of the mother's presence on a very important male fitness trait, which is their fertility," co-author Martin Surbeck, a primatologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany said in a statement.

"We were surprised to see that the mothers have such a strong, direct influence on the number of grandchildren they get." For the study, Surbeck and colleagues observed wild bonobo populations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as wild populations of chimpanzees in Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Uganda. To verify paternity, they collected the primates' droppings for DNA analysis.

Gynecocratic communities

They found that while both bonobo and chimpanzee mothers attempted to assist their sons, bonobos were far more successful because their communities' highest ranks are dominated by females. Chimpanzee communities on the other hand are dominated by males who compete for alpha status. The two species together are humans' closest relatives in the animal kingdom and share about 99 percent of our DNA. "The bonobo moms act a bit like social passports," Surbeck told AFP.

"The sons, in close proximity to their moms, are also very central in the group and access positions in the group that allow them to interact more with other females including copulation." "If there's a female who's very attractive, you see moms stick around them, and in the shadow of their moms are the males," he added. By contrast, they found that if a mother lost her high rank, her son also fell in rank and was subsequently less successful in his mating attempts. In addition to intervening in their sons' rivals attempt to mate, bonobo mothers also protected their own sons from the efforts of rivals to disrupt courting and sex.

Grandmother hypothesis

Interestingly, bonobo mothers did not go the extra mile for their daughters, nor did they help their daughters raise offspring. Surbeck believes that, since bonobo daughters leave the community and males remain behind, it may simply not be worth the mothers' time and efforts from an evolutionary perspective. One thing the team believes they may now have tentative evidence for is the so-called "grandmother hypothesis": that a post-reproductive female can increase her own lifespan and continue her genes by ensuring her offspring's reproductive success.



In this photo a young juvenile male bonobo is groomed by his mom in the Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve in Djolu Territory of Tshuapa District in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. — AFP

It is an idea that anthropologists have applied to humans and Surbeck believes it could also be the case for bonobo populations. "The interesting thing now is in bonobos we have such a mechanism, apparently allowing the females to do that, but intriguingly not through their daughters but their sons," he told AFP. Moving forward, Surbeck said he would like to confirm through more long-term research the benefits of the behavior on the longevity of mothers, and find out whether mothers exhibit welcoming behavior to new female arrivals in the community who go on to become their sons' mates.

More broadly, he said, studying the differences between gender egalitarian and largely peaceful bonobo societies, in which members practice both heterosexual and homosexual sex to strengthen social bonds; versus alpha-male led chimpanzee societies, could yield clues about our own evolutionary past. "One has to be clear—we did not evolve from bonobos or chimpanzees but we share with them a common ancestry," said Surbeck. "Comparing us with our closest living relatives might give some idea about traits which could evolve under selective pressures." — AFP