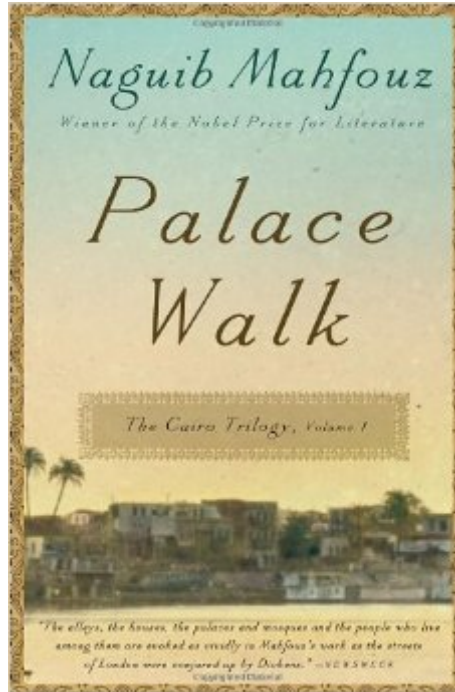


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Palace Walk: The Cairo Trilogy, Volume 1



Synopsis

Palace Walk is the first novel in Nobel Prize-winner Naguib Mahfouz's magnificent Cairo Trilogy, an epic family saga of colonial Egypt that is considered his masterwork. The novels of the Cairo Trilogy trace three generations of the family of tyrannical patriarch al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, who rules his household with a strict hand while living a secret life of self-indulgence. Palace Walk introduces us to his gentle, oppressed wife, Amina, his cloistered daughters, Aisha and Khadija, and his three sons—the tragic and idealistic Fahmy, the dissolute hedonist Yasin, and the soul-searching intellectual Kamal. The family's trials mirror those of their turbulent country during the years spanning the two world wars, as change comes to a society that has resisted it for centuries. Translated by William Maynard Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Twelve years ago, I spent several months living in Egypt. I am an American woman, and at that time, I found much of the culture and behavior of Egyptians to be confusing. Since that time, I have married a Moroccan, and have lived in Morocco for the past ten years. I now feel that I understand much about Arab culture. Just recently, a friend recommended I read the Cairo trilogy. I began with Palace Walk, and haven't yet read the others. This book is SUPERB. Westerners have trouble understanding how Middle Easterners THINK. This book is so wonderful because it takes you inside the mind of each of the characters, in turn, chapter-by-chapter, showing you how each one of them thinks, and allowing you to see their motivations for their behavior. One person commented in

their book review that the majority of the book concentrated on the male characters. There is a reason for this. Egyptian society is mostly about men, not about women. Even as the society modernizes, the THINKING stays the same. Mahfuz has done a masterful character study of each character in the book, as they go through their daily lives. Without yet having read the two subsequent books, I expect that I will get more in depth into the women's lives in Sugar Street, because this is the house to which the two female daughters have moved upon their marriages to two brothers. In the past, I have tried to read some other books by this author, and just couldn't get into them. These books are different. They really do merit the Nobel Prize. Reading them now, after being immersed in the Arab culture for 12 years, I see so many more things than I would have noticed had I read the books first.

I first read this book in Kuwait. My dog-eared copy still has sand in the pages, so they make a desert noise when I turn them. It always takes me straight back...Mahfouz is not easy for an American reader. We like to know what's about to happen, and we like the story to "get there" in a few strokes (witness Tom Clancy.) The language is beautiful--too beautiful for many Americans--and the setting is so real, so evocative that I can smell Egypt when I'm reading this trilogy (or is that the sand again?) If you feel like you need to warm up to this series, I suggest that you start with "Miramar" or, better yet, "Arabian Nights and Days." Mahfouz's work is always allegorical; characters reflect the passage of their era, and the language is part of that reflection. Many other reviewers have complained that they "don't get the language"-- well, I can read Arabic as well, and I have stabbed at the original text before, so I can safely tell you that (like anything in the Middle East) language is *everything.* Once you understand that, you can start understanding the people who live there. This book begins the saga of a family in crisis. It isn't a single event, but a slow evolution brought on by the irrepressible challenge of modernity. Young people want to shake off old traditions...Adults misbehave in secret...And in Cairo, the home becomes a place where secrets are kept hidden from those within while it protects secrets on the outside. It is an allegory of the Egyptian soul in the age of independence. The trilogy metes these secrets out one by one, until the walls that "protect" inside and outside begin to crumble. People must make new lives and develop new self-identities.

"Doesn't function like a Western novel"? Does the reviewer who wrote that think that all novels need function like Western ones? The novel is not an indigenous form to Arabic literature, and the first Arabic novel was published in the 1910's or 1920's in Egypt. Yet Middle Eastern writers, with

Mahfouz at their head, have taken this foreign form and appropriated it, infusing their own cultural values and linguistic lyricism. How is literature to evolve if everyone must write in the same way? We owe thanks to the late Jackie Kennedy Onassis for this wonderful translation of "Palace Walk"; she read it in French and enjoyed it so much that she set the wheels in motion to get an English translation onto American bookshelves. Since then many of Mahfouz's novels and novellas have been published by Doubleday. I own most if not all of them, and they are fantastic. I'd like to add something about the difficulties of translation. Mahfouz's Arabic is too poetic and complex for me to understand, but the fact that the English translation is so lyrical and can stand on its own is testament to the greatness of the original work. Reading literature from other cultures should open our minds and help us to come closer to global understanding. It's true that I have a far more intense bond with Mahfouz's work than a non-Egyptian or non-Middle Easterner would have, but he is such a consummate genius that he moves me as well, deeply. In addition, the reviewer's opinion that the characters have not changed strikes me as either misinformed or born of bias. The characters do change, but you have to read the whole Trilogy to see just how much.

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