

## POEMS THAT DO NOT SLEEP

HASSAN AL NAWWAB

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YEAR LEVEL: Y10–12

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Poetry; Transnational Literature;  
Cultural Perspectives

### ABOUT THE BOOK

With devastating simplicity, Hassan Al Nawwab's imagistic poems speak of war and terror, of homesickness in exile, the blessings of peace and the pain of belonging. The collection is in two parts, 'Tree Flying' and 'Diaspora', and each poem is presented with its counterpart in Arabic on the opposite page, as translated from English by the poet himself.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hassan Al Nawwab was born in Iraq in 1960 and came to Australia in 2003 with his wife and children. He is a poet and journalist who has published three volumes of poetry and two plays in Arabic, and has received numerous awards for his poems. *Poems That Do Not Sleep* is Hassan's first collection in English.

### THEMES

- History
- Belonging
- Cultural identity
- Arabic poetry
- War
- Exile
- Refugee
- National identity
- Culture
- Peace
- Postcolonialism
- Diaspora

### AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

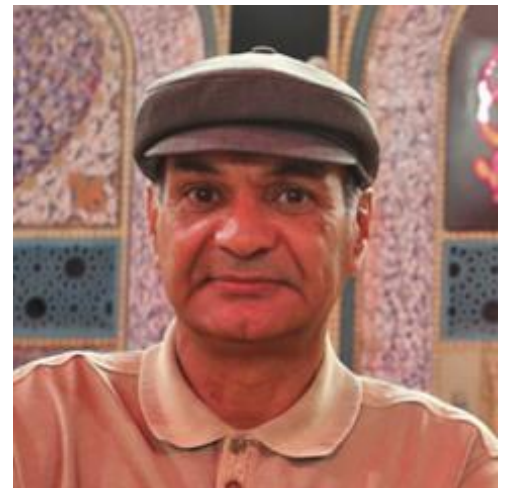
Although this teaching resource was written with students in Years 10 to 12 in mind, there are poems in this collection that are accessible to younger readers.

West Australian teachers of Year 11 Literature ATAR can refer to literary texts outside the prescribed list as long as the text chosen assists in the teaching and learning of the course content and students are aware that the text is not on the Year 12 Literature ATAR list. *Poems That Do Not Sleep* is a new work and as such is not yet on the prescribed list.

For teachers outside Western Australia who wish to use this book as a Year 11 or 12 Literature ATAR text, please confer with the curriculum board in your jurisdiction.

### GENERAL CAPABILITIES

Critical and creative thinking, personal and social, literacy, intercultural understanding, ethics.



## USEFUL WEBSITES

- History of Arabic Poetry: [bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-28210674](http://bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-28210674)
- Iran and Iraq War: [aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/22/legacy-of-iran-iraq-war-still-reverberates-40-years-later](http://aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/22/legacy-of-iran-iraq-war-still-reverberates-40-years-later)
- Iraqi Artists in Exile: [thewalrus.ca/a-culture-in-exile/](http://thewalrus.ca/a-culture-in-exile/)
- Other Iraqi poets in Exile: [poetryfoundation.org/poets/dunya-mikhail](http://poetryfoundation.org/poets/dunya-mikhail)
- War poetry: [poetryfoundation.org/collections/144683/war-poetry](http://poetryfoundation.org/collections/144683/war-poetry)

## CLASSROOM IDEAS

Readers of Arabic are encouraged to read both the English and Arabic versions of the poems in this collection. Teachers should encourage those who are able to read both versions to share their knowledge and opinions with others in the classroom.

### Pre-Reading Activities

1. Create a list of poems you have read or that you like. You can include songs you believe hold up as poems, as well as Insta-poetry.
2. In pairs, compare your lists and identify any common features of at least two works from your respective lists.
3. What poetic or literary techniques are used in these works? Do the pieces in your partner's list conform to your expectations of what a poem is? What are some of the themes that the works on your lists explore?
4. In what ways does poetry differ from prose or drama? What commonalities do they share?
5. Look at the book cover and consider the title. Predict what you might think themes might be explored in this book?

Although each poem in *Poems That Do Not Sleep* can be read as a standalone piece, student should be encouraged to read the whole book and to listen to Hassan's reading of the poems.

### Listening

'Memories' is read in Arabic. Non-Arabic speakers should listen but read the text in English, as they would subtitles in a movie.

'Fire' is read in both Arabic and English.

If there are students who speak Arabic in your classroom, encourage them to read these poems out loud to the class. If you have students who have friends or relatives who speak Arabic, you may want to ask them to record them reading one or two of the poems.

### Reading

1. Individual students should select five poems from the book that they engaged with. In pairs or small groups, they should decide on a final list of five of the most engaging poems and have reasons why these poems made the list.
2. Below is a general guide on how to introduce critical and close reading of a poem to students unfamiliar with the process:
  - a. Read the poem a few times to gain a sense of meaning, language, narrative, point of view, rhyme and rhythm.
  - b. Clarify words and phrases.
  - c. What images and sounds does the poem evoke?
  - d. Identify and clarify the intertextual references.
  - e. Pay attention to the poetic devices used in the piece, such as line breaks, imagery, repetition, metaphor, simile.
  - f. Pay attention to the physical layout of the poem on the page. How does this contribute to meaning?
  - g. How would you describe this poet's voice and style?

