

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 129

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

Naguib Mahfouz credits Hafiz Najib—thief, jailbird, renowned cop baiter, and author of twenty-two detective novels—with being his earliest literary influence. The ten-year-old Mahfouz read Najib's *Johnson's Son* on the recommendation of an elementary school classmate, and the experience, Mahfouz avows, changed his life.

Mahfouz's subsequent influences have been many and various. In high school Mahfouz became preoccupied with Taha Husayn, whose revolutionary critical work *Fil-sbi'r al-Jahili* provoked a hysterical reaction from conservative Asharite circles when it was published in 1926. In college Mahfouz read Salama Musa, who as the editor of the magazine *al-Majalla al-Jadida* later published Mahfouz's first novel, and from whom Mahfouz says he learned “to believe in science, socialism, and tolerance.”

In the years following the Second World War, Mahfouz retreated from his socialist ideals to a deep pessimism. He spent much of his time engaged in gloomy discussions of life and the purposelessness of literature with fellow writers Adil Kamil and Ahmad Zaki Makhluḥ, on the lawn area by Cairo's Jala' Bridge, which they dubbed “the ominous circle.” In the fifties he experimented with

Sufi mysticism, seeking in it answers to the metaphysical questions not addressed by science. These days Mahfouz appears to have settled on a philosophy that combines scientific socialism with a concern for the spiritual—a combination anticipated by the definition of fiction he advanced in 1945: Fiction is art for the industrial age. It represents a synthesis of man's passion for fact and his age-old love affair with the imagination.

Born in Cairo in 1911, Mahfouz started writing at the age of seventeen and has since written more than thirty novels. Until he retired from the civil service at sixty, he wrote at night, in his spare time—unable, despite his critical successes, to depend on writing for a living. His first published work, *Abath al-Aqdar*, appeared in 1939, the first in a series of three historical tales set in the time of the pharaohs. Mahfouz originally intended to expand this series into a thirty- or forty-novel history of Egypt in the style of Sir Walter Scott, but he abandoned the project to work on his contemporary Cairo novels, the first of which, *Khan al-Khalili*, appeared in 1945.

Although much acclaimed in other parts of the Arab world, Mahfouz did not acquire a significant reputation in Egypt until the publication of *The Cairo Trilogy* in 1957. This three-thousand-page epic portrays life in middle-class Cairo between the world wars, and was immediately hailed as the novel of its generation. Mahfouz became known abroad in the late sixties, when a number of his works were translated into English, French, Russian, and German. In 1988 Mahfouz achieved worldwide recognition when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Now eighty, Mahfouz lives in the Cairo suburb of Agouza with his wife and two daughters. He avoids public exposure, especially inquiries into his private life, which might become, as he puts it, “a silly topic in journals and radio programs.” The series of meetings that made up this interview were held on a succession of Thursdays, each time at precisely eleven o'clock. The interviewer sat on a chair to Mahfouz's left, next to his good ear.

Mahfouz in person is somewhat reserved, but always candid and direct. He laughs frequently and wears an old-fashioned dark blue suit, which he buttons to the top. He smokes, and he likes his coffee bitter.

—Charlotte El Shabrawy, 1992

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing?

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

In 1929. All my stories were rejected. Salama Musa—the editor of *Majalla*—used to say to me: You have potential, but you’re not there yet. September 1939 I remember well because it was the beginning of World War II, Hitler’s attack on Poland. My story, “Abath al-Aqdar,” was published, a sort of surprise gift from the *Majalla* publishers. It was an immensely important event in my life.

INTERVIEWER

Did writing and publication then follow easily?

MAHFOUZ

No . . . though after that first publication a friend of mine, a writer, came to me and told me about his brother who owned a printing press. He formed a publication committee with some colleagues who had had a little success. We began publishing in 1943 with some regularity. We published a story of mine every year.

INTERVIEWER

But you never depended on your writing for a living?

MAHFOUZ

No. I was always a government employee. On the contrary, I *spent* on literature—on books and paper. I didn't make any money from my writing until much later. I published about eighty stories for nothing. Even my first novels I published for nothing, all to help the committee.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to make money from your writing?

