Artist and writer Joy Garnett (@joygarnett) is working on a book about her grandfather, Ahmed Zaki Abushady, the Egyptian poet and bee scientist. She answered a few questions about AZ Abushady, his work, and her book project:

ArabLit: When did you first become interested in your grandfather’s life and work (in a serious way)? What role did family stories play? Can you describe your current book-project and what it will encompass?

Joy Garnett: The book is a family memoir and an adventure story – a love story – that focuses on Abushady’s life, his work as a poet and bee scientist, and his premature death in relative obscurity in the US. It’s not a biography in the conventional sense. I have an inside story to offer, told through family members and Abushady’s own voice. My discovery of an archive containing his letters and decades of correspondence was a pivotal moment. They reveal how his personal story is entangled with political and cultural conflicts played out from 1922 to 1946 in Egypt. Central to the story is the point of view of my aunt Safeya, the source of so much of this material. She is Abushady’s oldest daughter and the last living family link to that time. So, I am telling an idiosyncratic story partly through her, and in a way that I think anyone will relate to, whether or not they’re interested in Egypt. Specialists in Modern Arabic poetry and Egypt between the wars will, I hope, be interested as well.

I grew up hearing stories my mother told me about her childhood in Alexandria. Abushady loomed large, but his significance was related in broad strokes. It was all a bit vague and romantic. I was in college when I started to get a real sense of who my grandfather was. I started studying fusha at McGill’s Institute of Islamic studies and got into a conversation with an Egyptian classmate. She set me straight.
When I finally got to Egypt, it was on a student loan. I enrolled in the American University in Cairo's summer language program. I was twenty. I made a point of looking for Abushady's books and asking questions about him. I started to figure out who my family was. Once back at the Institute, I sought out critical articles about his poetry, but this was premature. The bulk of critical writing in English was still being written.

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In my twenties, I stopped studying Arabic and Abushady altogether. I decided to pursue an art career instead. There was a point when I realized it was either him or me, and I had to make a choice. Many years passed where I barely thought about him, and then a few years ago I felt the pull. Even dead, Abushady is a force of Nature.

Abushady’s student ID card, from Medical School in Cairo.
When my mother, aunt, and uncle started to grow old and sick, I was jolted back into thinking about this project. I taped interviews with them. I had a day job in a museum library that gave me free access to things like JSTOR and interlibrary loans. And of course, this time around I have the Internet.

I’ve spent the past couple of years traveling to different archives and doing research independently to try to piece together the many parts of Abushady’s life, which is not easy. As a physician, bacteriologist, beekeeper, agricultural and social reformer, poet and publisher, he defies categorization. I want to bring together what I’ve discovered about his main achievements in a single narrative. I would like to show the extent of his influence on Modern Arabic poetry as well as his impact on bee husbandry in England and Egypt. For him, poetry and bees were deeply interconnected. But of course, no one in Arabic literature circles knows much about his bee science contributions and vice versa. The connections are interesting.

**AL:** Does it get into other family history? For instance, your great-grandmother’s Cairo literary salons?

**JG:** There are some colorful characters in the extended family. My great-grandfather, Maitre Muhammed Abushady Bey, was a big lawyer and a pal of Sa’ad Zaghlul. Legend has it that he could get anyone off no matter how serious the offense. His milieu included many writers and poets who exerted an early influence on his young son. I’ve had difficulty extracting more than a few details from that earlier time. I’ve had better luck with the period following Abushady’s return to Egypt in 1922 after ten years living in England. A creative DIY urban scene greeted him, and he was perfectly suited for it. Our close cousins through my great-grandmother, Amina (née Nagib) were the painters and satirists Seif and Edham Wanly, who were integral to the Egyptian artist “scene” in Alexandria. They were part of my grandfather’s circle, which included poets, writers, journalists, cartoonists, calligraphers, painters, sculptors, composers, etc. The Wanly brothers provided illustrations and cartoons for Abushady’s various publications. Edham was very close with my aunt, and they exchanged letters regularly until his death in 1959.

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There was also an evil stepmother, an atheist grifter, several instances of unrequited love and a string of tragic, youthful suicides. There are probably too many intrigues to include in one book.

I made an unexpected discovery concerning my grandmother, Abushady’s first wife, Annie. They met when he was a medical student in London, and she was English, of course. Her maiden name was Bamford. It turns out that she was descended from the radical labor organizer, Samuel Bamford, who was a poet in the Lancashire dialect. Her father was a member of the Oddfellows, a centuries-old mutual organization that
presaged trade unions. So she came from a long line of radical working class poets who believed in things like financial support for working people and free healthcare for the poor. I believe Annie had a significant influence on Abushady’s vision for social reform. She may have provided the inspiration for his feminism. He was promoting women’s suffrage in Egypt in the 1930s! And he named his two daughters after Huda Sha’arawi and Safeya Zaghul. He actually wanted to institute the principles of England’s Cooperative Movement in Egypt, which shows his romantic, against-all-odds brand of idealism. He was a Wafdist like his father, and as a nationalist he wanted, of course, to see an end to the British occupation. So his Anglophilia was complex, if not conflicted.

AL: Do you remember when you first read his poetry? To what extent are you/the reader interested in it as poetry, and to what extent as part of his story (as an Apollo founder, as an experimenter, an innovator)? What about his other works, literary criticism & historical works & theatre? Will some of his translated work be a part of your book? Do you think some of his works, translated, would interest English-language readers today? Or, re-issued, Arabic readers today?

