

plot in Kigali cut down to build a rental unit to pay for her daughter's university education in the United States. Born in 1998, the twenty-one-year-old daughter is inhabited by her brother and three sisters, buried at the foot of the jacaranda in 1994 by Gaby's mother, but whose presence she has always sensed sitting high up among the tree's branches, out of her mother's sight.

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Gaël Faye

Jacaranda



Jacaranda traces, in thirty multivocal chapters, Milan's thirty-six-year journey to understanding what lies behind the tenacious refusal of his mother, Venancia, to open up about her Rwandan family. Explicitly stated years—1994, 1998, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020—signpost his stays and travels between Kigali and Versailles where, as a twelve-year-old in 1994, horrified and uncomprehending, he watches with her and his French father the massacres unfolding on the French news and briefly that summer shares his bedroom with Claude, who arrives with a deep head wound and is presented as Venancia's nephew. They meet again in 1998 during Milan's first trip to Rwanda with his mother when the two sixteen-year-olds grapple with the Franco-Rwandan's foreignness as a *muzungu* (a white European) before forging over three decades the trust that will bridge the genocide's chasm for them.

Familiar characters from Gaby's childhood cross over into Milan's own first-person narrative. Mamie, Milan's maternal

grandmother, is back in Rwanda after years in exile in Burundi; and Rosalie, Stella's great-grandmother, has rejoined her granddaughter Eusébie, whose very existence as a Tutsi survivor incarnates the dead and ensures that her people live on in the generations that follow hers. Gradually, Milan assembles Rwanda's history from their stories, harking back over five generations to the royal court in Nyanza, before the divisive Belgian colonial rule tore the sovereign nation's social fabric apart and created the calamitous retributive conditions in the ensuing postcolonial era that led up to the genocide.

Weaving testimonials that Milan witnesses at a *gacaca* court proceeding or during the annual commemoration events together with discussions to which he is privy as survivors confront their assailants and their own acrimony, *Jacaranda*'s architecture fills in the gaping memories with the buried truths that imperil trusted friendships, vindicate familial intimations, and appease consciences. The novel figures its own *mise en abyme* at the Kibuye wooden chalet on Lake Kivu: a library for the films, music, and books scavenged from the homes the *génocidaires* decimated and the recently acquired collection that Gaby inherited from Madame Economopoulos in Bujumbura. These create a space to hold and transmit to the new generations the testimonials and stories of their elders, whether written or even rapped—as in Faye's 2022 album *Mauve Jacaranda*—to know the root of each life's tree.

Sarah Davies Cordova
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ZAHRAN ALQASMI

Honey Hunger

Trans. Marilyn Booth. Cairo.
Hoopoe. 2025. 292 pages.

FOR THE READER who knows little about Oman, Zahran Alqasmi's third novel, aptly titled *Honey Hunger*—an unusual tale about hunters of wild honey in the mountains—has a sweet novelty. Versatile in many literary genres, Alqasmi has published four novels, ten poetry collections, and a collection of short stories. Recognized internationally, he was awarded the International Prize for Ara-

bic Fiction for his novel *The Water Diviner* in 2023. *Honey Hunger* does not blow any trumpets on political issues but instead follows another melody by examining a small, unknown band of colorful characters who thrive in a magnificent natural landscape, full of risk.

In the opening chapter, we are introduced to Azzan, a withdrawn beekeeper, who has great sympathy and understanding for his bees, many of whom he lost because of the severe winter. A friend persuades him to move his bees from the White Mountains to Juba, two hundred and fifty kilometers south. His solitude is broken by the mysterious appearance of the shepherdess Thamna, whose plaintive *tawwibehs*, poem-songs, he hears.

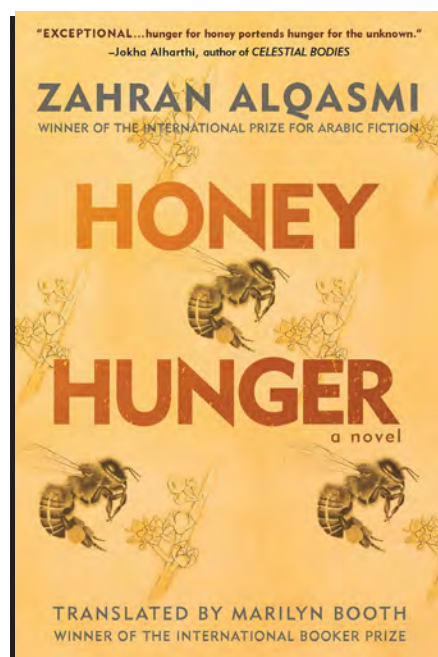
Although the novel begins with Azzan's point of view, the omniscient narrator probes the minds of other characters and hearsay to give us a complex picture of village life in Oman. When Azzan moves to Juba with his bees, he is befriended by a Bedouin, Hamud, and his wife, Salama. Despite his modest Bedouin lifestyle, Hamud has thousands of *rials* in the bank from training camels for races for wealthy Gulf emirs. Azzan's new home at first seems idyllic, but then he is confronted by others in the area, who are annoyed by his bees. Hamud, who is well connected, intercedes for him when he is told he must have a government permit to raise bees.

