

The Literary Legacy of Naguib Mahfouz

In Egypt and throughout the Arab world, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz are more than modern classics—they provide the foundation on which much of contemporary Arabic fiction is built. Today’s Arabic novels are invariably compared to and contrasted with those of Mahfouz, who is widely regarded as the father of the modern Arab novel. When presenting him with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, the Swedish Academy observed, “In Arabic literature, the novel is actually a twentieth-century phenomenon, more or less contemporary with Mahfouz. And it was he who, in due course, was to bring it to maturity.”

Mahfouz’s impressive body of work—drama, non-fiction, novels, and short stories—continues to influence writers around the world, including many contemporary Egyptian authors. Alaa Al Aswany, whose novels *The Yacoubian Building* (2005) and *Chicago* (2008) have hit international best-seller lists since their translation, credits Mahfouz for having “opened doors for five generations of Arab novelists.” Ibrahim Aslan, author of *Nile Sparrows* (2004) and *The Heron* (2005), writes:

Mahfouz . . . was able to create from Arabic, with all its phonetic characteristics, a language able to be the vehicle for modern literature, a modern storytelling form. And he forged the Arabic novel in a fashion that speaks to the Western understanding of the genre, a fact that has had a profound effect. The achievement is of barely imaginable magnitude.

Indeed, the translation of Mahfouz’s novels bridged a gap between Arabic literature and that of the European and American traditions. History and current events often served as inspiration for Mahfouz, infusing his novels with a distinctly Egyptian flavor. While Mahfouz’s novels are wrapped in Arab culture and have a specific national setting, they also address the human condition and implore readers to examine the sociology of the world around us. According to Raymond Stock, “[Mahfouz] left an incredibly rich and varied legacy. He gave the everyday flavors of life, but his great genius was that he could transcend the local and make it universal.”

On December 11, 1996, to celebrate Mahfouz’s eighty-fifth birthday and the publication of his *Echoes of an Autobiography*, the American University in Cairo Press established the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature to recognize an outstanding work of Arabic literature. Five years later, the AUC Press announced the Naguib Mahfouz Fund for Translations of Arabic Literature. By encouraging emerging Arab writers and supporting the translation of Arabic literature, the press continues to honor the memory of Egypt’s most recognized and beloved writer.