

Naguib Mahfouz

(1911–2006)

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“The Arab world also won the Nobel with me.

I believe that international doors have opened, and that from now on, literate people will consider Arab literature also. We deserve that recognition.”

Naguib Mahfouz, *Aramco World Magazine*, March–April 1989.

ON OCTOBER 14, 1994, as Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, then 82, made his way to a weekly gathering with friends at a Cairo café, a man stabbed him in the neck. Mahfouz survived the assassination attempt, the work of an Islamic militant group.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, the first Arab writer to win the prize, Mahfouz, though a devout Muslim, was a high-profile target for such an assault. Much of the Arab world, including Egypt, had unofficially banned his 1959 novel *Children of the Alley* for its blasphemous, demythologized depiction of religion. A fatwa had later been issued against him when he defended Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) and freedom of speech. Though a popular, well-respected writer, he was also controversial for his deep humanitarian vision—his criticism of President Sadat's “open-door policy” (which privatized much of Egypt's public sector), his support of the Camp David peace treaty with Israel in 1978, and his thinly veiled works of social criticism. Indeed, Mahfouz's novels reflect Egypt's—and his own—social, political, and intellectual evolution during the 20th century. “Through the story and the characters,” Mahfouz said, “the outlines of a social, psychological, romantic, or political problem appear” (nobelprize.org, 3/11/99).

In about 40 novels and short-story collections and 30 screenplays (more than two dozen translated into English), Mahfouz explored Egypt's turbulent transition to modernity. He gave expression to ordinary Cairenes' dreams, expectations, and disappointments as they weathered the ups and downs of the 20th century: British occupation; the rise of nationalism; independence in 1922; war with Israel in 1948; Nasser's “socialist” reforms of the 1950s; and the Six Day War. In the 1970s, Sadat's economic reforms, the Yom Kippur War, and the Camp David Accords again put Egypt on a new path. Taken together, Mahfouz's novels offer a panoramic portrait of 20th-century Egypt.

Steeped in local flavor, Mahfouz's back alleys teem with lower- and middle-class Cairenes—merchants, prostitutes, beggars, shopkeepers, strong men, and even stronger women—who must choose between a traditional past and an uncertain future. His most popular work in translation,

The Cairo Trilogy (1956–57), peeks voyeuristically into the family's inner sanctum. His readers discover, “with guilty delight, a quiet murmur of furtive gropings, dissatisfaction, and despair that confirms everything he has ever suspected about his neighbors,” writes Amitav Ghosh. “[Mahfouz] has a fine instinct for discovering the fears, the prejudices, and

Where to Start

PALACE WALK, the first novel in *The Cairo Trilogy*, offers a voyeuristic peek into traditional Arabic life as Egypt becomes modernized in the 20th century. (**PALACE OF DESIRE** and **SUGAR STREET** continue the saga.) **MIDAQ ALLEY** captures the sights and sounds of Cairo's back alleys in more condensed form. For an allegorical novel that nearly cost Mahfouz his life, try **CHILDREN OF THE ALLEY**, which demythologizes the three major religions.

the suspicions of his People, and serving them back to them as fiction" (*The New Republic*, 5/7/90).

Mahfouz knew Cairo's back alleys well. He was born in 1911, the youngest of seven children, and spent his childhood in the crowded Gamaliya quarter of Cairo, in the heart of the old city. The modest neighborhood of little shops, cafés, groceries, medieval mosques, and schools inspired the backdrop for his fiction. In 1934, after graduating from King Fuad University with a philosophy degree, Mahfouz took a job as a clerk in the civil service. Until his retirement in 1971, he supported his wife and two daughters by working in various government positions: as Director of Censorship in the Bureau of Art, Director of the Foundation for the Support of the Cinema, and as a consultant to the Ministry of Culture. He also wrote professionally.

Mahfouz intended to address all of Egyptian history in 30 novels. *The Struggle of Thebes* (1938), for example, linked Egypt under British occupation to the Hyksos invasion of ancient Egypt. During World War II, however, he turned his focus to modern-day Egypt. Mahfouz started with *New Cairo* (1945) and followed it with *Midaq Alley* (1947), about a lower-class woman who descends into prostitution. During the 1950s Mahfouz penned the monumental 1,500-page *Cairo Trilogy*, a portrait of three generations of an ordinary family experiencing all aspects of Egypt's upheavals. Written in the style of social realism, *The Cairo Trilogy* revealed the contradictions of modern Egyptian life and brought Mahfouz fame throughout the Arab world.

