

Naguib Mahfouz, *Voices from the Other World: Ancient Egyptian Tales*

(Anchor Books, 2003)

Mahfouz (1911–2006), the only Egyptian writer awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature, provides glimpses of his homeland's past through tales of political power and magic realism that read like contemporary fiction.

How to Use this Discussion Guide

All art arises from the context of its time. The MFAH Book Club uses works of art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and from museums around the world, as the hub for a series of questions directly related to a specific book. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts—this is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique.

Discuss the questions with your book club or a friend, or just think about them if reading on your own, then bring your book and take a guided tour of select works at the MFAH on a Book Club Tour!

MFAH Book Club Tours

To complement your reading and discussion of Naguib Mahfouz's *Voices from the Other World: Ancient Egyptian Tales*, tours are available February 1 through May 31, 2012. These discussion-based, docent-led tours will feature art works selected from the MFAH collections that evoke timeless human themes.

To book a tour at a time of your own choosing:

Read and discuss the book in your own book club, then [book your group for a guided tour](#) led by a gallery educator. A minimum of 6 people is required.

Not in a book club? Reading on your own or with a friend? The MFAH has scheduled walk-in tours for each book selection on specific dates and times throughout the season. Visit www.mfah.org/bookclub for the walk-in tour schedule, and to register for a specific tour.

Overarching Questions

These tales—written in Arabic during the 1930s and early 1940s, set in ancient times, and translated only recently into English—might be described as possessing a timeless quality. Do you feel these stories are true to ancient times or timeless, and why?

These five stories were written separately and were originally published in different contexts before being anthologized in *Voices from the Other World*. How does each story relate to the other four in this slender volume? Would you have put these short stories together? Why or why not?

STORY: "Evil Adorned"

This story is set in a *nome* (a district along the Nile River) led by a magistrate, a constable, and a physician. Describe the kind of leadership that each figure provides to the community.

Discuss the changes implemented by the mysterious "elderly gentleman" (pp. 8–11). Was the new social order he ushered in a utopia?

To whom does the story's title apply?

ART: Obstacles to Leadership / Utopia vs. Dystopia

Among the Akan of Ghana and the Ivory Coast, a chief conveys important messages through his spokesmen, called linguists. Linguists are knowledgeable about the customs, history, and laws of the Akan, and often speak in proverbs, short sayings that encapsulate wisdom and advice. These proverbs are often depicted in carved and gold-leafed wooden finials on a linguist's staff. Read these two proverbs, and examine these finials from the MFAH collection; then discuss how they related to Mahfouz's "Evil Adorned."



"To be a ruler is like holding an egg: if it is pressed too hard it breaks; but, if not held tightly enough, it may slip and smash to the ground."

Linguist Staff Top Representing a Man Holding an Egg, African, Asante, Osei Bonsu, 1947–56 A.D., wood and gold leaf, the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of African Gold, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

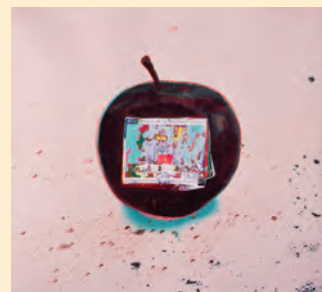


"The hen's foot may step on her chicks, but it does not kill them."

Linguist Staff Top Representing a Hen with Six Chicks, African, Akan, c. 1900, wood and gold leaf, the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of African Gold, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

Utopia means "no place." The term was coined by Sir Thomas More, an English lawyer, social philosopher, and statesman, who used the word as the title of his 1516 book about an imaginary island enjoying perfect legal, social, and political systems. During the 1610s, the term utopia was extended to mean a perfect place. Closely examine the following four artworks—two from the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Collection, and two featured in the exhibition *Utopia/Dystopia: Construction and Destruction in Photography and Collage* (March 11–June 10, 2012)—then wrestle with the questions that follow:

- Are any of these works of art related? If so, how?
- Can one know Good without knowing Evil, pleasure without pain, or salvation without damnation?
- Are people born Good or Evil?
- Compare the role of the apple in the story of Adam and Eve (depicted by Fuseli) and in Mull's collage. How do these two contexts for the apple relate to one another, if at all?



Right, clockwise from top left:

Henry Fuseli, *The Dismission of Adam and Eve From Paradise*, 1796–99, oil on canvas, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, 1985.14.

Circle of Hieronymus Bosch, *Saint Christopher Carrying the Christ Child Through a Sinful World*, early 16th century, oil on wood, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, 1979.1.

Esaki Reiji, *Collage of Babies*, 1893, albumen print, photomontage, the MFAH, gift of an anonymous donor in honor of Yasufumi Nakamori, 2010.1897.

