Mansour Al-Souwaim’s *Memoirs of the Wicked* (zakirat sharir)
Reader’s report by Alice Guthrie

Mansour Al-Souwaim was awarded the prestigious Tayyeb Salih fiction prize for his novel ‘Memoirs of the Wicked’ in 2005. Whilst his style and his content are highly distinctive and richly personal, there is a clear parallel to be drawn between his work and that of the legendary Sudanese writer the prize commemorates. Mining rich veins of dark psycho-sexual underworlds and the hidden recesses of urban culture, Al-Souwaim explores both the problematic and the universal aspects of broader humanity, of his society in general, and of a substrata of African society we rarely get access to. The remorseless and frequently shocking gaze of this remarkable book, and its capacity to map the intertwining hidden worlds of the most marginalised sections of Sudanese society, have been compared to *For Bread Alone*, Mohamed Shoukri’s seminal underworld memoir. Perhaps the most valid comparison in that regard is the urgent passion of Al-Souwaim’s writing, and its unselfconscious quality, despite its sensational subject matter – but there is a lyrical beauty to this prose that bears no relations to Shoukri’s raw street style. Painstakingly researched over many years with the keen eye of the instinctive anthropologist, the book is a dense and lucid epic work of documentary fiction in which Al-Souwaim inhabits the crippled body of his (anti)hero with an apparently effortless grace, soaring out to chart the huge rolling tides of his society as a whole, and swooping in on the minute details of his inner world and his daily life, with equal and extraordinary flair.

Al-Souwaim’s central concern within the underworld he is mapping here is the reality of life for Khartoum’s homeless street kids (shamaasa), many of whom are solvent abusers. He focusses on them through the lens of the richly varied phases and episodes in the life-story of Adam, the novel’s physically disabled central character and main narrator. Adam’s trajectory takes him from begging on the street as an infant to a deluxe prison from where, it gradually becomes apparent, he is telling his life-story. Along the way he has experienced being granted celebrity status in the elite world of healing, various incarcerations, all manner of ways of surviving and escaping, life in a sewer full of dying and desperate people, and a multitude of other twists and turns, and we have been able to explore his psychology and that of those around him.

The extraordinary multi-sensory urban vignettes and visions throughout the book allow Al-Souwaim to introduce us to a plethora of incidental or fringe characters alongside the major figures in Adam’s life. All of these characters are finely and vividly drawn as people in their own right, but they also serve to illustrate a broad array of elements of contemporary Sudanese society – people’s war memories, tales of drunken parents abandoning their children, a prostitute dying of AIDS, a rural village girl’s terror at her urban isolation, and so on. So the narrative, while staying tightly linked to Adam and firmly rooted in the world of creative fiction, also deals explicitly with several crucial social issues, many of which are emblematic of the era of Islamist power in Sudan, according to Al-Souwaim. The breakdown of society as represented by phenomena such as urban destitution, financial fraud, the repressive state and its apparatus, the proliferation of fake magic and quack medicine, sham religious piety, and distorted and dysfunctional sexuality, is of course a potentially uncomfortable or even taboo arena. As such, the novel has been highly praised in Sudan for approaching these subjects and, even to the foreign reader, makes for an exhilarating and illuminating read.

**SYNOPSIS**

Mainly narrated by Adam looking back from some future moment, the novel is divided into eight chapters, each covering one of the distinct phases of Adam’s life.
Chapter 1
The novel begins in a luxurious room, where Adam begins reminiscing about his life, introducing himself and describing his infancy with his solvent-abusing mother. So we get to know Adam as a physically disabled child, revelling in the soothing embrace of his mother during a long journey as stowaways on the roof of a train to Khartoum. The first installment of a recurring eulogy of Adam’s mother firmly situates silicone adhesive, the narcotic solvent she is addicted to inhaling, as the central nourishment in their lives. As the narrative unfolds over the next 200 pages we become aware that silicon has a powerful symbolic and practical role, not only for Adam but for a large section of their community as a whole. This solvent is maternal love, to them, and comfort, safety, nurture – the divine feminine is a narcotic for these people and that narcotic is their common ground, their refuge, their identity, and their crutch.