In 1959, in the midst of Nasser's major economic and social reforms, Mahfouz published *Children of the Alley* (or *The Children of Gebelawi*) in *Al-Ahram*, a respected daily. Though it enraged fundamentalist Muslims, Mahfouz continued to challenge religion and politics in further allegorical novels, including *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *Autumn Quail* (1962), and *Miramar* (1967). The early 1960s marked a new phase for Mahfouz. The fiction he published until the outbreak of the Six Day War in 1967, including *The Search* (1964) and *Adrift on the Nile* (1966), experimented with modern, escapist themes and styles. In 1970, Mahfouz received Egypt's National Prize for Letters. After he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, his work garnered international acclaim. Much of it has been adapted for Egyptian cinema, theater, and television. He died on August 30, 2006.

The "Balzac of Egypt"

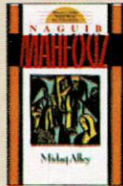
THROUGHOUT ITS 2,000-YEAR HISTORY, Arabic literature has taken the forms of poetry, narrative, oral history, and public storytelling. It includes works by Arabic-speaking Arabs, Jews, Indians, Egyptians, Turks, and other Africans and Asians, and spans diverse nations. The most famous piece of literature (and of divine revelation), the *Qur'an*, was formalized in the seventh century. The Arabic prose romance came next, represented by the medieval literary epic *The Arabian Nights*, filled with sexuality, murder, fantasy, and adventure.

Not until the 20th century did the modern Arabic novel take shape. Critics regard Muhammad Husayn Haykal's vernacular *Zaynab* (1913), about life in the Egyptian countryside, to be the first modern Arabic novel. A growing body of novels and short fiction by contemporary Arab authors, including El-Manfalouti, El-Aqqad, and Taha Hussein, whose *Stream of Days* (1943) achieved Western acclaim, inspired Mahfouz.

Many, however, consider Mahfouz to be the first true Egyptian novelist, the "Balzac of Egypt." Mahfouz systematically studied the European classics, first writing in Victor Hugo's "historical romance" style and then in the style of Dickens's social realism. "An artist, to my mind, has to depict ... reality without distorting it," Mahfouz said. "Without going in for fanaticism or ideological commitment and without speaking out in favor of one belief or another" (*UNESCO Courier*, 12/89). Mahfouz's stream-of-consciousness technique, seen in his middle and later works, including *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), resembled the styles of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and pioneered psychological realism in Arabic literature. Though best known for his novels of the 1950s and 1960s, Mahfouz's later works helped to develop the Arabic novel further and created prototypes for Arabic literature.

Major Works in Translation

Midaq Alley (1947)



Many critics consider *Midaq Alley*, initially published in serialized form and written in the style of tragic natural realism, to be Mahfouz's best novel. Like his *Cairo Trilogy*, the novel captures the sights and sounds of Cairo's back alleys as slum dwellers cast their hopes and fears on Western-style modernization and seesaw between accepting God's will and courting new destinies.

THE STORY: In a back alley of Cairo, more than a dozen characters' fates intertwine as they strive for love, happiness, and prosperity during World War II. Café owner Kirsha, a married drug addict, seeks solace in young men. The beautiful Hamida, who craves freedom from traditional bonds, turns tricks for British and American troops. The neighborhood barber, Abbas, tries to win over Hamida by joining the British armed forces. Filled with extravagance and debauchery, elusive hopes and loneliness, these characters become trapped in situations beyond their control.

"The novel is set in Mahfouz's familiar world—in a street in the old city—but it lacks the portentousness of some of his other work. It is written tongue-in-cheek, almost as self-parody, and it brims with moments of pure delight." AMITAV

GHOSH, *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, 5/7/90

"In his most famous book, *Midaq Alley*, [Mahfouz] evoked a glorious cast of Al Qahiran characters—the rogues, the

sentimentalists, the pious, the profane, the girl who ran away to be a downtown prostitute, the matchmaker, the quack, the man who made his living mutilating people to make their begging more profitable. His eponymous Midaq Alley still exists ... and it pleased me to imagine that the schoolboy with his rucksack was a novelist in embryo too, already soaking up his material." JAN MORRIS, GUARDIAN, 3/9/96

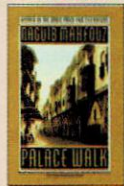
THE BOTTOM LINE: An excellent introduction to Mahfouz and a brilliant portrayal of Arab life and culture in the first half of the 20th century.

THE MOVIE: 1995, Mexico, *El Callejón de los Milagros* (also known as *Midaq Alley*), starring Ernesto Gómez Cruz, María Rojo, and Salma Hayek, and directed by Jorge Fons.

