

ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Having explored the Arab World, Robin Yassin-Kassab has written a well-received first novel and moved to Castle Douglas to write full-time. He tells **Mary Smith** about his favourite themes – religion, faith and identity

Castle Douglas-based author Robin Yassin-Kassab wanted to be a writer from a young age but it wasn't until he was lying in a hospital bed in Oman, facing the possibility of death, or at least a leg amputation, that he finally started writing. The result was his first novel, *The Road from Damascus*, described by the Sunday Telegraph as "an extraordinary debut".

"I had been in Sri Lanka on holiday with my son, Ibrahim, and at some point I'd had a blister on my toe and some sort of tropical bacteria had got in and it was munching up my leg," Robin explains. "In hospital I was on four different super-strength antibiotics given intravenously."

"While I was lying there, reading Saul Bellow and worrying about losing my leg and about death, I decided to start writing. I'd always wanted to be a writer, because I'd grown up with the idea, probably learned from my grandfather, that writers were the most valid type of human being; most worthy of fame and respect, the most honest, the ones who see most clearly. I didn't set out to write a novel. I started writing about two characters and then it became an idea and a story and then it eventually turned into my novel."

Robin was born in London to a Syrian father and a British mother. He then lived in Merseyside followed by a time in south west Scotland, where he attended Kirkcudbright Academy, before moving back to London and then going to university in Oxford where he studied English. He also learned Arabic.

"When I was very young I was surrounded by it but didn't go on to speak it because my parents separated and I grew up with my mother and grandfather. When I was a student at Oxford, my cousin Muntaha taught me to read and write Arabic and I have named the only balanced character in

my novel after her, in her honour," he says. "I think a very rich, warm and interesting range of cultures is opened up to you when you speak and read Arabic."

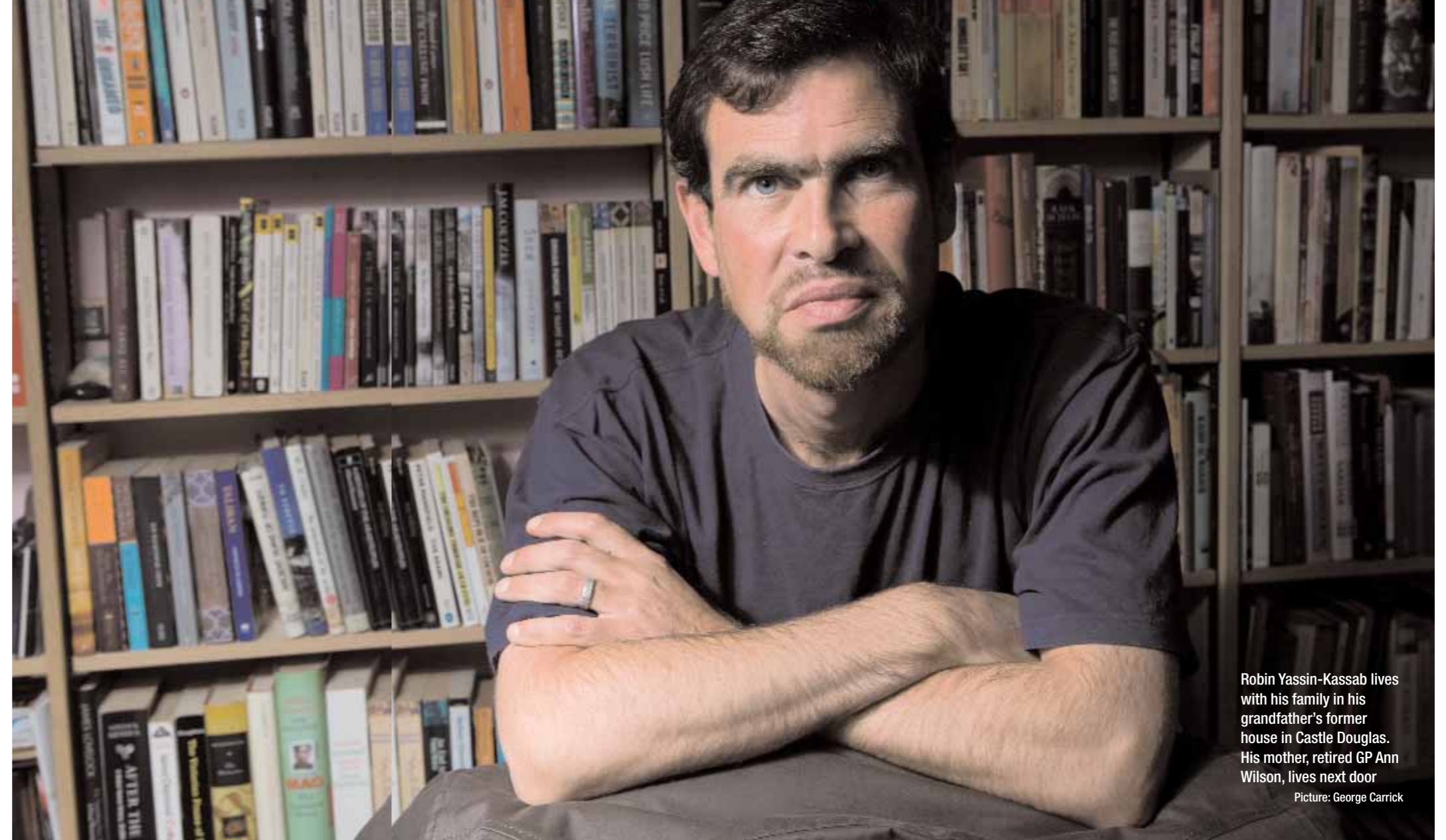
At Oxford, Robin had a Pakistani friend who said he should go to Pakistan to see the mountains. So, as he "had no other direction", he went. And because he didn't have any money, he looked for work. He walked into a newspaper office in Rawalpindi and told the editor, a friend of Benazir Bhutto, that he had been to Oxford and was after a job. He was given work as sub-editor.

