

VOGUE

ARABIA

APRIL 2024



THE STORYTELLERS

THE POWER OF
ARAB CINEMA & TV

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HALA GORANI

The Emmy winning international journalist currently works at NBC, after 25 years in broadcast news. For this issue, she spoke to cover star Youssra (p86), who, Gorani says, “exuded perpetual motion.” “Youssra is a veteran of the screen with almost a hundred films and TV shows to her name, and she still speaks with the kind of joyful excitement you’d expect from a newcomer.”

YASMINE EISSA

The Egyptian stylist, who studied costume design for theater and screen and has worked with the biggest stars in the region, styled this issue’s covers. “It’s always a pleasure styling Youssra. She is my icon and such a joy to be around. The group cover was also so thrilling and is definitely one to remember!”



DESIREE MATTSOON

“We had so much fun shooting this sleek, bold jewelry story,” says the acclaimed Norwegian photographer – who first picked up a camera at age nine – about Drama Queen (p71). “The jewelry was striking and it was magical to see everything come to life with such an amazing model and gorgeous makeup. It’s one of my favorite stories.”



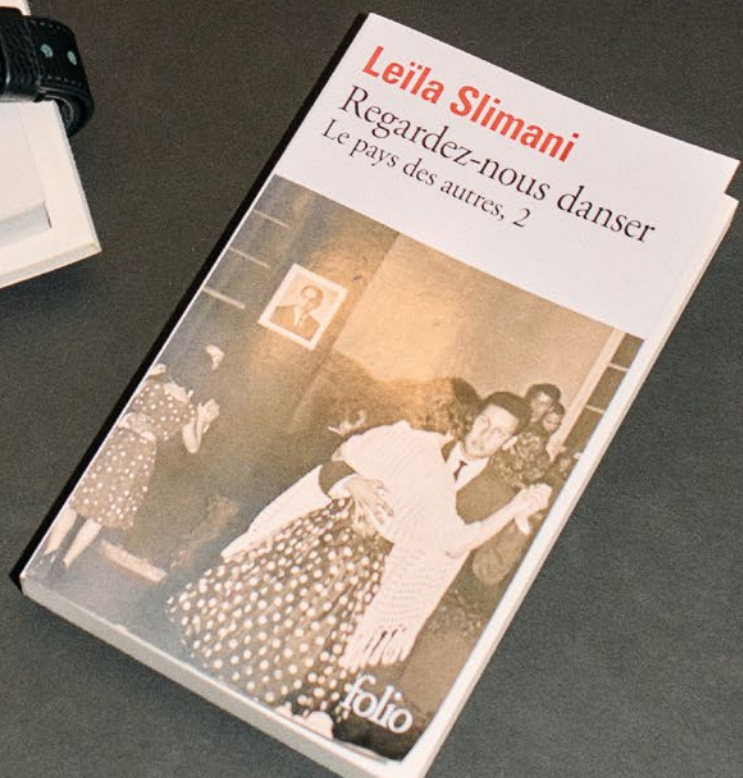
GAY GASSMANN

As an editor, writer, and art historian, Gay Gassmann covers art and lifestyle stories. For this issue, she interviewed three women about their lives in literature (p108): author Leïla Slimani, fashion icon and author Farida Khelfa, and designer/architect Aline Asmar d’Amman. “This was such a fascinating and enlightening subject, and each woman has her own strong and unique voice. I loved listening to their stories and hearing how literature and the written word has touched their lives.”

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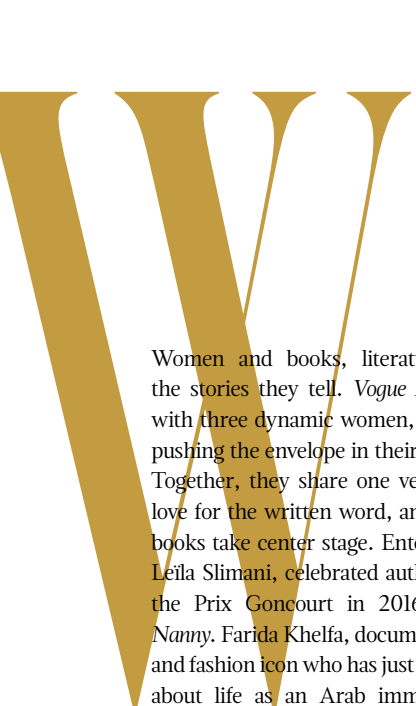
Words GAY GASSMANN