The Cairo Trilogy (1956–57)

The Cairo Trilogy, Mahfouz's most widely read work in English, established Mahfouz as Egypt's preeminent novelist. Like *Midaq Alley*, the trilogy takes place in the alleys of Mahfouz's childhood. Critics compare the meticulous descriptions of specific times and places to "the major English, French and Russian novels of the 19th century" (Richard Dyer, *Boston Globe*, 4/8/94). The trilogy explores three generations of Egyptian history, from World War I to the 1950s, and is richly autobiographical; Kamal, the youngest son of the first novel, is Mahfouz's alter ego.

I. Palace Walk (1956)



After the eviction of the British at the end of World War I, a nascent nationalism and changing family roles affect Al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Jawad and his family. A middle-class merchant, Ahmad governs his family according to the laws of Islam and the *Qur'an*. But while his submissive wife, Amina, and two daughters, Aisha and Khadija, remain sequestered inside their home, Ahmad lives a double life. Away from home, he transforms from a tyrannical patriarch into a womanizer. Then his three sons start to challenge his dictatorial family role.

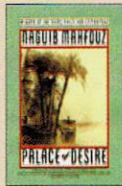
"Palace Walk is the greatest novel of Naguib Mahfouz ... and it and the two other parts that round out the Cairo Trilogy may well be the masterpiece of Arabic literature in the twentieth century. ... Mahfouz can be compared to Honoré Balzac in his love for the life of a particular great city, high and low, and his tolerance for the ambiguity in the heart of each human." DANIEL PIPES, DANIELPIPES.ORG

"Much of the novel is devoted to the immemorial rhythms of family life behind the walls of the house on Palace Walk, the morning baking of bread, the coffee-hour conversations of the mother and her children, the teasing and bickering among the siblings, the yearnings each of them feels to escape a tyranny they are bound to by religious law but a tyranny that they also love and respect." RICHARD DYER, BOSTON GLOBE, 2/28/90

Mahfouz's Nobel Lecture

"I am the son of two civilizations that at a certain age in history have formed a happy marriage. The first of these, seven thousand years old, is the Pharaonic civilization; the second, one thousand four hundred years old, is the Islamic one. ... Hear, then, this recorded historical incident: Old papyri relate that Pharaoh had learned of the existence of a sinful relation between some women of the harem and men of his court. It was expected that he should finish them off in accordance with the spirit of his time. But he, instead, called to his presence the choice men of law and asked them to investigate what he has come to learn. He told them that he wanted the Truth so that he could pass his sentence with Justice. This conduct, in my opinion, is greater than founding an empire or building the Pyramids. It is more telling of the superiority of that civilization than any riches or splendour. ... I will ... introduce [the Islamic] civilization in a moving dramatic situation summarizing one of its most conspicuous traits: In one victorious battle against Byzantium it has given back its prisoners of war in return for a number of books of the ancient Greek heritage in philosophy, medicine and mathematics. This is a testimony of value for the human spirit in its demand for knowledge. ... It was my fate, ladies and gentlemen, to be born in the lap of these two civilizations. ... Then I drank the nectar of your rich and fascinating culture. From the inspiration of all this—as well as my own anxieties—words bedewed from me."

II. Palace of Desire (1957)



Al-Sayyid Ahmad has finished mourning the death of his son, Fahmy, who demonstrated against the British, and has returned to his old vices. Ahmad's two married daughters have problems of their own. His older, recently divorced older son, Yasin, has married his own mistress; and Kamal, the youngest son, rebels against traditional occupations. Introduced to European culture and literature, he strives to become a writer.

"Perhaps the first thing that will strike the reader ... is how subversive it is of the Arab culture from which it sprang. ... Mahfouz has Tolstoy's gift of showing us, but not telling us, how a family's character traits can be passed from one generation to another." JOSEPH COATES, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 12/23/90

"The second installment situates the rogue-patriarch against the background of deteriorating traditions, filial insubordination, and the rising tide of nationalism and resentment of British domination. ... It's the wit, irony, and rich sense of incongruity in life that make *Palace of Desire* an important novel of civilization." DAVID CASTRONOVO, COMMONWEAL,

6/14/91

III. Sugar Street (1957)



As World War II, modernity, Western ideals, and political upheavals that shatter dreams of democracy disrupt life in Cairo's alleys, the ailing Al-Sayyid Ahmad slowly loses his powerful grip. Amina, once confined to her home, freely roams Cairo's streets; Kamal is a writer.