Soon after Adam and his mother arrive in the capital she dies in a freak accident whilst acting out scenes from a Bollywood film, and Adam is taken on by a community of beggars who quickly train him in the “begging arts”. This particular strand of Khartoum’s underworld comes into sharp focus as Adam is dragged around by the young Wahiba, whose “youthful infatuation with him made her grip onto him with tears, teeth and filthy claw”. The members of this community are down and out in the city but also some have access to rural farming relations, and so Adam begins, as Wahiba’s adopted charge or sibling, to move in and out of their care and their traditional practices. Adam and Wahiba are eventually summoned by the rural relations to join them permanently in their village of mud huts and fragrant smoke, out beyond the slums that ring the city. Adam is taken under the wing of an important elder, Sheikh Haju Mohamedu, ostensibly to learn to read and study the Quran. However the Sheikh turns out to be not only a great teacher of the cultural and religious canon but also an African herbsman, a traditional shamanic healer, and introduces Adam to all the colourful indigenous medical techniques and paradigms that implies. As Adam begins to absorb this rich heritage, he is in fact living in the first of many types of captivity he will experience during his life – loved ‘like a son,’ in this instance, by the old Sheikh, but missing the wild unwieldy freedoms of his life on the street with his urban family. When the Sheikh finally dies, Adam is hurled into his next phase as a beggar, and the cityscape sprawls out over the page. A seething mass of human variety, from lepers to elite children, sails past him as he works a busy intersection, dragging himself around now instead of being carried, trailing his lifeless legs behind him. As solvent abuse creeps into more and more of the lives around him, the barely adolescent Adam is repulsed and somewhat traumatised by his first sexual experiences with his contemporaries, young girls who overpower him and take it in turns to masturbate him.

Chapter 2
When Wahiba’s rural relations arrange her marriage to Sheikh Haju Mohamedu’s son, Adam goes to live with them, and so begins his new phase – being exploited, this time, by a corrupt and fake version of the elder sheikh Haju Mohamedu. This one tells him he will not be begging anymore, and will relearn reading and the Quran, which he has forgotten during his years back on the street. In return, he is taught how to pretend to be carrying out a great many of the African herbsman techniques, the original practices of the elder sheikh, and shown in great detail the many secret ways to “dive into depths of other people.” These quack shamanic rituals also involve Adam’s sexual initiation, as his work takes on new dimension as a kind of sexual healer or ‘sex cure’ for women. In the first of the book’s several deeply unsettling sexual scenarios, Adam discovers a lavish secret bedroom where the sheikh “treats some special cases,” and he is summoned to deal with certain women who “don’t cooperate” with the sheikh. He is trained for this by the female domestic worker Sania, and he feels he’s being exploited, hates it, and begs to be taken back to the street. His work as a sexual healer culminates in a highly traumatic treatment for a white woman who is “scared of men” – Adam has a kind of breakdown as a result and becomes seriously ill, bed-ridden, haunted and as if possessed, for several months. He suffers from
hallucinations of Christian crosses, an image that will remain with him for the rest of his life in the form of a flashback that can recur at any point when he is under extreme stress.

Until this point he has had no access at all to Wahiba, who has been kept in total seclusion by her husband; but once Adam is seen to be seriously ill she is allowed to visit him daily. She reveals her desperate boredom to him, spending her days killing time drinking coffee and channel-hopping. By now in recovery, he is desperate to get back on the street, and eventually he is smuggled out by Sania and returns with immense relief to Khartoum and another version of his old life.

Chapter 3
Adam becomes a homeless street kid once more and finally get hooked on glue, during an ecstatic reunion with his city, his kind and his old haunts. We are taken on a huge tour of the city from his perspective, as his working environment as a beggar is described with vivid cinematic detail – the central mosque which is a refuge for the homeless, the labyrinthine streets of the old markets, the frantic intersections he drags himself around, touting to the cars streaming past him. Whilst Al-Souwaim in no way indulges in glamorising this lifestyle, Adam is relatively stable at this point, until a crackdown by the regime unleashes a vicious police attack on all beggars citywide. Panic ensues in Adam’s community, and during intensely harrowing escape scenes down into the network of sewers. One of the darkest sections of the book unfolds: weeks pass as a whole group of them survive down there in the mounting filth and disease and dysfunction, starving, thirsty and withdrawing from solvents. The children have to be kept under constant guard in case they try to escape and thereby reveal the location of the hideout, whilst a select delegation sneak out and manage to get hold of enough food water and glue for them all to scrape by on.