- h. How do any of the items identified in 5, 6 or 7 above help emphasis the poems' meanings?
- i. What is the effect of having the Arabic poems set alongside their English counterparts?

## Context

Although *Poems That Do Not Sleep* can be read as a standalone text, students in senior secondary school are encouraged to explore the socio-political and historical context in which the book was written in order to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of these poems.

Hassan Al Nawwab was born in the Republic of Iraq in 1960, only two years after the overthrow of the Kingdom of Iraq. Hassan's grandparents were from Lucknow, the capital city of the Indian state Uttar Pradesh, India, and moved to what was then the British Mandate of Iraq, which preceded the independent Kingdom of Iraq.

In 1981, when Hassan had only just graduated from university with a degree in horticulture, he was drafted into the Saddam Hussein's army and became a tank driver in the Iraq and Iran war; a war began in 1980 when the Iraqi army crossed into Iran. Although most commentators and historians now attribute Iraq as the aggressors, at the time, many argued that Iran started the war because they wanted to export their theocratic state to Iraq. Iraq was openly supported by wealthy countries including Saudi Arabia, Britain and the US. The war ended in a stalemate in 1988 but the last Iraqi troops did not withdraw from Iran until early 1991, which is when the First Gulf War began.

Hassan spent a year fighting in the First Gulf War and later became a journalist, novelist and poet, after working a series of odd jobs. In 2001, he was invited to Jordan by the Jordan Writers Union, and it was there that he sought refuge from Saddam Hussein's oppressive government because he was one of the writers and intellectuals who spoke out against Hussein's regime.

There are many Iraqi poets, writers, artists and intellectuals living in exile. Experts in Arabic poetry have commented on how difficult it is for Iraqi poets in exile to be visible in the country of their arrival because poetry is not as valued as much in their host country as it is in Iraq. They also point to how difficult it is for them to continue writing in their own language while trying to communicate in the language of their new countries. Hassan's first cousin (once removed) Muthaffar al-Nawab (b.1934), also a dissident poet, is renowned throughout the Arab world.

Hassan came to Australia in 2002 under the UNHCR's resettlement program.

## Activities

In pairs or small groups brainstorm and mind map the topics and themes covered in this book. Then come up with a list of potential research topics. The point of this exercise is for students to consider the broader context of this book.

After students have created their list, ask them to pick and research one of the topics to present to the class. Examples:

- The Iran and Iraq war
- The Modern History of Iraq
- Poets in Exile
- Refugees
- Arabic poetry
- Ancient history of what is now Iraq
- War Trauma
- Citizenship/Nationality

## War Poetry

*Poems That Do Not Sleep* can be situated within the context of other poets who have written about the horrors of war and for survivors, the aftermath. There are also many songwriters in the 20th and 21st century who have written about wars.

## Pair/Group Activity

Create an anthology of war poetry in which you include at least ten poems or songs that speak to poems from *Poems That Do Not Sleep*. You need to include at least five of Hassan's poems and five mirroring poems and be able to explain the thematic links. Present your findings to the class and/or include an introduction to your anthology.

You may want to address the following questions:

1. What is your definition of 'war poetry' – is it poetry written by combatants, peace protestors, people who have survived war, or all of the above?
2. Have you limited yourself to a specific war, country, region or period in history?
3. What are the themes common to the poems you've included?

The Poetry Foundation webpage War Poetry could be a useful place to start.

## Further Discussion Questions

Teachers may create a panel discussion in which students demonstrate their understanding of the key concepts and themes, or the application of these to the role of poetry in the students' own lives. Panel discussions do not necessarily have to be a formal assessment task but can be an opportunity for students to reinforce and synthesise knowledge and skills gained from other lessons. These ideas can also be adapted for essay questions as required.

Ideas for panel discussion:

1. 'Fire' and 'Do not ask me' are two of the poems in the collection where the poet has deliberately repeated the words at the beginning of the line for effect (anaphora). Compare and contrast how anaphora has been used in and your personal response to these two poems.
2. What can poems such as those in *Poems That Do Not Sleep* add to an understanding of war, say from a war historian's perspective? Use examples from the book to support your discussion.
3. Discuss how rhetoric and imagery in this collection lets the reader know that the poet's particular stand on war and exile.
4. A poem is a conversation with a reader. What is the role of the reader when reading a poem? Select a couple of poems from the collection to discuss how reading poetry can be an active or passive experience.
5. Poetry is political; a poet can be an activist. Discuss how rhetoric and imagery in this collection lets the reader know that the poet is taking a particular stand. How useful are poems in opening our eyes to different subject positions? What is the effect of a poem that makes us feel uncomfortable?