MAHFOUZ

When my short stories were translated into English, French, and German. "Zabalawi" in particular was extremely successful and made me more money than any other story.

The first novel of mine to be translated was *Midaq Alley*. The translation was first published by a Lebanese named Khayyat. Neither I nor the translator made any money because Khayyat cheated us. Heinemann published it again around 1970. After that it was translated into French, and other translations of my work soon followed.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us about the notorious Kharafish group? Who belongs to it, and how was it formed?

MAHFOUZ

We first became acquainted in 1943: Mustafa Mahmud, Ahmad Baha al-Din, Salah Jahin, Muhammad Afifi. We would hold discussions on art and on current political issues. *Kharafish* means "hoodlum"—those types found on the fringes of demonstrations and who start looting at the first opportunity, they are the kharafish. Ahmed Mazhar [one of Egypt's leading actors] gave us the name. At first we used to meet at Muhammad Afifi's house. Sometimes we would go to a place called Sahara City, near the pyramids. Now we go to the film director Tewfiq Saleh's place because

he has a balcony on the tenth floor, facing the Nile. There are four or five of us left.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have much contact with the younger generation of Egyptian writers?

MAHFOUZ

Every Friday evening I attend a session at the Casino Kasr el-Nil, to which new writers are invited. Many come: poets, writers, literary types . . . Since I stopped working for the government in 1971 I have had more time for friends.

INTERVIEWER

What role did the political situation prior to 1952 play in your life?

MAHFOUZ

I was about seven when the 1919 revolution took place. I became more and more affected by it and more and more enthusiastic about the cause. Everyone I knew was for the Wafd Party and freedom from colonization. Later I became much more involved in political life as an outspoken follower of Zaghlul Pasha Saad. I still consider that involvement one of the most important things I have done in my life. But I've never *worked* in politics, never been a member of an official committee or a political party. Although I was a Wafdist, I never wanted to be known as a party member; as a writer I wanted the total freedom that a party member can never have.

INTERVIEWER

And 1952?

MAHFOUZ

I was happy with that revolution. But unfortunately it did not

bring about democracy.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think progress has been made toward democracy and freedom since the time of Nasser and Sadat?

MAHFOUZ

Oh yes, there's no doubt about that. In Nasser's time one feared the walls. Everyone was afraid. We would sit in the cafés, too afraid to talk. We would stay at home, too afraid to talk. I was afraid to talk to my children about anything that happened before the revolution—I was worried they would go to school and say something that would be misinterpreted. Sadat made us feel more secure. Hosni Mubarak? His constitution is not democratic, but *he* is democratic. We can voice our opinions now. The press is free. We can sit in our homes and speak loudly as though we were in England. But the constitution does need revising.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the Egyptian people are ready for full democracy? Do they really understand how it works?

MAHFOUZ

In Egypt today most people are concerned with getting bread to eat. Only some of the educated really understand how democracy works. No one with a family has a free moment even to discuss it.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had much trouble with censorship? Have you had to rewrite any of your manuscripts?

MAHFOUZ

Not recently, but during World War II *Al-Qawra al-Jadida* and *Radibus* were censored. I was called a leftist. Censors called

Radibus inflammatory because in it the people kill a king, and our king was still alive. I explained to them that it was simply a historical tale, but they claimed that it was false history, that the king in question had not been killed by the people but had died under “mysterious circumstances.”

INTERVIEWER

Didn't the censors also object to *The Children of Gabelawi*?

MAHFOUZ

They did. Even though I was at the time in charge of all artistic censorship, the head of literary censorship advised me not to publish the book in Egypt in order to prevent conflict with the Al-Azhar—the main seat of Islam in Cairo. It was published in Beirut but not allowed into Egypt. This was in 1959, in Nasser's time. The book still can't be bought here. People smuggle it in.

INTERVIEWER

What did you intend with *Children of Gabelawi*? Did you intend it to be provocative?

