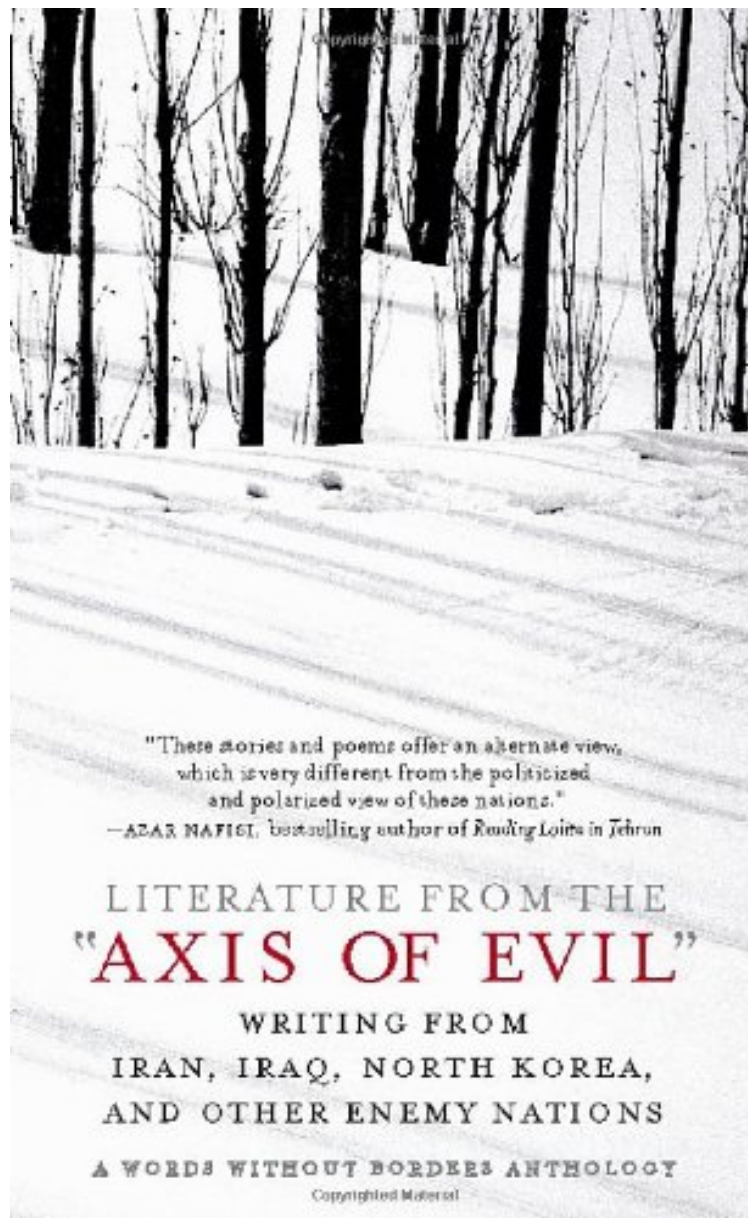


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Literature from the 'Axis of Evil': Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations

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Five Stars for the Intention, Two for the ExecutionBy Reader in TokyoThis book was published in 2006 and collected 21 works by 20 writers from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Sudan and Cuba. There were 7 short stories, 7 excerpts from novels and 7 poems.The countries were President George W. Bush's three "axis" nations, plus four others that have been called enemy nations. These nations have been rated by Freedom House among the world's most repressive societies in terms of political rights and civil liberties, with North Korea, Libya and Sudan at rock bottom, Cuba and Syria slightly higher, and Iran and Iraq just above them.The collection wasn't intended to either attack or justify the nations, but to promote "international conversation through literature," show common humanity, dispel ignorance and stimulate curiosity. It did oppose the use of rhetoric like "axis of evil," which ignored great differences between the countries and peoples. It didn't pretend to give anything like a definitive insight into each nation's literature.With only two to five pieces per country, some of them very short poems, only the briefest glimpses could be offered into each country. Iraq and North Korea had the greatest number of works, at four to five each. Each country was given only a cursory introduction. Iran was described as diverse, with both cosmopolitan and repressive elements, Libya was said to have some of the most severe restrictions on freedom of expression in the world. For North Korea, the editors said that contrary to expectations they'd been unable to locate any nonofficial literature. Writing from Sudan was likewise difficult to obtain. From Cuba, on the other hand, the editors had had an abundance of work to select from, much of it widely available in the United States.The oldest writers in the collection were Syria's Hanna Mina (1924-), called his nation's most prominent novelist, the Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000), and the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef (1934-). The youngest were Iraq's Muhsin al-Ramli (1967-), Cuba's Anna Lida Vega Serova (1968-) and Iran's Tirdad Zolghadr (1973-). Others included Libya's Kamel al-Maghur (1935-2002), Iran's Houshang Moradi-Kermani (1944-), called his nation's most frequently translated author, Sudan's Tarek Eltayeb (1959-) and Iraq's Sherko Fatah (1964-). Of all the authors, three were women. At the time the book was published, nearly half of the writers were living outside their home countries, including all of the Iraqis.The works ranged from the late 1950s (six lines from the Iranian poet Shamlou) to 2006 (an excerpt from a novel by the Iranian Zolghadr). More than three-fourths of all the pieces in the book were from the 1990s or 2000s. All but one of the works from Iraq predated the U.S. invasion and concerned things like deserters imprisoned during the war with Iran, a smuggler passing through a minefield at an unnamed border, and an employee of a British oil company in Kirkuk a half-century ago and his close-knit community. Contrary to what another reviewer said, opposition to the U.S. occupation was expressed--in the most recent work, a poem.For this reader, the most impressive writing was from Iran's Moradi-Kermani and Cuba's Vega Serova. The former's bittersweet story, published around 1979, concerned a student whose originality drew the condemnation of a narrow-minded teacher. The latter's poem-like prose concerned her life between Cuba and the Soviet Union, her search for roots and emotional expression. These pieces felt the most universal. Also interesting were the recent one by Iran's Zolghadr showing the blend of traditional and modern values in his country, one by Iraq's Fatah about a smuggler's tense crawl through a minefield, and a funny one by Cuba's Francisco Garca Gonzlez about the thoughts and smells in a man's life.Many of the other works made less of an impression or couldn't be grasped, particularly the poetry, much of which felt opaque. The prose work from Libya was set during World War II, the one from Sudan involved a soldier fleeing an oppressive officer, and the readable one from Syria concerned a narrator's poverty-stricken youth.Unlike all the other writers, the authors from North Korea came from a monthly literary journal published by an official organization. Their pieces were chilling for the glimpse they offered of approved literature in that country. Themes included the benevolence of the motherland and its leader; the importance of giving priority to serving society rather than anything related merely to oneself; the importance of keeping the country strong and repaying the love of the Great Leader; the dangers of infection by the capitalist world, which bred corruption and abuse of loopholes, reduced honest labor to a contemptible endeavor and encouraged the unjust acquisition of wealth; and the need for continued vigilance and self-discipline to avoid betraying the accomplishments of previous generations. In one story, Russia in the years after Khrushchev and again after 1989 was cited as an example of what happened when vigilance weakened, and North Korea was proclaimed the superior model.I finished the book wishing I'd been able to get more from it; thinking that there were too few selections for each country, that many of the lesser prose works should've been better and that much of the poetry was hermetic. The anthology's concept and aim were praiseworthy; I appreciated the book for the pieces of writing I enjoyed and the insight into North Korea. For the other nations, though, collections of much

greater depth were needed to dispel ignorance; this book was little more than the barest start. Other collections for the countries include the following. Many were published in the United States, and currently all are available on Amazon, without censorship. FOR IRAN: Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature (1980), Modern Persian Short Stories (1980), Tales from Iran: A Collection of Short Stories (1990), Stories by Iranian Women since the Revolution (1991), Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology 1921-1991 (1992), In a Voice of Their Own: A Collection of Stories Written by Iranian Women since the Revolution in 1979 (1996), A Feast in the Mirror: Stories by Contemporary Iranian Women (2000), Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature (2005) and My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices (2006), a collection of essays and interviews mainly by Iranians living abroad. FOR CUBA: The Voice of the Turtle: An Anthology of Cuban Stories (1998), Dream with No Name: Contemporary Fiction from Cuba (1999), Cuba: A Traveler's Literary Companion (2002) and Cubanísimo: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Cuban Literature (2003). FOR IRAQ: Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology (2008). FOR SYRIA: Breaking Knees: Modern Arabic Short Stories from Syria (2008 in English), a collection of works by eminent short-story writer Zakaria Tamer. FOR LIBYA AND SUDAN: The most convenient, inexpensive option might be The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction (2006), which contains a handful of works by writers from these countries, in addition to those from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Another option is the 1,000-page Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology (2005). FOR NORTH KOREA: Korean Short Stories: A Collection of North Korea (2003) as well as the memoirs This Is Paradise! My North Korean Childhood (2007) and The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag (2001 in English), a chronicle of horrors faced by returnees to North Korea from the 1960s that's been called one of the first published accounts of the nation's prison system.

Subject of a full-length segment on Morning Edition when it first appeared in hardcover, Literature from the Axis of Evil quickly went to the top of the Amazon bestseller list. Its publication was celebrated by authors including Azar Nafisi and Alice Walker, and the Bloomsbury Review named it a book of the year. In thirty-five works of fiction and poetry, writers from countries Americans have not been allowed to hear from until the Treasury Department revised its regulations recently offer an invaluable window on daily life in enemy nations and humanize the individuals living there. The book includes works from Syria, Libya, the Sudan, Cuba, as well as from Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. As editor Alane Mason writes in the introduction, "Not knowing what the rest of the world is thinking and writing is both dangerous and boring."

"Reading Literature from the Axis of Evil inevitably makes you think about whether art and literature can help prevent hatred and even war." San Francisco Chronicle "[It] has more to say about the historical complexities, conflicts, and nuances of so-called enemy nations than a hundred shelves of polemics and political rhetoric that clutter the front rows of our bookstores." The Bloomsbury Review "The best kind of armchair travel book, one that gifts its reader with the cultural understanding and appreciation that even travel doesn't always provide. . . . If you read this book, you will know more than the Administration does about the cultures and people of America's so-called enemy nations." Maudnewton.com