

Review of Comma Press

Comma Press, founded in 2005 and based in Manchester, has a simple, yet effective, mission: “to put the short story at the heart of contemporary narrative culture”¹. The press’ focus on the short story form is intended, in their words, to “transcend cultural and disciplinary boundaries, and to enable greater understanding across these boundaries”². Indeed, Comma has a catalogue which spans from the local, Manchester itself, to broader regions such as China, united through the form of the short story. The founder of the press, and Editor in Chief, Ra Page, emphasises the importance of ‘originality’ in their publications, using the advantage of financial support from Arts Council England (ACE), thus existing as a not-for-profit publishing press³. This funding model allows Comma the freedom to create opportunities for new, diverse authors, and to “play a role, not dissimilar to citizen journalism”, giving a voice to the marginalised authors around the globe through the powerful form of short fiction, speaking “truth to power”⁴.

From early in its conception, Comma has participated in translation ventures, from Europe in 2006, to the Middle East in 2008, and China in 2012. By engaging with a team of translators and editors, Comma has been able to uniquely widen their scope as a UK-based press, and establish an international perspective, publishing a wide range of diverse authors. Many of these authors are well-known in their own areas, in their own languages, but Comma’s involvement has enabled them to also break into the UK market, creating a symbiotic and collaborative relationship between publisher and author. One significant example of this is the Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim, generally unknown to the British public until the publication of his debut collection *The Madman of Freedom Square* in 2009,

¹Comma Press, ‘About Comma’, *Comma Press* <<http://commapress.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 21 Oct 2017].

² Comma Press, ‘About Comma’.

³ Georgia DC, ‘Interview, Ra Page, Comma Press, Indie Publisher of the Week’, *BookBlast* (2017) <<https://bookblast.com/blog/interview-ra-page-founder-comma-press-indie-publisher-week/>> [accessed 21 Oct 2017].

⁴ Georgia DC, ‘Interview, Ra Page’.

translated by Comma Press. Since then, Blasim has been shortlisted for, and won, several Independent Foreign Fiction prizes⁵.

Comma's engagement with authors from diverse backgrounds also operates at a political level; in 2017, it announced its intention to publish all 2018 titles from authors directly affected by the 'Muslim Ban' enacted by Donald Trump, in order to "champion, give voice to and better understand" the nations which have been vilified by popular US media and politics⁶. This level of awareness of, and involvement with, current political divisions, and Comma's determination to showcase worldwide talent, is impressive, and sets them apart from many other independent presses in the UK.

Published in January, 2008, the short story anthology *Madinah: City Stories from the Middle East* exemplifies Comma's mission substantially, as part of the *Comma City Stories* collection. Consisting of ten stories set across the Middle East, translated from a variety of dialects, the anthology seeks to expose the urban experience, within this politically-charged region, to a Western audience, and "open [...] doors" to transnational compassion⁷. In order to widen its availability to audiences, and increase mass-market appeal in modern society, *Madinah* is offered in both hard copy and eBook form, on Amazon Kindle, iBooks and Google Play; this is typical of all of Comma's publications. The cover is unpretentious yet effective, adopting green and gold accents against a stark white background, with gold and black text, tilted enticingly at a slight angle, listing the countries and their associated writers which will be represented within. The title, furthermore, is accompanied by its corresponding translation in Arabic script, to reinforce the subject matter, and the presence of translation within the anthology.

⁵ Comma Press, 'Hassan Blasim', Comma Press <<http://commapress.co.uk/hassan-blasim/>> [accessed 21 Oct 2017].

⁶ Scott Esposito, '8 Questions with Ra Page of Comma Press on Publishers Defying the Muslim Ban', *Conversational Reading*, Wordpress, (21 February 2017) <<http://conversationalreading.com/8-questions-with-ra-page-of-comma-press-on-publishers-defying-the-muslim-ban/>> [accessed 27 October 2017].

⁷ Comma Press, 'Madinah: City Stories from the Middle East', *Comma Press*. <<http://commapress.co.uk/books/madinah-city-stories-from-the-middle/>> [accessed 22 Oct 2017].

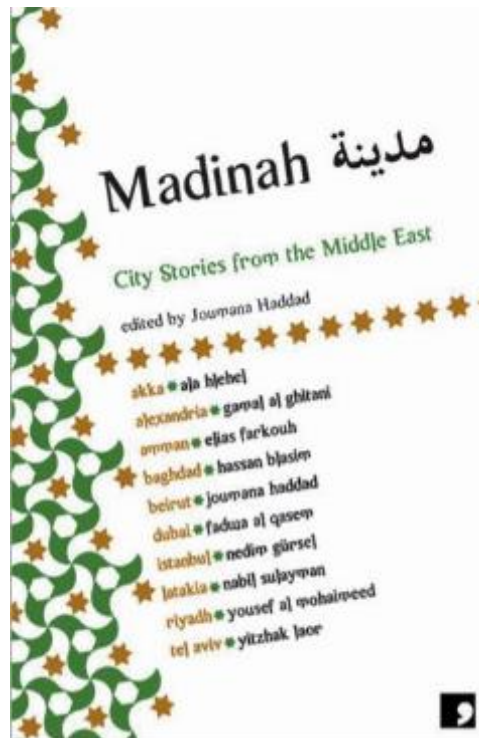


Fig 1. Screenshot of *Madinah* Cover from Amazon, https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B008170LRE/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_tmb [accessed 28 October 2017]

The format of the anthology is traditional and clear; one particularly notable feature is the use of minimalistic maps on the title page of each story, pinpointing the location of which each story is set. This is clearly added for the benefit of the international audience,