MAHFOUZ

I wanted the book to show that science has a place in society, just as a new religion does, and that science does not necessarily conflict with religious values. I wanted it to persuade readers that if we reject science, we reject the common man. Unfortunately, it has been misinterpreted by those who don't know how to read a story. Although the book is about ghettos and those who run them, it was interpreted as being about the prophets themselves. Because of this interpretation, the story was, naturally, considered shocking, supposedly showing the prophets walking barefoot, acting cruelly . . . But of course it's an *allegory*. It's not as though allegories are unknown in our tradition. In the story of “Kalila and Dimnah,” for example, a lion represents the Sultan. But no one claims that the author turned the Sultan into an animal! Something

is *meant* by the story . . . an allegory is not meant to be taken literally. There is a great lack of comprehension on the part of some readers.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the Salman Rushdie case? Do you think a writer should have absolute freedom?

MAHFOUZ

I'll tell you exactly what I think: Every society has its traditions, laws, and religious beliefs, which it tries to preserve. From time to time individuals appear who demand changes. I believe that society has the right to defend itself, just as the individual has the right to attack that with which he disagrees. If a writer comes to the conclusion that his society's laws or beliefs are no longer valid or even harmful, it is his duty to speak up. But he must be ready to pay the price for his outspokenness. If he is not ready to pay that price, he can choose to remain silent. History is full of people who went to prison or were burned at the stake for proclaiming their ideas. Society has always defended itself. Nowadays it does so with its police and its courts. I defend both the freedom of expression and society's right to counter it. I must pay the price for differing. It is the natural way of things.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read *The Satanic Verses*?

MAHFOUZ

I didn't. By the time it appeared, I could no longer read very well—my eyesight has deteriorated a lot recently. But the American cultural attaché in Alexandria explained the book to me chapter by chapter. I found the insults in it unacceptable. Rushdie insults even the women of the Prophet! Now, I can argue with *ideas*, but what should I do with insults? Insults are the business of the court. At the same time, I consider Khomeini's position equally dangerous. He

ا - بدأت ميقات الروائية بملات قصة تاريخية ، حيث اقدر وهن سقوها
من حاية من التراث الوديع المعروف القديم ، وادويست وهنك سقوها من
حاية قديمة ، ولناح صينة وهن سقوها من التاريخ . فضلها من عدد
من القصة القيرة .

وليس نغريباً انه يرجع الطاب التراثي بيوجهه زهداً شائع ، جميع اوتوا
والتراث المعروف في الوديع والفن والتاريخ هو تراثنا الاول ، نليس هجيباً
انه اجد نيم اول سرك نينال الفنى
وما يذكر هنا ان كينيت هذا العام رواية من الخنازير .

ب - ادخيرة اما الخاطب من الجبل الناشئ من الوديع انه يدرس الشكل الوديع
الذي تتخاضه برصية دراسة الحاية وتلقى ، وانه يدرس تراثه الروحى المعروف
والعربى ، و ان ينهل من الثقافة العامة بلا حدود ، وانه يفتح قلبه وهواسه
لتجارب الحاية باعتبارها مادة حمل الاساسية ، وانه يخلق كاحله في تقييم
وصبر غير شجبل للناجح ، بل انه يجبل من العمل قايمة في ذاته يهزى النظر
من حمرته ، فالفن حاية حيا قبل انه يلود بها كمرز

ج - كثير ما ينادون لم يجمع مواهب جديدة ويومه حلاقة في الوجدان السابة .
الامر الذي لاشك فيه انه توجه مواهب فذة والحال غاية في الجودة
وهن خليفة بانه تمنى لصالح الاستيانه والعبارة . المسألة انه اجد
الفتاح خالد ، انه من فترة مرضية ، ربما بيت ازمت التعليم
وارتد الاقتصار وشفافة التلقين ، اعنى انه الاصابه
اصابت الجمهور نفسه فانكسرت آثارها على المؤسسات والفقد والقيمة
العامه للفن الجاد .
وليس امام الوديع المحنازيه الا الاستمرار في العمل حتى تتجانب
الظلمات

does not have the right to pass judgment—that is not the Islamic way. According to Islamic principles, when a man is accused of heresy he is given the choice between repentance and punishment. Rushdie was not given that choice. I have always defended Rushdie's right to write and say what he wants in terms of ideas. But he does not have the right to insult anything, especially a prophet or anything considered holy. Don't you agree?