In this literal bowel of the city the distorted sexual norms of their society become apparent; many of them are involved in confused traumatic and premature sexual activity in general, but rape is also used as a method of discipline and punishment. Adam’s earlier sexual exploitation, and his exposure to the rape of female patients as part of their treatment by his then master has deeply scarred him, and he is engaged in some highly dysfunctional sexual relationships in the sewer. But as a witness to these acts he is simultaneously traumatised by it all anew, and when two young boys are raped as a punishment for trying to escape it provokes flashbacks in Adam of the white woman and the crosses.

By the third week in the sewer conditions are deteriorating very badly, and one of their oldest and dearest companions is dying of respiratory disease. Whilst attempting to smuggle her up into the city in order to get her to hospital they are finally caught by the police and taken to a temporary prison crammed with other beggars. From the prison they are eventually relocated to the children’s detention camp out in the desert which is the location for the next chapter.

Chapter 4
Having lost all of his companions from his latest phase, Adam finds himself incarcerated in a children’s detention centre. Guarded by thin drugged-looking soldiers, with emaciated kids serving up scanty stale cold food, and extreme disciplinarian staff, the inmates survive in an environment of immense fear. The children, according to Adam, are being made into automatons, slaves, as all trace of rebellion and life is punished out of them. Sent to work in the kitchen, where he makes a “friend for life” in Imran, Adam finds a certain uneasy equilibrium. The children are sent to class, and despite the context of the teaching, he yearns to join in with the religious lessons and rediscover his early passion for reading and learning. After being forbidden to join the lessons for several years, he is eventually allowed to participate, and begins to study not only religion but science.

Al-Souwaim’s relentless vision of this oppressive camp and the way the children are ground down by the state apparatus constitutes perhaps the most searing political commentary of the book, as the arbitrary despotism and perversion of the Islamist regime in Sudan is fearlessly and mercilessly critiqued. The numbed and hopeless stasis of Adam and his companions’ years in the camp is finally disrupted by the arrival of some senior regime figures and the subsequent departure of the hated head teacher and all his staff. The initial euphoria of the children at being allowed to run wild
quickly becomes a terrifying free fall towards their death of thirst – they are stranded in the remote burning desert with no means of getting anywhere and no more deliveries of water or food. But on the brink of expiring they are picked up in a lorry commandeered by some inmates who escaped earlier, and whisked back to Khartoum.

Chapter 5

Back in Khartoum once more, Adam and his dear friend Imran from the camp kitchen find that the old order in the city has changed: it is now packed with whole families of displaced people from all over the country, and swarms of amputees and war-wounded. Begging is therefore no longer a remotely reliable livelihood, as there is so much competition. So the next step Adam and Imran take is to join a troop of emotionally and physically damaged ex-soldiers, who are organising hierarchies of fly-pitching street salesmen with a military approach to sales, all over the city. Initially they work very hard, for tiny profits, in constant fear of being caught by the police. Eventually, thanks to a weekly bribe to the police organised by the ex-soldiers, and to a squatted house they take on, they fall into a fairly comfortable lifestyle. The house is in an old abandoned Jewish and Armenian neighbourhood, so Adam finds himself living among crosses and Christian iconography, and once again they seem to herald some negative turn of events for him. Sure enough, in due course the chic boutiques, gold sellers and cafeterias of the city club together to pay off the police to carry out a ‘clean-up’ operation. A brutal attack ensues. Amidst bloody scenes of tear gas, whips and clubs, Imran dies from a shot to the head. Adam manages to escape, and cries himself to sleep in the house, among the crosses. Dreaming of his mother, he awakes to a boot on his chest. He has been tracked down, and is dragged off to jail for yet another spell in captivity.

Chapter 6

Adam is initially held without charge, in terrible conditions. The prison is being crammed, by the hour, with more and more of the various characters of his street world, their hierarchies distorted and their power changed by this latest assault on them. Al-Souwaim’s exploration of the effect of state brutality on this vulnerable and dysfunctional community, and of the systems they develop within it, is powerful and distressing reading. Eventually Adam is found guilty, without trial, of a whole list of trumped-up charges loosely related to handling stolen goods, and transferred to the financial fraud wing of a prison. He finds himself thrown into a group of educated and cultured elite criminals. In relatively luxurious conditions, with access to the media, he joins the other inmates in the daily lectures and debates they organise for themselves on politics, religion, economics, and the arts.

