

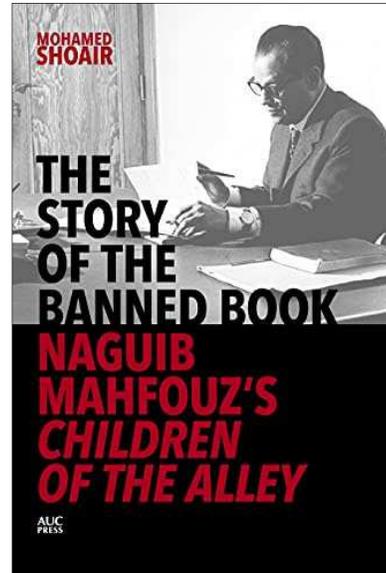
# The Destiny of Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley*

by Peter Theroux

**The Story of the Banned Book:**  
**Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley*. By Mohamed Shoair. Cairo:**  
**American University in Cairo Press.**  
**211 pp. \$35.**

It is September 21, 1959, and the forecast in Cairo is for cool and cloudy weather. A wave of arrests of communists has occurred as well as a break-in at the home of the great poet Ahmad Shawqi. Demonstrations in Baghdad have agitated against Abd al-Karim Qasim; Nikita Khrushchev has addressed the United Nations in New York. The Egyptian media inveigh against young Cairenes who ape the clothing and hairstyle of the late James Dean and, even worse, dance the decadent cha-cha. Also, the city's leading newspaper, *al-Ahram* starts serializing Naguib Mahfouz's new novel, *Awlad Haratina* or *Children of the Alley*.

So the reader learns from the opening pages of this well-written and elegantly translated history of Mahfouz's most controversial novel. *Children of the Alley's* plot follows five generations of an Egyptian family that suffers from its relationship with its aloof patriarch, who might be alive or dead. The book details the expulsion from the patriarch's favor of Adham and his wife Umaima (little mother), who had tempted him to flout their patron's taboos, followed by the tale of their descendant Gabal (mountain), who also suffers exile but returns with a foreign wife to free his people; and so on through Rifaa, whose life resembles that of Jesus; Qasim, whose exploits echo those of Muhammad (known to Muslims also as



Abu al-Qasim); and Arafa (knowledge), a practical seeker after the truth who may or may not have killed Gabalawi. A recurrent theme is how holy men are always at cross-purposes with the brutish, violent, and corrupt “bullyboys” of every age.

Critics, religious and secular, were quick to find fault with Mahfouz's work. Islamic figures saw obvious blasphemy in the treatment of characters who seemed to be reliving the lives of holy prophets, complete with wording taken directly from the Torah and Gospels. Partisans of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser saw in the disconnected tyrant of the novel an unsubtle stand-in for their leader. Various factions called for Mahfouz's trial, arrest, or assassination, and the controversy finally resulted in the 1996 assassination attempt against Mahfouz by a

fanatic encouraged by the notorious “Blind Sheikh,” Omar Abdel Rahman. Mahfouz survived to die peace-fully in 2006.

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*The Story of the Banned Book* briefly but exhaustively chronicles the story of the novel, which makes for lively reading as well as serving a highly scholarly purpose, especially given the study’s fastidious sourcing and footnoting. Most interesting is the day-to-day historical context, starting with the opening pages noted above. Shoair accompanies the ups and downs of Mahfouz and the novel with rich details of contemporary events: what was worrying Nasser on a given day; how al-Azhar University and the Muslim Brotherhood saw their equities evolving in the culture war, and how political opportunists went after the doggedly pro-peace Mahfouz in the aftermath of lost wars with Israel, followed by the Sadat-Begin peace treaty.

Mahfouz’s highly artistic novels about life in Cairo, preeminently the *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-77) delighted Egyptians, and eventually the world, in dozens of languages, and won him the Nobel Prize, due to his screenwriter’s gift for dialogue, plot, and character, as well as his deep love for and empathy with his subjects. Like Anthony Trollope’s Palliser novels, they do not read like literature at all, and part of their charm is the historical accuracy and specificity. Human and historical events transpire in identifiable Cairo neighborhoods and abound with local color. By contrast, the characters of *Children of the Alley* live in a rather vague scriptural world without a map or calendar. It dispenses with the daily realities of Egypt much as Shakespeare took a long step beyond the familiar times and places of his comedies and tragedies to go “meta” in

*The Tempest*. Mahfouz seemed to have moved—as T.S. Eliot said of *The Tempest*’s author—and “seen beyond dramatic significance to spiritual

significance.”

The idea that Mahfouz was out to retell stories from sacred scriptures seems obvious from his comments about the novel having its origin (his word) in George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah*. In 1934, Mahfouz wrote a lengthy appreciation of Shaw’s play, which dramatized the life of Adam and Eve; his essay appears in full as an appendix to this book. Later, Mahfouz would marvel at how the story of the life of Mary, mother of Jesus, was woven through numerous suras of the Qu’ran.