INTERVIEWER

I see your point . . . Does the Koran discuss insults or blasphemy?

MAHFOUZ

Of course. The Koran and the laws of all civilized nations legislate against the vilification of religions.

INTERVIEWER

Were you religious as a child? Did you go to the mosque with your father every Friday?

MAHFOUZ

I was especially religious when I was young. But my father put no pressure on me to go to Friday prayers, even though he went every week. Later on I began to feel strongly that religion should be open; a closed-minded religion is a curse. Excessive concern with religion seems to me a last resort for people who have been exhausted by life. I consider religion very important but also potentially dangerous. If you want to move people, you look for a point of sensitivity, and in Egypt nothing moves people as much as religion. What makes the peasant work? Religion. Because of this, religion should be interpreted in an open manner. It should speak of love and humanity. Religion is related to progress and civilization, not just emotions. Unfortunately today's interpretations of religion are often backward and contradict the needs of civilization.

INTERVIEWER

What about women who cover their heads, or even their faces and hands? Is this an example of religion contradicting the needs of civilization?

MAHFOUZ

Head covering has become a style, a fashion. It has no more meaning than that for most. But I do fear religious fanaticism . . . a pernicious development, totally opposed to mankind.

INTERVIEWER

Do you pray these days?

MAHFOUZ

Sometimes. But age prevents me at present. Between you and me, I consider religion an essential human behavior. Still, it's clearly more important to treat one's fellow man well than to be always praying and fasting and touching one's head to a prayer mat. God did not intend religion to be an exercise club.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been to Mecca?

MAHFOUZ

No.

INTERVIEWER

Do you want to go?

MAHFOUZ

No. I hate crowds.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when you married?

MAHFOUZ

Thirty-seven or thirty-eight.

INTERVIEWER

Why so late?

MAHFOUZ

I was busy with my job and with writing. I was a government employee in the morning and a writer in the evening. My day was completely filled. I was afraid of marriage . . . especially when I saw how busy my brothers and sisters were with social events because of it. This one went to visit people, that one invited people. I had the impression that married life would take up all my time. I saw myself drowning in visits and parties. No freedom.

INTERVIEWER

Even now, don't you refuse to attend dinners and receptions?

MAHFOUZ

I never attend such events. I never even visit my friends. I meet them at the Casino Kasr el-Nil or at one or two other coffee houses.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why you didn't go to Sweden to receive your Nobel Prize? Too many visits, dinners, parties . . . ?

MAHFOUZ

No, not exactly. As much as I would have loved to travel when I was young, nowadays I no longer have the desire. Even a two-week trip would disrupt my lifestyle.

INTERVIEWER

You must have been asked many times about your reaction to

receiving the Nobel. Did you have any inkling beforehand that you would win?

MAHFOUZ

None at all. My wife thought I deserved it, but I had always suspected the Nobel was a Western prize; I thought they would never select an Eastern writer. There was a rumor, though, that two Arab writers had been nominated: Yusef Idris and Adonis.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know you were being considered?

MAHFOUZ

No. I was at Al-Ahram that morning. Had I stayed half an hour longer I would have found out immediately. But I went home and had lunch instead. The news came across the tickers at Al-Ahram and they called my house. My wife woke me up to tell me, but I thought she was joking and wanted to go back to sleep. Then she told me Al-Ahram was on the phone. I picked up to hear someone saying, Congratulations! It was Mr. Basha. Now Mr. Basha sometimes plays jokes on me, so I didn't take him seriously. I went into the living room in my pajamas and was just sitting down when the doorbell rang. Someone came in whom I assumed was a journalist, but he turned out to be the Swedish ambassador! So I excused myself to change . . . and that's how it happened.