In this way Adam learns a great deal about what he refers to as ‘the subjects of the rich,’ and how to pass for a highly educated person himself. Among these embezzlers and fraudsters he is reminded of Wahiba’s husband, the nefarious sheikh, and the seed of an idea for a livelihood is planted. With the help and encouragement of his new friend Khalil, Adam develops his act as a healer and guru, adapting all that he was exposed to by his early mentors, both the genuine elder herbsman, and the charlatan. Whilst serving the rest of his sentence he refines the act until, on release, he has a strong reputation for miracle cures, exorcism and all sorts of blessings, as well as the foundations of an established client base from among the prison officers and their families. They are absolutely in his thrall, dependent on his amulets and his holy water to cure whatever ails them and to feel safe, and Khalil is a natural as the perfect agent, public relations manager, and personal assistant to Adam in his new incarnation as a mighty miracle-working sheikh.

Chapter 7

Once Adam is finally out of prison, Khalil rents a house for them to operate out of and they build up their client base and reputation, across a wide cross section of society. Adam is in full swing now as a sham healer, constantly taking his act to new heights. He performs a mass daily ritual, blessing a huge crowd of followers who gather at the house, as well as performing one-to-one sessions with wealthier or more desperate cases. Adam’s first ever client, one of his fellow inmates, is also out of
prison now, and wants magical help in his latest fraud scheme. So Adam branches out into serving as chief protector and luck-provider to the master financial criminals of Khartoum.

After having known nothing about Wahiba, her husband, or Sania since he fled the house all those years ago, Sania appears at Adam’s place one day. It turns out that she has also made a career for herself in a very similar vein to Adam, having been able to base her practices, like Adam did, on those of her ex-employer. She has spent years travelling to Saudi and the Gulf with her amulets, spells and potions, developing quite a formidable level of expertise, and so they soon decide to join forces, expanding the operation even further. Sania also fills Adam in on Wahiba’s life story since they last met, moving Adam deeply, as he considered Wahiba to be family. Apparently the original sham sheikh is serving a long prison sentence, and Wahiba has vowed to wait for him, in seclusion, for as long as it takes.

Chapter 8

Adam’s guru performance is at its height by now, his immorality at its peak: wearing the mantle of a master healer, a great sheikh, a kind of hysterical cult has formed around him and his powers. He is able to charge huge fees to the rich, and the poor gather outside the house in crowds so immense that a whole industry of food-sellers has sprung up around it. He is widely sexually desired, partly because of a legend about his huge penis having healing powers – people frequently try to grab it as he passes. Eventually his fame has grown so much that his picture appears in the paper, and he is talked about during the Friday sermons in the mosque. When there are demands for a fatwa (religious ruling) on the nature of his practice, the beginning of the end heaves into view. Fearing this to be the case, Adam is tempted to quit while they are ahead. They have amassed quite a fortune now, which is managed by a specialist accountant, and Adam feels they should at least move their money in case they get busted, but Khalil dissuades him from changing anything.

Then the white woman who Adam had been forced to ‘treat’ for her fear of men all those years ago by his original master in the arts of deception reappears, with her mother, still in search of a cure. Just as the crosses he associates with her have always seemed to be a bad omen for him, Adam sees her arrival as a sign that things are about to change massively, and that his downfall is coming. Made very uneasy by seeing her, and experiencing distressing flashbacks of the original encounter with her which made him so ill, Adam nevertheless goes through with the consultations. On her second visit to the house, Khalil engineers getting her alone in a room while Adam is busy with another patient. He gives her what he thinks is a ‘date rape’ drug, which turns out to kill her. What he takes for her helpless compliance is in fact her death – she expires beneath him as he rapes her. The house is soon swarming with police, media, and short white men wearing gold crosses round their necks, and Adam is of course arrested. The novel ends with Adam’s pragmatic and apparently unruffled “So it’s prison, for a year or two, then maybe I’ll be back.” It is at this point that it finally becomes clear to the reader that the narration has taken place from prison – the story has come full circle and the luxury room of the opening passage is in fact our narrator’s latest prison cell.

Overall, then, the novel is a finely balanced work of utterly engaging fiction in its own right, with the gripping action, complex characters, lyrical description, and the well-formed narrative arc that requires. What makes it such essential and illuminating reading, however, is the combination of that literary merit with the documentary value of the content, and Al-Souwaim’s dedication to telling the untold tales of the unheard. Deeply distressing in places, vividly enchanting in others, always rich in detail and nuance, Al-Souwaim’s lucid and masterful epic is a rare and important take on contemporary Sudan and on human society in general.