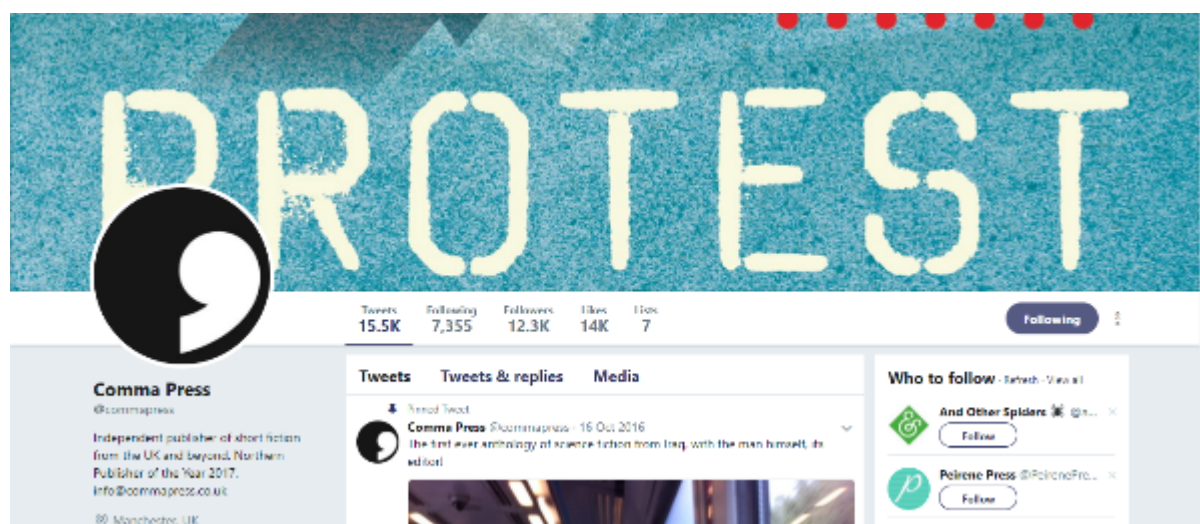


who may not be able to tell from memory where each city might be situated.

Fig 2. Screenshot of map from *Madinah*, on Amazon,
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B008I70LRE/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_tmb> [accessed 28
October 2017]

Innovative adjustments have been made to the eBook version, adding hyperlinks to the contents section which allow the reader to jump ahead to a specific short story. Comma's dedication to the digital format, both for this publication and many others, has the advantage of increasing readership, as well as being a cheaper and more energy efficient method of book production.

Moreover, Comma Press particularly excels in its embrace of social media and networking; the company publicises itself on a number of different platforms beyond its professional main website, including *Facebook*, *Wordpress* and *Twitter*. Each platform has



high production value, appearing sleek and professional.

Fig 3. Screenshot of Comma Press Twitter feed, from Twitter, 2017
<<https://twitter.com/commapress>> [accessed 28 October 2017]

By possessing a strong media presence, Comma has ensured a regular audience and readership for their publications, advertising themselves in an easily accessible, as well as inexpensive, manner. As a result, Comma publications are regularly reviewed by notable periodicals and blogs such as *The Independent*. At the moment of writing, Comma has approximately 12,300 followers on their Twitter account⁸. This commitment to self-

⁸ Comma Press, 'Twitter Homepage' (@commapress) <<https://twitter.com/commapress>> [accessed 23 October 2017].

promotion directly influences the attention of readers and reviewers upon the publications, leading to increased sales. According to Comma's annual report 2017, their yearly hardcopy sales increased from 8886 to 9580 in 2016, and their 'digital engagements' increased by 22,313⁹. Much of this incline can be attributed to their strong online presence, garnering media attention.

As well as social networking, Comma also maintains a strong presence within publishing networks; since 2016, the press has led The Northern Fiction Alliance, which intends to "showcase the diversity, creativity and spirit of risk-taking that sets Northern publishers apart", and includes other independent presses such as Leeds's Peepal Tree Press, and Liverpool's Dead Ink¹⁰. By forming this network, the NFA increases each press' international presence, and thus boosts revenue for writers and publishers. Page, as well as being Editorial Manager of Comma, also coordinates Comma Film, an adaptation project which "commissions filmmakers [...] to adapt short literary texts", committing to other platforms of story-telling as an effective method to broaden the scope of Comma's audience¹¹.

Comma Press' dedication to short fiction, and their contribution to the independent publishing industry, is unique in their global vision. Leading the way for innovations in format, platforms, translations, and engagement with political causes, Comma Press is firmly established as a respected model for the increasingly globalised publishing industry.

⁹ Comma Press, *Comma Press Annual Report 2017* (2017), p.4.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2fqVVLyJ_IHNFdkQzJnWGFERzQ/view> [accessed 27 October 2017]

¹⁰ Comma Press, 'Northern Fiction Alliance', *Comma Press*, <<http://commapress.co.uk/about/northern-fiction-alliance/>> [accessed 29 Oct 2017].

¹¹ Comma Press, 'Staff and Board, Comma Press' <<http://commapress.co.uk/people/>> [accessed 25 Oct 2017].

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Excellent review of Comma Press. Extremely well written, comprehensive, focused, with an interesting choice of press. I like the emphasis on dimensions beyond the textual (as in the use of maps). One untouched question is the press's distribution model: how does it get books out into circulation, and what are its typical print runs per publication? Also, what proportion of sales to publications and print run? (Works in translation are notoriously difficult to market in the Anglo-American world.) Finally, how well are its publications reviewed? You point to social networking and publishing networks as instrumental to the presses' success: how do its fortunes in this domain compare to the one of other presses in the network? These are nitpicking questions: great work!

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