INTERVIEWER

Turning once more to your writing: do you work according to a regular schedule?

MAHFOUZ

I have always been compelled to. From eight till two I was at work. From four until seven I wrote. Then from seven until ten I read. This was my schedule every day except Friday. I have never had time to do as I please. But I stopped writing about three years ago.

INTERVIEWER

How do you come up with the characters and ideas for your stories?

MAHFOUZ

Let me put it this way. When you spend time with your friends, what do you talk about? Those things which made an impression on you that day, that week . . . I write stories the same way. Events at home, in school, at work, in the street, these are the bases for a story. Some experiences leave such a deep impression that instead of talking about them at the club I work them into a novel.

Take, for instance, the case of a criminal who killed three people here recently. Beginning with that basic story, I would go on to make a number of decisions as to how to write it. I would choose, for example, whether to write the story from the point of view of the husband, the wife, the servant, or the criminal. Maybe my sympathies lie with the criminal. These are the sorts of choices that make stories differ from one another.

INTERVIEWER

When you begin writing, do you allow the words to flow or do you prepare notes first? Do you start with a specific theme in mind?

MAHFOUZ

My short stories come straight from the heart. For other works I do research first. Before beginning *The Cairo Trilogy*, for example, I did extensive research. I compiled a file on each character. If I hadn't done that I would have gotten lost and forgotten something. Sometimes a theme arises naturally out of the events in a story, and sometimes I will have one in mind before I begin. If I know beforehand that I want to portray a human being's ability to surmount whatever evil may befall him, I will create a hero capable of demonstrating that idea. But I also begin stories by writing

about a character's behavior at length, allowing the theme to emerge later on.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you revise and rewrite before you consider a story finished?

MAHFOUZ

I make frequent revisions, I cross out a lot, I write all over the pages, even on the backs. Often my revisions are major. After I revise, I rewrite the story and send it to the publisher. Then I tear up all the old reworkings and throw them away.

INTERVIEWER

You never keep any of your notes? Many writers keep every word they have written! Don't you think it's interesting to study a writer's process by examining his revisions?

MAHFOUZ

It may well be, but it is simply not part of my culture to preserve notes. I have never heard of a writer preserving his early drafts. I have to discard my revisions—otherwise my house would overflow with useless paper! Besides, I have terrible handwriting.

INTERVIEWER

Neither the short story nor the novel is part of the Arab literary heritage. How do you explain your success with these forms?

MAHFOUZ

We Arab writers did borrow the modern concept of the short story and the novel from the West, but by now they have been internalized in our own literature. Many translations came our way during the forties and fifties; we took their style to be simply the way stories were written. We used the Western style to express our own themes and stories. But don't forget that our heritage

includes such works as *Ayyam al-Arab*, which contains many stories—among them “Antar” and “Qays and Leila”—and of course *The Thousand and One Nights*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you identify with any of your characters?

MAHFOUZ

Kamal from the trilogy represents my own generation—our ideas, our choices, our dilemmas and psychological crises—and so his character is in that sense autobiographical. But he is universal at the same time. I also feel close to Abdul Gawad, the father . . . open to life in all its aspects, he loves his friends and he never wittingly hurts anyone. The two together represent both halves of my personality. Abdel Gawad is very gregarious, loves art and music; Kamal is inhibited and shy, serious and idealistic.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about a specific example of your writing: *The Thief and the Dogs*. How did you begin?

MAHFOUZ

The story was inspired by a thief who terrorized Cairo for a while. His name was Mahmoud Suleiman. When he got out of prison he tried to kill his wife and his lawyer. They managed to escape unharmed, but he was killed in the process.

INTERVIEWER

Had his wife betrayed him, as in the novel?

MAHFOUZ

No . . . I created the story from his character. At the time I was suffering from a persistent and peculiar sense that I was being pursued, and also the conviction that under the political order of the time our lives had no meaning. So when I wrote the criminal's

story, I wrote my own story along with it. A simple crime tale became a philosophical meditation on the times! I subjected the main character, Sayyid Mahran, to all my confusion, my perplexities. I put him through the experience of looking for answers in the sheikh, in the “fallen woman,” in the idealist who has betrayed his ideas for money and fame. The writer, you see, is not simply a journalist. He interweaves a story with his own doubts, questions, and values. That is art.