"I learned the job as I went along. After a while they gave me all kinds of things to do. I went to the tribal areas with a group of Pakistani journalists to see opium cultivation supposedly being stamped out and I interviewed Eqbal Ahmad, the writer and thinker. It was a good way to discover a country," he says.

Robin returned to London in 1995 where he gained a qualification to teach English as a foreign language, on the back of which he worked in Turkey, Syria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Oman. It was in Syria that he met his wife, Rana, who was a student in a class of doctors he was teaching.

Although *The Road from Damascus* is not autobiographical, it does reflect some of Robin's life experiences and personal preoccupations about living in the Arab world, about religion and faith and identity.

"A large part of it is about religion in the widest sense. It's interesting to come across these different belief systems that exist in different places. The whole world is interested in religion at the moment, especially after September 11. Everybody is talking about things which are really political or historical in religious terms and there is a



Robin Yassin-Kassab lives with his family in his grandfather's former house in Castle Douglas. His mother, retired GP Ann Wilson, lives next door

Picture: George Carrick

religious revival – although I would put the term revival in inverted commas – happening in America and in the Arab world and the Muslim world," he says.

"Primarily, the novel is just a story. I did my best to tell a story with characters worrying about the kind of things that I worried about when I was writing it. In the novel, there are all kinds of people talking about the Apocalypse: they are Christian fundamentalist, Islamist, environmental and Marxist apocalyptic. I find it very interesting that we live in a world where everybody is taught in different belief systems about the Apocalypse – they all believe the end is coming."

Robin says the best opportunity to come his way since his novel was published was being invited last year to take part in the second Palestine Festival of Literature – Palfest09.

"It was a very great honour to be with a group of accomplished writers from diverse backgrounds and to go to a place that fascinates me. I already knew a lot of Palestinians and I have a Palestinian brother-in-law and lots of Palestinian

friends – but I had never been inside Palestine before," he says.

"It was an emotional experience and it was an incredible week. The festival moves about because the Palestinians find it very difficult to move between the checkpoints. We were in East Jerusalem, Ramala, Bethlehem and Hebron. There were great audiences and the people we met in the streets and in the restaurants and cafés were really happy we'd come to see them.

"I was very grateful for the experience because firstly the people were astounding. Absolutely everything is being taken from them but, however terrible the situation, they are such a resourceful, cheerful, energetic, creative and bright people. Something fearless in them slipped into me, and gave me optimism. A people like this cannot be kept down indefinitely."

"There is an explosion of Palestinian creativity at the moment. It has been noticeable in the Arab world for a long time but it's becoming visible in the West now – really exciting cinema is coming out of Palestine and novels such as *Mornings in Jenin*, by Susan Abulhawa."

Robin moved from Oman back to Castle

Douglas to continue his writing career. He and his family live in what was his grandfather's house, which is next door to his mother, retired GP Ann Wilson. She is well-known in the region for her work in the disability movement.

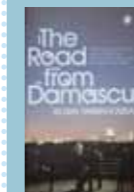
Robin is a co-editor of www.pulsemedia.org, a collaborative political weblog which Le Monde Diplomatique named as one of its five favourite websites. He also posts regularly on his own blog at <http://qunfuz.com>.

Coping with the lack of sunshine has been one of the most difficult aspects of returning to Scotland for Robin: "I find it

very cold and dark after Oman but the children have immediately adapted. They run around in the snow in shorts – it's outrageous.

"However, when the sun is shining, there is nowhere more beautiful than Dumfries & Galloway and there are lots of really interesting people here."

This winter, Robin coped by spending a couple of weeks in Andalusia, writing in a friend's cottage miles from the nearest village, with no phone or internet connection. He managed to produce 25,000 words of his latest writing project.



The Road from Damascus

Author: Robin Yassin-Kassab

Publisher: Penguin

Price: £8.99

It's summer 2001 and Sami Traifi is struggling. His PhD seems to be slipping ever further from his grasp, and a recent trip home to Damascus has thrown up some disturbing family secrets. On top of all this, his wife Muntaha has just announced that she is taking up the hijab, at a time when Sami couldn't feel more distant from faith, religion, and from having any answers to any of the big questions. Furious with Muntaha, he finds himself embarking on a spontaneous quest for meaning and fulfilment, but all too soon his search brings him to the brink of losing everything.