

Title: White Masks

Source: Contemporary Review of Fiction

In a 1993 interview published in *Beirut Review*, Elias Khoury observed that the Lebanese civil war "opened literary language to the spoken language"—something unprecedented in modern Lebanese literature. *White Masks*, Khoury's fourth novel (originally published in Arabic in 1981), nicely exemplifies this incursion of the colloquial into the syntax of classical Arabic, to judge from Maia Tabet's translation, which captures successfully Khoury's conversational prose. Such prose is crucial here, for the novel takes the form of a series of interviews with several individuals regarding the brutal murder of postal worker Khalil Ahmad Jaber, who became unhinged following the death of his son in the early days of the war. (Fair warning: no one explains anything that someone living through the war would already know.) The novel is largely given to these witnesses—Khalil's widow and daughter, the neighbors, the garbage collector

who found the body—yet each is soon lost in his or her own story, confirming the Prologue's observation that "Every one of us has a story, after all, and that's more than enough. We have no need of other people's." Indeed, what becomes clear is that in war-torn Beirut, where "everything was up for grabs, daylight robbery was the order of the day, and it was all done 'in the name of the people,'" there are countless stories like Khalil's and a well-stocked shop of insanities from which to choose, all of which prove that "we [can] get used to anything!" Not surprisingly, readers won't learn who murdered Khalil, which might provide "the resolution that would shield us [. . .] from the debilitating pessimism we all feel," and we are left asking exactly how many martyrs one country needs—or simply echoing Khalil's daughter: "Honestly, what is going on in this place?" [Brooke Horvath]