France's newly renovated national library sets the scene for a trio of dynamic Arab thinkers, as award-winning writer Leïla Slimani, filmmaker Farida Khelfa, and architect Aline Asmar d'Amman discuss the power of books



Aline Asmar d'Amman, Farida Khelfa, and Leïla Slimani in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris



Women and books, literature, words, and the stories they tell. *Vogue Arabia* sits down with three dynamic women, each leading and pushing the envelope in their respective fields. Together, they share one very strong link, a love for the written word, and projects where books take center stage. Enter Morocco-born Leïla Slimani, celebrated author who received the Prix Goncourt in 2016 for *The Perfect Nanny*. Farida Khelfa, documentary filmmaker and fashion icon who has just written a memoir about life as an Arab immigrant, *A French Childhood*, and Aline Asmar D'Amman, an architect from Lebanon and designer who has always been inspired by the written word.

All three gather in Paris within the walls of the historic Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), site Richelieu, recently renovated and transformed over a period of 12 years with a budget of approximately €241 million. Located in the center of Paris, it is now open to students, visitors, and readers. The BnF dates to the time of François I in the 16th century and is dedicated to collecting and preserving national documentation. With more than 150 million printed materials, the vast collections are divided into 14 departments. The restored premises are nothing short of spectacular, with a brand-new entrance through the garden and a breathtaking sculptural metal staircase. In addition to the traditional presence of a library, the BnF also hosts exhibitions, conferences, and talks. The institution has four Parisian locations, including the monumental site in the 13th neighborhood. In addition to books, the collections also include maps, medals, photographs, and more than 10,000 illuminated manuscripts.

Having just returned from a writing retreat on the Azores islands in Portugal, Moroccan French writer and Goncourt Prize winner Leïla Slimani has much to share about books, writing, and living life.

What are you working on now?

LS: The third part of the trilogy I have been writing. I have already published the first two parts. The first one, *The Country of Others* (2020), is about my family history, about my grandparents during the colonization in Morocco. The second part, *Watch Us Dance* (2023), is about my parents in the 70s, in Morocco. The third part, which I have just finished, is about my generation. This generation of immigration, of terrorism.

The Goncourt Prize is the most renowned literary prize in France. How did it feel to win it?

LS: A prize is a curious thing. It was a total surprise for me, and I was happy and proud. But in the end, success has no smell, no taste. It's nothing you can touch or hug.

How would you describe your lifelong relationship with literature?

LS: I have a passionate relationship with books. I was a crazy reader when little and I would feel like I was living in the book. I love books – and I hate them because they prevent me from living. I think I've spent most of my life reading and in fiction. Since I was a child, I've been obsessed with other people. What are they thinking? Feeling? As a reader, I could sense what it was like for another human being. As a writer, I try to put myself in the shoes of someone else. In this time now, it is important to be able to look at life with another point of view. This is the gift that literature gave to me.

What books have you read and reread?

LS: A lot! Marguerite Duras. I've read all her books, many times. Toni Morrison is my guide, my sister. She is always there for me. When I am blocked, I always find inspiration again and I can continue writing.

*Lebanese architect and designer Aline Asmar d'Amman has lived with books and literature since childhood. She began the year hosting the first edition of literary events with Chanel at 7L bookstore in Paris and currently is exhibiting her *Le Béton littéraire*, *Concrete Poetry* at Le Bon Marché Rive Gauche as part of the Bookish pop-up.*

“Literature has always been essential to me. My father couldn't read or write. So, for me, it is important to use it”

What do books mean to you?

AAA: As an architect, born and raised in Lebanon, for me, books meant shelter and a safe space. They also meant armor as I heard chaos around me. I would sit and hide with a book under a table. I knew that books and paper and ink don't save you from anything, but it was my way to travel and to enter deep silence and forget everything else. This is why I recently created *Le Béton littéraire*, *Concrete Poetry*. Unconsciously, these stories become your foundations.

Can you describe this “concrete poetry”?