Ahmad's and Amina's grandsons represent microcosms of Egypt's changes. One rises in the civil service through homosexual relations with an older politician; another becomes a fundamentalist Muslim brother; the last courts Marxism. As Egypt transitions from traditional Islam to a more modern, uncertain future, Ahmad becomes trapped a world he doesn't understand.

"Not merely does Mahfouz possess a Dickensian feel for the streets of the city and for the daily lives of the ordinary people who inhabit them, but he shares with Dickens the implicit

conviction that story, setting, characters, and themes are of greater moment than pure literary art. ... Even more than in the first two volumes, the dominant theme of *Sugar Street* is convulsive, irresistible change." JONATHAN YARDLEY, WASHINGTON POST,

1/5/92

"It reads more like a sequence of connected scenes than narrative. ... The characters in the trilogy only achieve a sort of half-life for me. They never rise from the page; their speeches are almost interchangeable." PENELOPE LIVELY, THE SPECTATOR,

4/25/92

THE BOTTOM LINE: Read together, this great trilogy offers a portrait of upheaval in mid-20th-century Egypt. Even decades after they were published, "the *Trilogy* is seen by young Arab writers as a wall of China that stands in their way" (Anton Shammas, *The New York Review of Books*, 2/2/89).

Selected Works in Translation

* Discussed in Major Works

Dates refer to publication in Arabic.

KHUFU'S WISDOM (1939)

Mahfouz's first novel features the Egyptian Fourth Dynasty monarch Khufu, who must navigate among competitors and opposing fates.

RHADOPIIS OF NUBIA (1943)

During Egypt's Sixth Dynasty, the beautiful courtesan Rhadopis begins a star-crossed affair with Pharaoh Merenra II.

* MIDAQ ALLEY (1947)

THE BEGINNING AND THE END (1949)

The Kamels, a middle-class Egyptian family, encounter generational, moral, and financial difficulties as they struggle through World War II.

* THE CAIRO TRILOGY (1956-57)

* CHILDREN OF THE ALLEY (1959)

* THE THIEF AND THE DOGS (1961)

AUTUMN QUAIL (1962)

After the Egyptian revolution of 1952, a senior civil servant refuses to bow to the new regime.

THE SEARCH (1964)

In this fictional rendering of postrevolution Egypt, a dying prostitute urges her son to find his father. What he really seeks, however, is his father's wealth.

THE BEGGAR (1965)

In this novel of alienation, an ex-Egyptian revolutionary and poet abandons his family to pursue his lovers, but becomes more estranged from life.

ADRIFT ON THE NILE (1966)

In the 1960s, a houseboat on the Nile serves as a metaphor for escape—from disaffected professionals' responsibilities and careers. Until a tragedy strikes.

MIRAMAR (1967)

Four narrators, including a Nasserite supporter and a Socialist, meet in a pension in late 1960s Egypt.

RESPECTED SIR (1975)

In this satirical novel that takes place during the first days of nationalism, an ambitious archives clerk unsuccessfully tries to rise through the ranks.

* THE HARAFISH (1977)

ARABIAN NIGHTS AND DAYS (1979)

This sequel to *Thousand and One Nights* continues where the classic left off—with Shahrazad finishing the last of her stories of good and

evil. Many of these stories covertly criticize Sadat's open-door policy.

WEDDING SONG (1981)

This novel, with its centerpiece the life of the theater, employs different narrators to ask questions about art, time, fantasy, and human nature.

THE DAY THE LEADER WAS KILLED (1985)

Taking place during Anwar Sadat's open-door policy, this novella features three multigenerational characters facing economic uncertainty in modern Egypt.

AKHENATEN: DWELLER IN TRUTH (1985)

In the 11th century BC, a young boy tries to piece together the life stories of the recently deceased pharaoh, Akhenaten, Egypt's first ruler, and his queen, Nefertiti.

ECHOES OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1997)

Mahfouz's anecdotes recall his childhood, dreams, and career, and reflect on wisdom, humanity, happiness, and the upheavals of the second half of the 20th century.

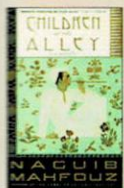
THE DREAMS (2005)

These lyrical short sketches and stories—dreams, all—feature a man who cannot escape the circus around him, a group of friends facing a flood, and a star above the Great Pyramid.

Children of the Alley (1959)

Also known as *The Children of Gebelawi*

♦ TOP 100 BOOKS OF ALL TIME, *GUARDIAN* [UK]



Mahfouz's alleged undermining of the Prophets not only incited major protest but also shocked readers familiar with *The Cairo Trilogy*. Initially serialized, the novel form was published only abroad. Using allegorical figures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, *Children of the Alley* is a spiritual history of humankind—and, though pessimistic, it offers a thin glimmer of hope.

