

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Naguib Mahfouz

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With its 119th number, the MLA's series on approaches to teaching world literature finally includes a volume on Arabic literature. That this volume is dedicated to Naguib Mahfouz is a judicious choice. The Egyptian author is possibly the most often taught Arab writer, not only because he is a seminal figure of Arabic literature, but also because his reception of the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature was followed by an increased awareness of his works among students and scholars who may not specialize in—or even be familiar with—the Middle East. Consequently, he often finds himself on various syllabi as the sole representative of the region, its language, and its literature. The stated purpose of this book, as indicated in its preface, is precisely to guide the introduction of the Egyptian author and his work into North American and European classrooms.

This is in concurrence with the overarching goal of the series, which is to collect within each volume a number of perspectives on teaching a particular work or author widely assigned at the undergraduate level. In this case, the editors of the volume on Mahfouz offer a collection of outlooks that may assist the addition of a Mahfouz work to a survey course, or even the development of an entire seminar on the author, a decidedly feasible endeavor given the breadth of his oeuvre. Well aware of the delicate burden that is placed on Mahfouz when he is, thus, designated to stand for a complex literary and cultural tradition, the editors of this book offer a balanced introduction to the author by simultaneously presenting him as ambassador of Arabic literature at-large, as well as offering entry points into specific aspects of his works.

Those acquainted with other volumes in the series will recognize the familiar organization of the book. It is divided into two parts: "Materials" and "Approaches." The first part, "Materials," is only six pages long and offers some background on Mahfouz, including biographic and bibliographic sketches, as well as a list of resources for teachers. This is a welcome primer for those new to the author. The second part, "Approaches," spans over two hundred pages, which is most of the remainder of the book and a typical structure for this series. "Approaches" begins with an introduction by Hassan and Muaddi Darraj on Mahfouz's biographical circumstances and is then further divided into two subsections, respectively titled "Contexts" and "Teaching Specific Texts." The first subsection, "Contexts," deals with such queries as teaching an entire seminar on Mahfouz, approaching his works in both Arabic and English translation, and appreciating their significance from historical, sociopolitical, and literary standpoints. The discussion throughout the six chapters that form this subsection alternates between addressing pedagogical issues and building a critical framework for the materials. In the next subsection, seven scholars discuss their approaches to specific issues and texts, namely *Midaq Alley*, *Palace Walk*, *Miramar*, *Children of the Alley*, and "Zaabalawi." The purpose being to share perspectives on teaching texts studied in undergraduate

classes, the emphasis is largely on Mahfouz's better-known works. However, those interested in his less commonly taught works will find allusions to some of them interspersed throughout the book.

Although all contributors are specialists of Arabic literature primarily, the book does not offer a narrow perspective on Mahfouz's work rooted in traditional approaches to literature only, but also addresses his impact on such arenas as cinema, nationalism, or postcolonialism. In this sense, Hassan and Muaddi Darraj's introduction to part two provides ample background on Mahfouz and his work and, in order to serve the needs of a given course, can be read in conjunction with only specific chapters in the subsequent subsections. For instance, those interested in including Mahfouz in a course with a religious emphasis may prefer to focus on Nabil Matar's chapter, "Christ and the Abrahamic Legacy in *Children of the Alley*." This approach could also be based on which of Mahfouz's works one wishes to teach. Those interested in adding the widely anthologized short story "Zaabalawi" to their syllabi may find the chapters by Roger Allen and Michael Beard particularly relevant.

Overall, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Naguib Mahfouz* certainly meets the goal of assisting the introduction of the Egyptian author and his work into the classroom. Admittedly, the classrooms primarily targeted, as mentioned above, are in North American and European Universities; the point being to offer guidance to professors of world literature without expertise in Arabic literary traditions. The question that this raises is what are Mahfouz's links to other literary traditions in which the instructors of world literature may actually be experts? There is some discussion of his ties to European literary traditions, and Elliott Colla's chapter points out a similarity with William Faulkner, but how do his works fit with other titles likely to be on world literatures syllabi? And, a question of particular interest to readers of these pages, how do his works fit with (or within) African literatures? The Arab world is too often presented and studied discretely, the very phrase commonly used to refer to the region insidiously suggesting that it is a "world" of its own, insular and separate from other cultures and traditions. Under these circumstances, some might wish further direction in approaching Mahfouz from a more comparative perspective.

However, anyone seeking to broaden the scope of their courses or curricula to include Arabic literature will find this volume to be a very useful source of information, materials, and suggestions, which would, in fact, help make any literature syllabus hitherto devoid of Arabic authors certainly more comparative. As such, it is a most welcome addition to a series with a dearth of volumes on teaching non-Western works and authors. In that regard, it is commendable, and bodes well for the future of *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*.