JG: I can’t speak to what would interest English-language or Arabic readers today. Poetry as a rule attracts a special readership. Arabic poetry of that period is of great interest to scholars. I tried to read Abushady’s poetry while I was at McGill. The Institute has a number of volumes of his poetry in their library. But it was rough going. There was no way, and there is still no way that I, or even many native Arabic speakers, can get a handle on what he was enacting in the Arabic language through poetry. The only people I know who can easily read the poetry of the period and who know and feel what he was doing with language are Arabists and linguists. The rest of us may have to take their word for it. Sadly, most of the translated excerpts I’ve found in dissertations and such are inadequate if not downright awful. It’s probably the most difficult thing to do, to translate poetry. You have to know both languages intimately, and you have to be a poet.

But I do know someone who meets all of these criteria, and who has agreed to translate one of Abushady’s love poems for the book. So that’s very exciting. Apparently, love poetry was his strong suit. When he published his diwan Zaynab in 1924, it was new, fresh — unlike anything that had been done. It helped open the way for what developed into an era of creative experimentation in poetry.

AL: How would you describe the influence of the Apollo, in Egypt and beyond, especially considering such important figures as Kamel Kilani, Abu-Qassem El-Shebbi, Ahmed Shawqi were involved? What role did your grandfather play?

JG: In the Arab world, poetry was stagnating. People were aware, whether they were happy about it or not, of the new kinds of writing being produced elsewhere in the world. There was a very real interest in Modernism across all the arts. Abushady’s vision was for a truly contemporary Egypt. He believed the only way forward was through hybridity and inclusiveness, discussion and debate. In Apollo he published criticism and reviews as well as poetry. He also rather infamously published monographs authored by himself and others on topics such as poverty, religious faith, women’s suffrage, and atheism.
When the great Bengali poet and Nobelist Rabindranath Tagore visited Egypt in 1926, he stayed with Ahmed Shawqi. There is a very moving passage in one of my grandfather’s diaries about their meeting, and about their shared belief that poetry offered a universal language. Abushady really believed that international peace could be achieved and that poetry played an active role in the process.

Apollo’s Society, some members posing in the garden in 1935.

Abushady’s poetry journal Apollo (1932-34) stopped publication for financial reasons after only two years, but its influence was disproportionate to its run. The group of poets, writers and artists he assembled around it, which he called “Apollo’s Society,” and the work they produced, represents the first wave of Modernism in Arabic poetry. And that wave was sustainable. The journal was also unique in that it reached out to writers beyond Egypt’s borders. Abu-Qassem El-Shebbi, as you mentioned, the great Tunisian poet whose verse became popular again in Tunisia and Egypt during the revolutions of 2011, published his poetry for the first time in Apollo.

Abushady generally played an avuncular and diplomatic role, encouraging young poets like El-Shebbi, and publishing their work at a time when the more established, conservative publications refused to do so. Shawqi was the éminence grise, bestowing a certain validation and authority. After Shawqi passed away, Khalil Mutran took his place as the president of Apollo’s Society. So while there was a new vision and encouragement of creative risk-taking, there was also a sense of history and lineage. The intention to link with tradition was made clear through the involvement of these esteemed, elder poets.
AL: And for you, how does this research/writing fit into the rest of your work? Visual art, cultural appropriation/borrowing? How does it resonate with your other projects?

JG: I have always been interested in the archive, and my work as a visual artist, whether painting or new media, has long been research-based. In other words, the contents of the archive I’m researching determines to a large extent the nature of the resulting project. The earliest instance I can think of where I was conscious of this way of working was in the late 90s, when I was compiling declassified images and films of US atomic tests and producing paintings and agitprop. I decided to organize the many links to source material that I had amassed in the form of a website: http://TheBombProject.org For some years I continued to work on it and add to it. Now it stands as an archive of the project itself, and to the time prior to the advent of RSS feeds and social media, when people aggregated links on static websites.

After I organize it all, I will need to scan it and digitize it online. Essentially, the project is a portable museum, an open access, virtual Abushady museum.

Now I find that I am dealing with a large, ungainly and fragile physical archive, the Abushady archive amassed by my mother and aunt. It’s extraordinary that it exists at all, and I’ve only recently become aware of how extensive the material is. I’m actually still unearthing parts of it. The fact is, no one in my family for several generations has ever thrown anything away. I have ephemera from 1930s Egypt that includes movie tickets and playbills. I have visas, student ID cards, and death notices. Abushady kept carbons of seemingly every letter he ever sent, and he saved every response. In some instances he collated the full correspondence of several years in chronological order. I found personal letters in both English and Arabic, cables, sketches, and of course, an enormous number of photographs. The visual information tells a story all its own, of course, and has been essential to my writing this book. But it is massive enough, visually startling and significant so as to present a separate project.

So, this is the archive that I am dealing with as a visual artist. After I organize it all, I will need to scan it and digitize it online. Essentially, the project is a portable museum, an open access, virtual Abushady museum. I proposed this project for post-doctoral work, and I have a place offered me at Winchester School of Fine Art at the University of Southampton, in their PhD program for visual artists. It is a program that emphasizes interdisciplinary research across the arts. I am looking for funding so that I can start. In the meantime, I have a book to write.
Front cover of Apollo, Feb 1934 issue.