

## Yalo

By Elias Khoury  
(MacLehose Press)

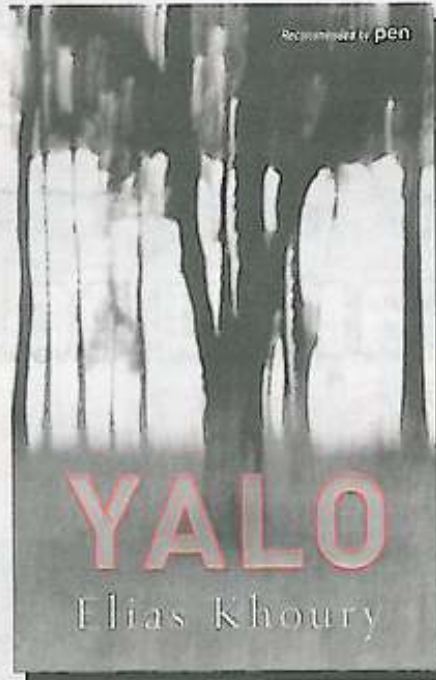
WHAT MAKES a person become a criminal, and how do they justify their crimes to themselves? Elias Khoury's novel *Yalo* attempts to ask these questions.

Set in a prison cell in Beirut during the time of the Lebanese Civil War, the eponymous protagonist is forced to confess under torture and write the story of his life. He confesses to robbery and rape, but not to collaboration in paramilitary activities.

Through Yalo's eyes we understand the religious, linguistic and cultural difficulties in today's Lebanon, magnified by Yalo's cultural background: an Assyrian Christian with Kurdish roots, and a speaker of Arabic instead of Syriac, the grandson of a local priest.

The narrator trawls through Yalo's memory over and over again, remembering his early childhood in a dysfunctional family, the many women he raped and robbed in the forest and Shireen, the woman with whom he fell in love and who was the one to hand him over to the police.

Claustrophobic in atmosphere, with Yalo as the only voice throughout, the outside perspective, the political circumstances, and the people who know Yalo only appear through the prisoners' lens, blurring the lines between reality and the



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narrator's perception.

Khoury's novel is blunt and direct – he doesn't hold back details of the brutal torture Yalo is subjected to, nor does he spare the reader details of Yalo's crimes. But Khoury does not attempt to justify the crimes he depicts – he creates a tapestry of the personal, political and environmental circumstances that lead to them, drawing the reader slowly into Yalo's world.

Each chapter re-tells the story in a slightly different way, in parallel to the increasingly brutal torture and the effect on the prisoners' body and mind, leading to his ultimate confession. Interestingly, Yalo never accuses his captors of their mistakes; he silently suffers and accepts his fate, searching for the errors within himself.

Khoury, a political activist, does not judge his hero, nor does he ask the reader to do so; he simply tells the story of a trapped man almost killed by the Lebanese government "for writing is the only way to remember". The narrator himself and all other protagonists are caught in their own ideology, each correct in their own way – maybe reflecting on Lebanese society as a whole?



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