THE STORY: The allegorical lives of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad play out in an unspecified time and place. In the beginning, a godlike man named Gebelawi creates an Edenic estate. He expels his favored son, Adham, for betraying his trust. This banishment leads to four generations living in the Hobbesian desert wilderness of the alleys; each generation produces a charismatic, semimesianic leader who tries to deliver the slum's denizens from oppression. Yet as the greedy, poverty-stricken people repeatedly fail to learn their lessons, the cycle of poverty, suffering, and powerlessness continues.

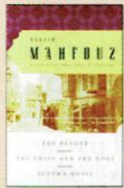
"This breathtaking novel captures the bittersweet joys of our eternal struggle." M. D. CARNEGIE, *WALL STREET JOURNAL*, 1/22/96

"The evil figures are scarred and ugly; the good are slim and handsome, and they win the hearts of the prettiest girls in the neighborhood. ... But *Children of the Alley* is nonetheless a powerful allegory of human suffering and striving, and it is saturated with a kind of tender authorial resignation at the submissiveness and suffering of the humble." RICHARD BERNSTEIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 1/10/96

NEW YORK TIMES, 1/10/96

THE BOTTOM LINE: In this controversial classic that nearly cost him his life, Mahfouz addresses human suffering, the never-ending battle between good and evil, and God's mysterious ways.

The Thief and the Dogs (1961)



One of his most successful works, *The Thief and the Dogs* reflects Mahfouz's disappointment in Gamal Abdel Nasser's dictatorship in Egypt. It is also a psychological crime story with deep sociopolitical overtones, reminiscent of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, where the characters' internal experiences supersede an external reality, the novel pioneered psychological realism in Arabic fiction.

THE STORY: Said Mahran, a thief just out of jail, soon resumes his old ways. He returns to his daughter, who snubs him, and discovers that his former flame has married his friend. Once considered an ardent nationalist and a noble Robin Hood, he seeks out the ones who thwarted his ideals of justice and imprisoned him. But instead of punishing the

rich "dogs" who devour the poor, his bullets claim innocent lives.

"Here, [Cairo] is dark and laden with symbolism: Said has left his jail cell only to enter the larger prison of Cairo society. While the theme is compelling, the plot and characters are not. ... [The novel] is likely to disappoint Western readers."

TONY HORWITZ, *WALL STREET JOURNAL*, 10/17/89

"Mahfouz makes no secret of his philosophical and intellectual identification with the secular outlook of modern Western civilization. ... What makes this novel political is the fact that the societal ills against which the contrived fictional action inveighs are directly referable to the culture of political opportunism cultivated and sanctioned by the regime."

MUHAMMAD SIDDIG, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 11/12/89

THE BOTTOM LINE: A Robin Hood–esque tale with tragic consequences.

The Harafish (1977)

Like *The Cairo Trilogy*, *The Harafish* (*harafish* is Arabic for "riffraff" or "common people") features generations of a family living in an alley in an unnamed city modeled on Cairo. The novel takes place over 800 years, however, and, like *Children of the Alley*, it contains allegorical rather than realistic characters.

THE STORY: Of humble beginnings, Ashur al-Nagi (Ashur the Survivor) comes from the harafish. Through sheer strength, he rises to the position of clan chief and reallocates all of the neighborhood's property to the harafish. But al Nagi's legendary idealism diminishes over ten generations as descendants win and lose fortunes, power, and respect—and succumb to debauchery and the family curse: "A desire for status, money and possessions, at the heart of which was anxiety and fear." Then a new leader restores honor to the al-Nagi name.

"The Harafish, at its most page-turning, is sort of like *Dynasty* or *Dallas* crossed with the Old Testament (as if they weren't already!). Stripped of its exotic settings and unfamiliar surnames, this is, at its pulsing core, a melodrama about lust, money, scandal, and the corruption of power—with a heavy dose of the indomitable human spirit thrown in for good measure." MICHAEL DORRIS, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 3/31/94

"At the book's best, Mahfouz draws us onward by continually frustrating our desire for conclusions. At its worst, his style, cliché-ridden in places, seems at a disappointing symbolic remove from the teeming Cairene reality that Mahfouz has rendered so powerfully in other novels." JOHN TAYLOR, *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*, 5/15/94

CHRONICLE, 5/15/94

THE BOTTOM LINE: *The Harafish* reflects Mahfouz's profound understanding of history as an epic, fablelike narrative. ■