AAA: *Béton littéraire* is certainly my most personal design creation to date. Selected, cherished books are set in poured earth to give rise to a series of sculptural pieces of furniture in literary concrete. They summon the love of literature and the promise of the book as a protective shield. Books invited silence and joy, dreams and escapism. They still do every day, in my quest of concrete poetry.

Which books have impacted your life?

AAA: So many! I like to think about women authors as imaginary friends. That's why when I did the Writing Room (for Design Parade Toulon 2023), I dedicated it to women writers. Etel Adnan, Virginia Woolf, Nadia Tueni. And contemporary authors like Lidia Yuknavitch and her memoir, *The Chronology of Water* (2011). Also, Sophocles' play *Antigone*, which I used to recite by heart. There is always the notion of female heroes.

What have you read and reread?

AAA: Probably Czech-French novelist Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). This is how you discover love, men, the body, the idea of the eternal comeback. I've always liked books where you meet many characters. I love Leïla Slimani and have quoted her in my work. These characters and stories become your friends and are the bricks and mortar of your inner foundation. You become who you are by the books you read.

Do you write?

AAA: I always start by writing. I have to grasp my ideas and thoughts with the written word. I must start writing the story before designing the story. Architects write with material.

What are you reading now?

AAA: *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates (2000), about Marilyn Monroe. It's so interesting. I also read poetry. Amin Maalouf. Always a mix and match, I discover authors all the time.

Moroccan French
writer Leïla Slimani





Lebanese architect
and designer Aline
Asmar d'Amman

You recently hosted the inaugural event at 7L in Paris. What was that like?

AAA: The founding collaboration I had with Karl Lagerfeld began at 7L, the sacred, ultra-vibrant cathedral of books that houses his collection of 33,000 volumes and his photo studio. Today, the place has a new lease on life thanks to its acquisition by Chanel, bringing together a circle of friends of 7L for creative and cultural events. I was the first guest of 7L and Laurence Delamare for the Salon de Lecture, so I could stage a personal scenography around selected books and Karl's tableware and objets d'art de vivre. A rare moment of joyful exchange and conversations, surrounded by book lovers.

French Algerian documentary film director and fashion icon Farida Khelifa, who has just written her

first book, A French Childhood, speaks about her need for books and the beauty of words.

How did you come to write?

FK: My mother passed away in August 2022. I started writing the next day. All my childhood memories came back, and it was like a compulsion. I wrote every day for a year. It was important for me, and I did it. I didn't start out writing a book, but it came later in the writing.

Have you written before?

FK: No, I tried, but not really. Not like this time. And suddenly, I felt like it was over, and I didn't have anything else to say.

Can you describe one of the most important moments or episodes you write about in your book?

FK: The entire book is an important moment, there's no special part. The idea of saying what I say in a book was unimaginable to me.

“These characters and stories become your friends and are the bricks and mortar of your inner foundation. You become who you are by the books you read”

It was a real journey.

Is this the one book? Are there other stories you want to tell?

FK: I have no idea. I enjoy writing, but I don't know if I'm a writer. It was comfortable even if it was painful at times. I had to write, otherwise things go away, and no one remembers. For me it was important to write it all down at this moment.

What do books mean to you? Are they a part of your life?

FK: Books are an important part of my life. I read all the time. I need to read. It nourishes me physically and intellectually. They have helped in my life, and I never give them up.

Are there books you have read and reread often?

FK: Yes, Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). I love Freud because he is a great writer, a great philosopher, and a great thinker. I also love Frantz Fanon. He was from Martinique and was a psychiatrist who worked in Algeria and France. His books *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) are important to me. I also love novels and Joyce Carol Oates. She can write anything, and she carries you into her stories.

What are you reading now?

FK: I am reading a book called *Bitch* by Lucy Cooke (2022), about the real meaning of the word and the power of the female in the animal world. It's fantastic. And also, a book about Picasso's superstitions by his granddaughter Diana Widmaier Picasso and the anthropologist Philippe Charlier, called *Picasso sorcier* (2022). Literature has always been essential to me. My father couldn't read or write. He suffered from this. It was a handicap. So, for me, it is important to use it. □

French Algerian
filmmaker, author, and
model Farida Khelfa

