

Ballas, Shimon (b. 1930) Israeli writer.

Shimon Ballas was born in Baghdad and emigrated to Israel in 1951. He studied at the Alliance Israélite Universelle where he was taught in French and Arabic. His passion for reading and writing emerged in early childhood. He discovered the treasures of world literature through French translations, while Arabic was the language he loved and in which he made his first attempts as a writer. At the age of sixteen he was already an active member of the Communist party in Baghdad and he joined the party upon his arrival in Israel. He knew no Hebrew at the time. Soon he became aware of the feeling of alienation with which his native Arab culture was regarded in the newborn State. He felt the need to reveal the essence of the political and psychological life of the Arab world and to function as a *trait d'union* between the two cultures. He started writing articles on the Middle East and later became the editor of Arab Affairs for the Communist newspaper *Kol Ha-'am*.

In 1964 Ballas published his first novel in Hebrew, *Ha-Maabarah* (The Transit Camp), the first Israeli novel to depict life amongst the Arab Jewish immigrants of the 1950s. This was followed by an anthology of Palestinian stories, *Mul Ha-Homah* (Facing the wall), 1969. Since then, Ballas has written prose and essays in Hebrew and Arabic, most recently the novels *Solo* (Solo), 1998, and *Tel Aviv Mizrah* (Tel Aviv East), 1998. He graduated from the Sorbonne in the early 1970s, and his doctoral thesis, published in 1978 under the title *Arab Literature Under the Shadows of War*, figures among his major works. Generally overlooked by the Israeli literary establishment, Shimon Ballas has been one of the first writers to present the reality of the Arab world and to remain true to his cultural heritage throughout his literary career.

Ballas was twice awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature (1978 and 1993). He lives in Tel Aviv and teaches Arab literature at Haifa University. His works have been translated into English, French and Arabic.