Who Reads Modern Arabic Literature, How and Why?

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Readers, Media, Translation and Reception in a Globalized World

Call for Papers for the

International Conference at Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany

5-7 October 2022

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Funded by the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA)

While readers are integral to the experience of literature, literary studies has often shied away from approaching readers and mapping the reception of literary texts. One of the currents that dealt with readers was reader-response criticism in the second half of the 20th century. Focusing on the poetics and aesthetics of literature, it usually relied on idealised model readers implied in or derived from the literary text itself (e.g., Iser 1972). In recent years, some scholars have revisited reading from an affective and post-critical perspective, asking, for instance, "Why do we read fiction?" (Zunshine 2006) and what are the "Uses of Literature" (Felski 2008)? In contrast, the sociology of literature seeks to understand literature in terms of practices of social production, distribution and reception and therefore relies on empirical methods such as interviews or participant observation (Griswold, 2000). With the rise of social media and participatory reading cultures, scholars from different disciplines have turned to "The Digital Literary Sphere" (Murray 2018), studying the habits and responses of non-professional readers on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Amazon or Goodreads, sometimes bringing together hermeneutical, empirical, and digital approaches (e.g., Rehberg Sedo 2017, for an overview see Willis 2018).

The fields of Modern Arabic literature, Arabic Studies and Comparative Literature have for a long time paid little attention to readers and their practices and communities. While one challenge was the scarcity of sources, the other was the perceived absence of theories and methods appropriate to the region. In recent years, however, scholars have placed readers and reception at the heart of their approaches towards historical reading practices (e.g., Ayalon 2004), the reception of genres and the readership of popular literature and culture (e.g., Jacquemond 2006) and youth literature (e.g., Abou Ghaida 2020). In addition, political and cultural institutions have conducted reading surveys (e.g., "What do Arabs read", "Arab Reading Index") while translation studies have discussed the act of

translation as reading and the economy and reception of translation (e.g., Jacquemond 1992). Moreover, the Arabic periodical press is being revisited as an important site for author-reader interaction (e.g., Glaß 2004) while, on the other hand, recent studies have focused on new forms of interactive readership (Pepe 2019) and non-professional criticism (Junge 2021) enabled by the internet.

Against the backdrop of these developments, this conference aims to bring together scholars from different fields such as literary studies, comparative literature, cultural studies, media and communication studies, translation studies, anthropology, ethnography, social sciences, history and digital humanities in order to discuss interdisciplinary approaches to texts and readers, communities and practices, media and institutions, translations and adaptations, distribution and receptions to address in one way or another the main question of: Who reads modern Arabic literature, how and why?

The conference invites contributions on the reception of modern Arabic literature from the 19th century to the 21st century. This may include research on readers of marginalized or emerging literary genres such as the essay or the graphic novel as well as literary texts written in languages other than Arabic but related to the literature of the Arab world such as French and English. By putting readers in the spotlight, this conference has three goals. First, it revisits the concept of reception as indispensable to understanding literature in its relationship to society. Second, it calls for interdisciplinary approaches to literary reception that combine hermeneutic and empirical methodologies to elucidate the mutual relationship between literary texts and reading practices. Finally, the conference invites scholars to approach the internet and social media as promising tools and objects and to include digital methods in researching the reception of modern Arabic literature.

Suggested topics include, but are not limited to:
- reading communities and reading practices (e.g., book clubs, social networks)
- influential individual readers and their readings (e.g., literary critics, scholars, authors)
- the media and especially social media as a platform for readers (e.g., journals, YouTube, Instagram)
- institutions and their impact on literary reading (e.g., schools, universities, reading indicatives)
- reception of particular literary texts, genres and authors in the Arab world and beyond
- politics and economies of translating modern Arabic literature and their forms of reception
- the literary field and the making of readership (e.g., bestsellers, literary prizes)
- fan culture and participatory reading and reading events (e.g., book fairs, fan videos)
- empirical research on readers
- digital and automated approaches to readership (e.g., sentiment analysis, network analysis)
- reading surveys and institutional reader research

Please submit your abstract (200-350 words including references) and a short CV (100-150 words) **no later than 30 June 2022** to christian.junge@staff.uni-marburg.de.

The conference is planned to take place in person from 5-7 October 2022 at Philipps-University Marburg, Germany. The accommodation and travel costs of all participants will be covered.

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If you have any inquiries, please do not hesitate to contact us: christian.junge@staff.uni-marburg.de.

Please note: the conference takes place subject to the receipt of third-party funding.

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The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is based at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW) in Germany and at the Academy of Scientific Research and Technology (ASRT) in Egypt. It was established in 2013 as the first bilateral young academy worldwide. AGYA promotes research cooperation among outstanding early-career researchers from all disciplines who are affiliated with a research institution in Germany or any Arab country. The academy supports the innovative research projects and collaborative initiatives of its members in various fields of research as well as in science policy and science communication. AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and various Arab cooperation partners.

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