



Source: Michael Howard, 'Beginning of the end for Zarqawi group, says Iraq', *Guardian Unlimited*, 16/06/06.

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Writer/s: [Gregory Pryor](#)

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We drove twenty odd kilometres on a quiet freeway to an outlying suburb and arrived at a house with a steep driveway. There were many cars parked outside and when we were greeted at the door we realized there was quite an assembly of people inside. We took off our shoes and walked into the living room. It was very warm and cosy. The atmosphere was quiet and there was a low table in the centre of the room covered in various dishes and platters full of sweetmeats. Around this table were a number of plush sofas and easy chairs. Other chairs had been brought into the seating circle from unseen, more functional rooms. We moved around the circle being introduced to everyone, and in turn, each guest stood up and shook our hands. We were invited to sit in one of the cosiest sofas and it swallowed us instantly. I wondered to myself if I could ever get out of such a thing. Black tea was offered and then the evening's proceedings began.

We were told that we would be listening to a certain section of the *Mathnavi* by Maulana Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi. This is a work of 24,660 couplets arranged in seven books and we found out that this group was steadily reading through the entire work. They had been meeting for thirteen years every fortnight and when people opened their books I could see that they were still only a third of the way through. We were offered an apology that the readings would only be in Farsi, but we had already been told to expect this. It was obvious we were the only non-Persian people in attendance. A friend had offered to interpret key points whenever she could and we were also given a translation of the passages that would be covered during the evening. Each person would take their turn to read a few couplets and then a discussion of them would ensue, led by a man with a wealth of knowledge of the writings.

Before the recitation began however, all the lights were turned off and our friend whispered to us that there would first be a recorded version of Rumi's work with a musical accompaniment played on the sound system. I had noticed the entertainment system to one side of the room, probably occupying a space where a bookshelf may once have stood. The gas heater and a couple of small candles offered humble illumination and then the music began. It was very spacious and meditative and after a

while, we were aware that a few people nearby were sobbing and quite obviously moved by what they were listening to.

After about an hour, the CD finished and the lights were turned on. It was such a strange feeling, as if I had just woken up with fifteen or so strangers, all speaking Farsi.

The reading of the text was very serious, the discussion detailed and extensive. From our translation we could see that the words were extremely complex, the ideas within elaborately pictorial and simply astounding at times. Occasionally I was moved to slowly shake my head in wonder that such things could be written.

After three hours of study, broken only by more tea and cakes, it was time to leave. The owner of the house showed us the glass paintings he had done and then explained to us that there was no room in this group for politics or religion. Various members of the group were keen to impress upon us their position of humility in the world and all they asked was to be able to share an intimate knowledge of the Mathnavi.

The freeway back into the city was even more desolate at midnight. The passage in the new car was smooth and silent. For some reason I began thinking of W.G. Sebald and his intimate connection to books. I had just been reading *Rings of Saturn* and recalled his pleasure at poring over the old harbourmaster's registers and logbooks in the sailor's reading room in Southwold, a small village in East Anglia. Sebald's writings reek of a close proximity to books and somehow then the image of his violent death around Christmas in 2001 entered my head. In the detritus of his exit from the world, the books remain.

In the rubble of the building where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed recently, computer files, memory sticks, mobile phones and flash disks were strewn. It has been said that when a person dies, a library burns.

When we got home that night, I took out a small copy of *Goodnight Moon* and read it into the grain of the night.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Greg Pryor.*