Translator's Introduction to Rafik Schami's "The Book of the Future" and "Enrichment"

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¶1 Rafik Schami (b. 1946) is a Syrian-German author, editor, and literary critic born in Damascus, Syria, where he completed his initial schooling. Faced with compulsory military service and censorship, he moved to Lebanon in 1970 and then to Germany a year later, where he completed a Ph.D. in Chemistry in 1979 and has lived ever since. After learning German by "copying out classics by Thomas Mann and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in long hand"—I balk at the amount of paper just one sentence of Mann must have demanded—he began writing his own texts and quickly emerged as a leading figure of the so-called "Guest Worker Literature" (*Gastarbeiterliteratur*) movement.[1] In 1980, he co-founded the literary groups *Südwind* ("Southwind") and *PoLiKunst* (Polynationaler Literatur- und Kunstverein [Polynational Literary and Art Society]), which offered vital platforms for immigrant and working-class writers.[2] Schami's vast literary oeuvre encompasses many genres, including novels, essay and story collections, and children's books. His work has enjoyed a lively reception in his adopted home country, where prestigious prizes and robust sales have secured his position as one of the most commercially and critically successful authors of contemporary German literature. At the same time, Schami's literary output has become a cultural export, translated into some two dozen languages. As the English-language translation market has focused largely on his novels, countless shorter form works have remained inaccessible to English-speaking audiences.[3] The selection of these two previously untranslated short prose works reflects this volume's special focus on experimentation and literature, albeit in different ways.

¶2 The first piece, "Das Buch der Zukunft," translated here as "The Book of the Future," is a speculative short story that considers technological innovations that would turn reading into a multimedia extravaganza not unlike a Romantic phantasmagoria. The story was written in 1993 but first published in Schami's 2011 collection, *Eine deutsche*

1— Markus Clauer, "Exile in his homeland," trans. Jonathan Uhlaner, *Goethe-Institut Pakistan*, https://www.goethe.de/ins/pk/en/kul/mag/20660052.html.

2— Schami discusses these groups in the following interview: Rafik Schami, "The Freedom to Publish: An Interview with Rafik Schami." Interview by Luke Neima. *Review 31*, http://review31.co.uk/interview/view/4/the-freedom-to-publish-an-interview-with-rafik-schami.

3— English-language translators of his novels include Rika Lesser (*Eine Hand voller Sterne*, 1987; trans. *A Hand Full of Stars*, 1990), Philip Böhm (*Erzähler der Nacht*, 1989; trans. *Damascus Nights*, 1993), Anthea Bell (*Der Schnabelsteher*, 1995; trans. *The Crow Who Stood on His Beak*, 1996; *Fatima und der Traumdieb*, 1995; trans. *Fatima and the Dream Thief*, 1996; *Die dunkle Seite der Liebe*, 2004; trans. *The Dark Side of Love*, 2009; and *Das Geheimnis des Kalligraphen*, 2008; trans. *The Calligrapher's Secret*, 2011), and Monique Arav and John Hannon (*Sophia oder Der Anfang aller Geschichten*, 2015; trans. *Sophia or The Beginning of All Tales*, 2018).

Leidenschaft namens Nudelsalat. Although the book's paratexts claim that the invention featured in the story preempted that of the e-book, digital readers were in fact an emerging technology at this time, becoming commercially available through devices like Sony's Data Discman in 1992.[4] While not nearly as elaborate as the sensational apparatus Schami imagines, such portable gadgets, as well as personal computers, could be used to access software such as *Library of the Future*, a CD-ROM-based "electronic library consisting of 450 complete works containing some 200,000 pages," first released in 1990 and expanded with additional editions throughout the 1990s.[5] Though it is unclear whether the similarity between the titles of Schami's story and the software is coincidental or deliberate, this alignment between fact and fiction indicates the degree to which Schami was responding to the zeitgeist. His story convincingly extrapolates on, and satirizes, the technological advances of his time. The main challenge I faced in my translation was in maintaining the text's absurdity when so many of the fantastical features described actually exist today; after all, in 2026, a palm-sized passport to the world is hardly *novel*, and immersive sensorial environments are already part of our (virtual) realities.[6]

¶3 The second piece is an essay titled "Bereicherung" and translated as "Enrichment," which appeared in Schami's 2017 collection, *Ich wollte nur Geschichten erzählen*. Schami reflects on his status as an exophonic writer, discussing how authors writing outside of their originary traditions contribute to their adopted cultural frameworks through both linguistic innovations, which are often perceived as errors, and perspectival ones, which are generally underemphasized. Drawing on the legacies of kindred spirits Adelbert von Chamisso and Joseph Conrad, Schami highlights the criticism their work provoked from all sides, while emphasizing their contributions to world literature. Schami's prose can shift from playful to earnest without warning, drawing us to consider how our job as scholars, translators, and cultural conduits who work between languages so often entails swapping our own "shadow" for another's. The essay offers a pithy retrospective of Schami's writerly *raison d'être* nearly fifty years into his German-language literary career. With its abrupt ending, Schami initiates a discussion on what it means to write—as an outsider, in exile, in a learned rather than inherited language—and asks that we reflect on our roles and responsibilities as readers, too.

¶4 Though thematically and generically different, both pieces get to the heart of why we read literature: to invigorate our imaginations, stir our souls, and learn something new about the world. In our current moment, when generative AI is stealing words, images, and music made by real humans to make endless, mind-numbing robo-content for profit, we need to intentionally center authentic stories and voices more than ever. Unique perspectives cannot be replicated or replaced by smoke and mirrors or algorithms. Literature worth reading can only come from a life well lived.

4— The claim is included in the book's blurb, which was likely provided by the publisher rather than the author himself. Rafik Schami, "Informationen zum Buch," in *Eine deutsche Leidenschaft namens Nudelsalat* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 280.

5— Estelle Irizarry, "Review: Library of the Future™ Series First Edition," *Computers and the Humanities* 26, no. 1 (1992): 68–73.

6— For an up-to-date view on virtual reality and the senses, see Yildirim et al, "Digital smell technologies for the built environment: Evaluating human responses to multisensory stimuli in immersive virtual reality," *Building and Environment* 271 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2025.112608.

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