Carter Mull, *Apple*, *New York Times*, February 8, 2011, 2011, collage, the MFAH, promised gift of John A. MacMahon in honor of Candace Waddell MacMahon.
© Carter Mull, courtesy Marc Foxx Gallery.

STORY: “King Userkaf’s Forgiveness”

Reading the King’s prayer and the celestial voice of the god Khnum’s response (pp. 16–17), would you have reached the same conclusion as the King? What other responses might the king have had?

Despite Samun (the high priest) and General Samunra (the commander) recognizing that King Userkaf has returned, they will not challenge Sahura’s authority. Their responses are concise: the priest says, “My duty is to serve my God, not to bring down kings” (p. 21), and the commander says, “Egypt has only one king; I know no other” (p. 23). Why do they respond this way?

What is the message of this story?

ART: Blood Relatives / Families and Conflict

The following two paintings in the MFAH collection depict family relationships in different contexts. Read the descriptions, and then discuss how these two paintings relate to Mahfouz’s tale of “King Userkaf’s Forgiveness.”



Baron Gérard, the leading portraitist at the court of French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, painted this portrait of the family of Jean Lannes, the first Duke of Montebello and one of Napoleon’s greatest generals, in 1814. The duke, who was killed in battle four years earlier, is included symbolically in the form of a statue that is just glimpsed at the upper left side of the painting. The duke’s eldest son, and heir, looks upward toward the statue.

François Pascal Simon Gérard, called Baron Gérard, *Portrait of Louise-Antoinette-Scholastique Guéhéneuc, Madame la Maréchale Lannes, Duchesse de Montebello, with her Children*, 1814, oil on canvas, the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund and the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund, 2007.1202.

In Constant Mayer’s poignant scene from the American Civil War, a wounded Confederate soldier has just discovered his dead Union brother. The latter figure reclines in a graceful S-curve, his chest exposed, his head lying on his left shoulder, his lifeless eyes half-opened and cast upward. He is cradled from behind by his brother in a composition that recalls the religious images of the Pietà (Mary cradling Jesus’ body) or Deposition (Jesus’ lifeless body taken down from the cross), a frequent subject throughout the history of European art.

Constant Mayer, *Recognition: North and South*, 1865, oil on canvas, the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by “One Great Night in November, 2011,” and gift of Nancy and Richard D. Kinder in honor of Emily Ballew Neff, 2011.764.



STORY: “The Mummy Awakens”

The main character of this tale transforms through multiple identities. What does each of these transformations signify?

“The Mummy Awakens” features two parallel clashes based on “occupations.” The Pasha is an Ottoman who prefers French culture over Egyptian culture.* Hor, the awakened mummy, is described as Sa’idi (from Upper Egypt), and reminds everyone of his defeat of the northern country (Lower Egypt). How are these “occupations” related?

How does this story relate to the 1922 discovery, by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, of the tomb of Tutankhamun and popular lore about the “curse of the mummy”?

** Egypt was occupied by the Ottoman Empire from 1517 until 1867, with a brief interruption during the French occupation between 1798 and 1801.*

ART: Reincarnation and Occupation / The Curse of Empire



Elephant Mask, African, Bamileke (Mileke), Kuosi society, first half of 20th century; raffia cloth, indigo dye, glass beads, and cotton cloth; the MFAH, gift of Bob Wilson.



Linguist Staff Top Representing a Chameleon Standing on a Box, African, Akan, c. 1900, wood and gold leaf, the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of African Gold, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

Among the Bamileke of Cameroon in West Africa, a chameleon represents a harbinger of death. Chameleons are a prominent motif on this *Elephant Mask*, which is worn only by the highest-ranking members of the Kuosi society during public celebrations or funerals for society members.

The chameleon also inspired a proverb among the Akan of Ghana and Ivory Coast:

“The chameleon can only change the color of the clothes he wears, but not those in his box.”

This is a warning that one should deal only with the problems at hand.

How does the chameleon, with its two different meanings in West African cultures, relate to “The Mummy Awakens”?



King's Crown, Balinese, Indonesian, Royal Court of Singaraja, late 19th century; gold, rubies, sapphires, diamonds, and copper; the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of Asian Gold, Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

In “The Mummy Awakens,” the Pasha prefers French culture, introduced during the 1797–1801 occupation, over Egyptian culture. In 1922, when Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon discovered the tomb of King Tutankhamun, Egypt was occupied by the British.

This *King's Crown* is from the Royal Court of Singaraja on the island of Bali in Indonesia. The crown is shaped like a Dutch military cap. (The Netherlands occupied Indonesia from 1800 to 1949.)