Azzan's obsession with bees is not just confined to raising them, however, but also with hunting them in the mountains. Part of the thrill of hunting for wild honey is the adventure, a little like miners panning for the illusory gold. Abdallah, one of his comrades, reflects: "The exultation of the search itself—not out of need but for the joy of the adventure, looking for a wild and elusive beehive when everyone else who had been searching for it had come back utterly worn out and empty-handed."

The reserved Azzan finds two kindred spirits. Abdallah is a feisty, voluble storyteller from a family of mountain climbers, nicknamed "the honey fly." He understands the secretive nature of bees—the key to finding the hives is locating their water supplies. The other comrade is Al-Hatati, an older man who is not afraid to scramble up mountains or call it straight. He is the one who found

Azzan and broke the news to him that both of his parents had died—and helped him with their funeral rites and also introduced him to a new addiction, hunting for wild honey.

Alqasmi uses the metaphor of honey to refer to other types of sweetness that ensnare his characters. Locals who work for British Petroleum bring foreign alcohol to the village. Many of the young men are drawn to the drinking sessions by the sweetness of the oud, the music of the lute. Once the foreign booze dries up, many of the men start drinking cologne while others succumb to vices of their own: the eloquent Abdallah cannot resist women, while Al-Hatati cannot do without tobacco.



Alqasmi also gives readers an insight into the strictly segregated, enclosed world of village women in Oman, ruled by ignorance, superstition, and gossip. Only one woman knows how to read, Wadha, and she reads medieval tales, stories from the Qur'an, and mystical and love poetry to the other women. Sarah, one of her listeners who has fallen secretly in love with Azzan, takes the idealized romantic poetry too much to heart. Sadly, her restricted life and infatuation fuel her depression, and she eventually wastes away without proper medical attention. The omniscient narrator describes examples of depression, sleepwalking, and epilepsy in the community that go untreated; in-

stead, these maladies and illnesses are explained away by malicious rumor and superstition. When Wadha withdraws from the other women, she is called a witch.

Alqasmi's poetic descriptions of the mountains and the desert of Oman have been rendered sensitively through Marilyn Booth's precise translation. Azzan himself identifies with the natural world so profoundly that he feels like he is a bird when he discovers his love for Thamna: "His spirit began to beat its wings, trying to rise out of its cage to soar into the lands behind those mountain peaks and the dips and gorges that separated them." Azzan marvels at how different the landscape is in Juba: "The sand plied its curves like the sea, waves birthing new waves into the distance, on and on. He began scrambling up a higher hill, his feet plunging deeper into the sand as it became softer."

Out on an expedition by himself, caught in a storm, he falls in a cave. Abdallah and Al-Hatati search for him; however, he is rescued by Thamna, who pulls him out with her donkey. He is so badly hurt that she takes him to the hospital but quickly vanishes. As one might expect from such an original writer, Alqasmi resists a predictable resolution for this memorable and evocative novel.

Gretchen McCullough
Cairo

BRIGITTE GIRAUD

Live Fast: A Novel

Trans. Cory Stockwell. New York.

Ecco. 2025. 176 pages.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN if you made one decision instead of another?

That's what the imagined alter-ego narrator of Brigitte Giraud's searingly personal, loosely autobiographical Prix Goncourt winner, *Live Fast*, wonders. In a retrospective forensic fictional memoir encumbered by loss, guilt, and the lingering languor of unrelenting grief, she focuses on the cogs of coincidental catastrophe that led to the accidental death of her forty-one-year-old husband, Claude, more than twenty years ago.

It's rare for a motorcycle to have the lead role or be the pivotal protagonist (almost a villain) in a novel, but a 430-pound

Honda CBR900 FireBlade from Japan is exactly that in Giraud's speculation surrounding the fatal events. In a series of twenty-three brief "if only" chapters, she constructs a framework of unexpectedly fateful choices that might have changed the course of their lives if the dominoes had not begun to fall to the inevitability of whenever.



In a prologue she blames a house they bought and had been moving into with their young son in 1999 and are now selling to a developer. She is certain that it is "at the heart of what caused the accident." The subsequent sequence of probable flashbacks begins when she also blames herself for wanting to leave their cramped apartment in the center of Lyon for the silent, bucolic "green zone" in order to "start again from scratch. To ratchet up to a new level of coolness. And to aim for perfection itself."

Other hypothetical considerations depend on if her "grandfather hadn't committed suicide," bequeathing her funds that helped to buy the property; if they "hadn't received the keys to the house in advance"; and telling her mother the garage was available where her brother could park the seductive motorcycle while on a week's vacation and Claude could "borrow" the dangerous bike for the eventful joy ride. At one point she even accuses Stephen King of contributing to Claude's demise; if "he had died