INTERVIEWER

What about the role of religion in the story? Is faith in God the path to true happiness, as the sheikh suggests? Is Sufism the answer the criminal is looking for?

MAHFOUZ

The sheikh rejects life as we know it. The criminal, on the other hand, is trying to solve his immediate problems. They are in two different worlds. I love Sufism as I love beautiful poetry, but it is not the answer. Sufism is like a mirage in the desert. It says to you, come and sit, relax and enjoy yourself for a while. I reject any path that rejects life, but I can't help loving Sufism because it sounds so beautiful . . . It gives relief in the midst of battle . . .

INTERVIEWER

I have several Egyptian friends who consult Sufi sheikhs regularly looking for solutions . . .

MAHFOUZ

I wish them well. The real solution to their problems is in the National Bank.

INTERVIEWER

What of Nur, the woman in the story? And women such as Nefisa in *The Beginning and the End* and Zohra in *Miramar*? These characters, although “fallen,” are clearly good-hearted, and

appear to embody the only hope for the future.

MAHFOUZ

That is correct, although I intended Nefisa also to demonstrate the consequences of dishonorable conduct in a typical Egyptian family.

INTERVIEWER

Do you condone that type of punishment?

MAHFOUZ

I, with most Egyptians, feel that punishment on that level is too severe. On the other hand an Egyptian man who does not respond the way Nefisa's brother did cannot continue to live in this society. Whether or not he wants to, he is obliged to kill the dishonored girl. He cannot escape it. And it will be a long time before this tradition changes, although its force has lessened somewhat recently, especially in the cities.

INTERVIEWER

Abdul Gawad in the trilogy personifies the typical Egyptian male of the time. Is his type still common today?

MAHFOUZ

Oh yes. Particularly in upper Egypt, in the countryside . . . though an Abdul Gawad today would probably be less extreme. Isn't there a shade of him in every man?

INTERVIEWER

Every *Egyptian* man, or every man?

MAHFOUZ

I can't speak for other countries, but it is certainly true of Egyptian men.

INTERVIEWER

Things seem to be changing, though, wouldn't you say?

MAHFOUZ

Things are beginning to change. The position of the woman in the household has become much stronger, mainly due to education, although there are other factors.

INTERVIEWER

Who do you think should have the upper hand in the household? Who should make the decisions?

MAHFOUZ

A marriage is like a company with equal partners. No one rules. If there is a disagreement, the more intelligent of the two should override. But each family is different. Often the power depends on money; whoever makes the most money has the most strength. There are no fixed rules.

INTERVIEWER

In very conservative, traditional societies such as Egypt, don't women often have great power over men?

MAHFOUZ

Certainly, and recent history proves it. Men with considerable political or military power will fall into the hands of strong women who influence their decisions. These women rule from behind the curtain, from behind the veil.

INTERVIEWER

Why are the majority of your heroines women from the lower strata of society? Do you intend them to symbolize anything larger? Egypt, for example?

MAHFOUZ

No. By writing about lower-class women I simply intended to show that during the period in which these novels are set women had no rights. If a woman couldn't find a good husband or divorce a bad one, she had no hope. Sometimes her only recourse was, unfortunately, illicit behavior. Until very recently, women have been a deprived lot with very few rights . . . even basic rights such as freedom of choice in marriage, divorce, and education. Now that women are being educated, this situation is changing, because a women who is educated has a weapon. Some critics see Egypt symbolized by Hamida in *Midaq Alley*, but I never intended anything of the sort.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of such critics, who interpret your work in terms of symbols?

