



Alaa Al Aswany

The Yacoubian Building
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Q: What was the first spark of inspiration for this novel?

A: I got the idea for this book ten years ago. I was walking in downtown Cairo and saw that the American University people were destroying an old building in order to build a new campus. I looked into the old building and saw empty rooms littered with small things the inhabitants had left behind: old towels, mirrors, student notebooks. I kept watching the scene and I thought, "Every one of these rooms has a history full of dramas." Each room had seen a baby born, the pleasure of love, a hard-working student, the pain of a divorce, etc. I told myself, "If I can write the tale of just one of those rooms, it would be a good novel." Some days later I began work on *The Yacoubian Building*.

Q: Some of Egypt's most famous actors and a much-lauded screenwriter made a film based on *The Yacoubian Building*. Have you seen it? How do you feel about it?

A: Yes, I have seen it in New York at the Tribeca Film Festival. I did like it and it was very good and extremely well-received. I felt that it was loyal to the novel. It kept the atmosphere and message as well.

Q: The novel is currently the best-selling book in the Arabic language, which might surprise most Westerners given its critique of government and handling of homosexuality and radical Islamists. How did the novel become so popular?

A: Probably because it's a good novel. I don't know as I don't think the author has the right to evaluate his own work. The author must write and this is his only job. It's up to the readers and critics to assess the novel.

Q: The novel seems to bemoan an encroaching corruption in Egyptian society, but that's arguably the case worldwide. Is this not, perhaps, an unavoidable aspect of democratization?

A: I believe the corruption in Egypt comes from the dictatorship. To me, democracy is actually the best thing we have to fight against corruption. In Egypt we have an undemocratic society and as a result of this we have corruption. In political science there is a known phrase that describes this principle: "total authority is total corruption."

Q: Who are your favorite Egyptian authors, and which novels in particular do you think should be introduced to American readers?

A: I believe Noble prize winner Naguib Mahfouz is not only the best Egyptian novelist, but also the best Arab novelist. I highly recommend American readers read all of his works.