- Does this King's Crown signify leadership in the same way as other crowns you have seen? If yes, how? If not, why not?
- How does foreign occupation affect a culture or a country?

STORY: “The Return of Sinuhe”

What life principle is conveyed in this story?

ART: Love & Loss / Orpheus and Eurydice

How do you think Mahfouz’s short story “The Return of Sinuhe” relates to the following ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice?



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*, 1861, oil on canvas, the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by the Agnes Cullen Arnold Endowment Fund, 87.190.

While walking among her people, the Cicones, in tall grass at her wedding, Eurydice was set upon by a satyr. In an effort to escape the satyr, Eurydice fell into a nest of vipers and suffered a fatal bite. Orpheus discovered her body. Overcome with grief, he played such sad and mournful songs that all the nymphs and gods wept. At their suggestion, Orpheus travelled to the Underworld and by his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone, the only person to accomplish this, who agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to Earth on one condition: He should walk in front of her and not look back until they both had reached the upper world. He set off with Eurydice following. Feeling anxious, as soon as he reached the upper world, he turned to look at her. But as Eurydice had not yet crossed the threshold to the upper world, she vanished for the second time—forever.

In Corot’s *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*, there is no hint of the disappointing finale of the story (which everyone in Corot’s day would have known). In Mahfouz’s story, the youthful love of Sinuhe and the queen is revealed near the end. Does this make you more sympathetic toward Sinuhe or the queen, and why?

STORY: “A Voice from the Other World”

Is Mahfouz’s description of passing into the afterlife (in part one) similar to how you envision it? Why or why not?

What is the most surprising moment in part two?

Who is the narrator of this story? What happens to the narrator by the end of the story? How is this foreshadowed at the beginning of the story?

ART: Death Rituals / Anticipating the Hereafter

The MFAH has one Egyptian sarcophagus on display: the *Coffin of Padi-Osiris*.

Examine the coffin during your visit to the MFAH, and read the label next to the work. What do the details on this coffin reveal about its occupant?

Like the famed and easily recognizable mask of Tutankhamun, made of gold to symbolize the skin of the gods, other ancient cultures placed golden masks over the mummies of their deceased leaders and loved ones. Looking at these two examples—one from ancient Java, and one from ancient Colombia—what do they tell us about the deceased?



Coffin of Padi-Osiris, Egyptian, Ptolemaic period, 305 B.C.–A.D. 30; carved and painted wood, gold; the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund.



Left to right:
Burial Mask, Javanese, Indonesian, 5th century or earlier, gold, the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of Asian Gold, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

Mask, Pre-Columbian, Calima, 1000–100 B.C., gold, the MFAH, The Glassell Collection of Pre-Columbian Gold, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr.

Final Questions

The first and second stories come to a clear conclusion. The third and fourth stories leave the reader with questions to ponder. The fifth story ends abruptly. What is the effect of these different types of endings on the reader?

Egypt has experienced periods of unrest throughout its history, long before the Arab Spring of 2011. During Mahfouz's lifetime (1911–2006), Egypt staged a brief rebellion against British colonial rule in 1919, and finally gained independence in a military coup d'état known as the 1952 Revolution. How does Mahfouz's writing reflect a nation experiencing internal unrest before, during, and after these tumultuous events?

Mahfouz once said, "If I had traveled, like Hemingway, I'm sure that my work would have been different. My work was shaped by being so Egyptian." Based on this collection of stories, in what ways do you think his perspective might have changed had he traveled?

About the Author



Naguib Mahfouz. Source:
Bienvenu sur Babilown
(<http://blaisap.typepad.fr>).

Naguib Mahfouz was born in Cairo in 1911 and began writing when he was seventeen. After completing his secondary education, Mahfouz entered King Fuad I University (now the University of Cairo) where he studied philosophy, graduating in 1934. By 1936, having spent a year working on a master's degree, he decided to become a professional writer. Over his 70-year career, he published more than 50 novels, 350 short stories, dozens of screenplays, and five plays for the stage. His first three published novels were *Khufu's Wisdom* (1939), *Rhadopis of Nubia* (1943), and *Thebes at War* (1944)—all of which are set in ancient Egypt. His most well-known work is *The Cairo Trilogy*, consisting of *Palace Walk* (1956), *Palace of Desire* (1957), and *Sugar Street* (1957), which focuses on a Cairo family through three generations, from 1917 until 1952. His writings range from re-imaginings of ancient myths to subtle commentaries on contemporary Egyptian politics and culture, and are among the first works of modern Arabic literature to explore existentialism. In 1988, Mahfouz became the first Arabic-language writer to be awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in August 2006.

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