MAHFOUZ

When I first heard that Hamida symbolized Egypt, I was taken by surprise, even a little shocked. I suspected that the critics had simply decided to turn everything and everyone into symbols. But then I began to see resemblances between aspects of Hamida's behavior and aspects of the political situation. And by the time I had finished reading the article, I realized that the critic was right—that while I was writing about Hamida I was also subconsciously writing about Egypt. I think such symbolic parallels probably always come from the subconscious. Although I may not intend a story to convey a certain meaning that a reader sees in it, that meaning may nevertheless be a legitimate part of the story. A writer writes both consciously and subconsciously.

INTERVIEWER

What is the subject closest to your heart? The subject you most love to write about?

MAHFOUZ

Freedom. Freedom from colonization, freedom from the absolute rule of a king, and basic human freedom in the context of society and the family. These types of freedom follow from one to the other. In the trilogy, for example, after the revolution brought about political freedom, Abdul Gawad's family demanded more freedom from *him*.

INTERVIEWER

What is the most difficult situation you have had to face in your life?

MAHFOUZ

Most certainly it was the decision to dedicate myself to writing, thereby accepting the lowest standard of living for myself and my family. It was especially difficult since the prospect of money was dangled before me . . . Around 1947 I was given the chance to work as a scriptwriter with the best in the field. I began working with Salah Abu Seif, but I gave it up. I refused to continue. I didn't work with him again until after the war when everything became expensive. Before that, I wouldn't think of it. And my family accepted these sacrifices.

INTERVIEWER

Many prominent writers, especially in the West, are known for their decadent private lives—their excessive drinking, drug use, unusual sexual habits, suicidal tendencies . . . but you appear to be perfect!

MAHFOUZ

Well . . .

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps that is your greatest flaw?

MAHFOUZ

It is certainly a defect. But you are judging me in my dotage. In my younger days I did all those things—I drank, I pursued the gentler sex, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

Are you optimistic about the future of the Middle East, particularly in view of the Gulf War and continued violence?

MAHFOUZ

At my age it is unseemly to be pessimistic. When you are young you can declare that there is no hope for mankind, but when you are older, you learn to avoid encouraging people to hate the world.

INTERVIEWER

But what about a conception of the hero? Heroes don't seem to exist in your stories, nor indeed in the stories of any contemporary Egyptian writer.

MAHFOUZ

It's true that there are no heroes in most of my stories—only characters. Why? Because I look at our society with a critical eye and find nothing extraordinary in the people I see. The generation before mine, influenced by the 1919 uprisings, saw heroic behavior—the worker able to overcome unusual obstacles, that kind of hero. Other writers—Tawfiq al-Hakim, Muhammed Husayn Haykal, Ibrahim Abd al-Quadir al-Mazini—write about heroic types. But on the whole, our generation is very apathetic and a hero is a rare thing; you can't put a hero in a novel unless it is a work of fantasy.

INTERVIEWER

How would you describe a hero?

MAHFOUZ

There are many heroes in ancient Arabic literature, all of them horsemen, knights. But a hero today would for me be one who adheres to a certain set of principles and stands by them in the face of opposition. He fights corruption, is not an opportunist, and has a strong moral foundation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself a hero?

MAHFOUZ

Me?

INTERVIEWER

Aren't you a model, for your children and your public, of one who stands by his principles in the face of adversity?

MAHFOUZ

Yes, certainly. But I don't think of myself as a hero.

INTERVIEWER

How, then, would you describe yourself?

MAHFOUZ

Someone who loves literature. Someone who believes in and is sincere about his work. Someone who loves his work more than money or fame. Of course, if money and fame come, they are welcome! But they have never been my goal. Why? Because I love writing more than anything else. It may be unhealthy, but I feel that without literature my life would have no meaning. I might have good friends, travel, luxuries, but without literature my life would be miserable. It's a strange thing, but not really, because most writers are the same way. This is not to say I have done nothing but write in my life. I am married, I have children. Then, since 1935, I have had a sensitivity in my eyes that prevents me from

reading or writing during the summer, so this has imposed a balance on my life—a balance sent down by God! Each year I must live for three months as a man who is not a writer. Those three months I meet my friends and stay out until morning.

And I haven't lived?