This reader was always skeptical of the more prosaic view that Mahfouz was out to satirize carefully the behavior of President Nasser. That always seemed like a fringe theory, like Anthony Burgess’s contention that Orwell’s *1984* was actually just a satire on the BBC, cutely reversing the last two digits of the year that book was published, 1948. Mahfouz was always careful to emphasize that this was a novel, a work of fiction, and shied away from politics. This changed, Shoair notes, after Nasser’s death. He cites Mahfouz’s less careful remarks to a Kuwaiti newspaper in 1975:

I had begun to feel that the revolution ... had begun to go astray and reveal its shortcomings. ... and mistakes, especially in the form of terrorist operations, torture, and imprisonment. I began the writing of my major novel, which portrays the struggle between prophets and bullyboys, with this as my point of departure. I was asking the revolutionaries,

“Do you want to take the path of the prophets or of the bullyboys?”

Of course, *Children of the Alley* is both and more. Good and evil have rarely been at such entertaining odds in modern literature, and it is the novel’s liveliness and readability that made even its detractors praise it as a work of art even as they called for Mahfouz to be punished. The controversy might have ebbed had not Mahfouz’s profile received a global boost with his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1988. Not only did the publicity upend his family’s life to the degree that he lamented he had become “an employee of Nobel’s,” but the newfound fame was catnip for his many enemies. Shoair writes,

A deluge of charges brought by his enemies now rained down on Naguib Mahfouz. His support for the Camp David Accords (1978) was the first among these.

Not only had colonial powers and “Zionists” shown their approval of Mahfouz by naming him the first Arab recipient of the prize, but in the world of Arab nationalism and political Islam, there were literary rivals to contend with. Egyptian novelist Yusuf Idris dubiously contended that he had been nominated for the Nobel “five times,” and, of course, “Mahfouz has got it because he has made peace with the Jews and does not criticize them.” Other writers piled on; mosque preachers openly denounced him as an apostate, and an emissary of the

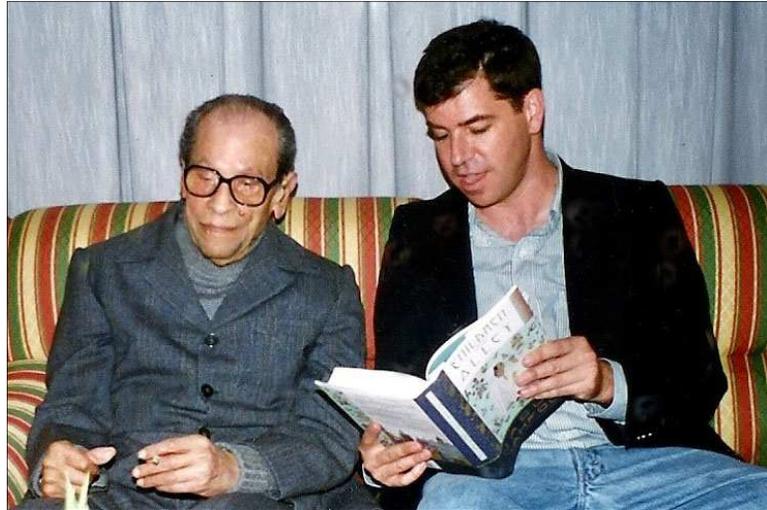


Photo: Raymond Stock  
*Peter Theroux (right) reading from his translation of Children of the Alley to Naguib Mahfouz in his office, Cairo, 1996.*

Palestine Liberation Organization showed up in Cairo with a suitcase containing \$400,000 in cash to bribe Mahfouz to refuse the prize and denounce the West. Mahfouz maintained his serenity throughout, declined to respond in kind to his detractors, and sent family members to accept the prize on his behalf, saying he was too deaf to get through the ceremony without embarrassment.

It is rare that one book documenting the life of another book sheds so much light on the literature, politics, religious feuds, and even cinematic trends of a couple of generations, but as James Joyce noted to Bennett Cerf in 1932: books have their own destinies.

If this reviewer has one quibble with this superlative book, it is that Shoair suggests that the first English translation of *Children of the Alley*, in 1981, “may be the only complete text of the novel in existence.” In fact, the definitive translation based on the most complete Arabic text came out in 1996

from Doubleday, the work of this reviewer. Shoair in fact cites my translation on page 155 and his own translator throughout uses my title, *Children of the Alley*.

At Mahfouz's funeral, Egyptian minister of religious endowments Hamdi Zaquq described the novelist as Egypt's "fourth pyramid." *The Story of the Banned Book* offers readers a unique opportunity to climb that pyramid and enjoy the view.

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