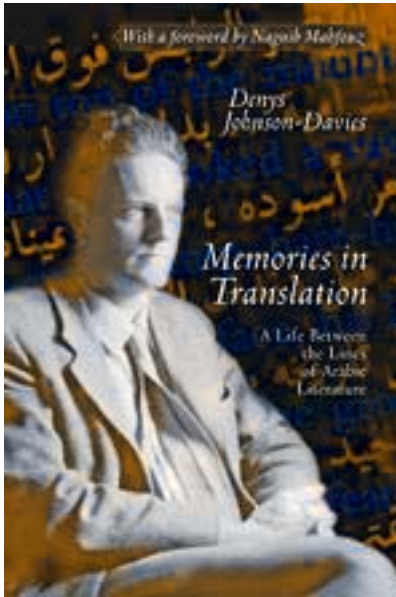


Aida Nassar

## Review

### THE ART OF TRANSLATION



A leading translator of modern Arabic literature publishes his memoirs

Without translators, written works of Arabic fiction and poetry would not have taken their rightful place on the stage of world literature. Denys Johnson-Davies, one of the most renowned Arabic-to-English translators, has made Middle Eastern literature accessible to a growing audience of English readers.

“It is really good to be translated and be read both nationally and internationally ... something great! Denys Johnson-Davies ... was the first person to translate my work, a short story, and he has since translated several books of mine, so I owe him a special debt of gratitude,” writes Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz in the Foreword to Johnson-Davies’ collection of memoirs, “Memories in Translations.”

Johnson-Davies’ autobiographical work is not the typical book one would pick off a bookstore shelf. Though, for a fan of modern Arab literature, to overlook it would be a

loss. The style is reminiscent of a casual chat with a friend after settling down in an armchair after an evening meal. The author starts off by recounting how he unintentionally came to study Arabic and incidentally became a proponent of Arabic literature.

He strays, however, from the traditional style of autobiography and lapses into a series of anecdotes, which offer a rare glimpse into the Arab literary scene. Having lived both in Cairo and Beirut, the literary hubs of the region, he recounts his personal encounters with greats such as Naguib Mahfouz, Tawfik Al-Hakim and Tayeb Saleh, and offers a unique insight into the struggle for recognition that Arab writers throughout the region face.

His modest storytelling is misleading given his considerable role in promoting Arabic literature. During his 60-year career he has translated a commendable 28 books from modern Arabic literature, though he promises himself, that he will end his career as a translator when he reaches the round figure of 30. In the 1960s, he published a literary magazine, *Aswat*, which featured the leading writers of that time. Later that decade he compiled the first volume of short stories from the region. He catapulted Arabic literature to vie for attention on an international level by creating the Heinemann Arab Authors series. He was instrumental in proposing the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature awarded annually by the American University in Cairo press. He has written a series of children's books featuring regional history and folktales and, aside from fictional works, he has translated a number of books on Islamic Hadith.

The Daily Star Egypt asks Johnson-Davies about his memoirs, his latest accomplishment:

DS: What challenges did you face when you put together these memoirs? Was it compiled from memory or did you work on it over the years?

DJD: None, really. The contents of the book were very much on the surface of my memory and it only needed for them to be put on paper. It was written over quite a short time from memory. Of course, after it was finished and had been sent off to the printers, various memories stirred within me and I was finding myself saying: 'I really should have told such-and-such a story about so-and-so.' For instance, the woman I met who, knowing

I was interested in modern Arabic literature, told me that she'd recently read a remarkable novel by a Sudanese writer and I really should read it. It turned out that she was talking about "Season of Migration to the North" by Tayeb Salih, which I had not only read but translated.

Did you approach AUC Press with the suggestion for this book? Or did they approach you?

It was the AUC who suggested I write such a book. I was having a general conversation with Mark Linz, the director, and he remarked that the experiences I had had with Arab writing should be recorded and why didn't I write a book about my friendships with various writers.

When the book was in the process of being published, who did you envisage your readers to be?

I suppose largely foreigners. The sad fact is that Arabs on the whole are not really interested in modern Arabic literature or indeed in modern literature in general.

Who do you consider the most influential writers today? Is it still dominated by the modern classic writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, or is there room for a younger generation of writers to emerge?

I think the literary scene is still dominated, if it is dominated at all, by writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris and Yahya Hakki. Of course, there is room for a younger generation. The fact that a novel such as "The Yacoubian Building" has had such a success shows that there is room, both for a book in the original Arabic and also in translation.

You explain that much of the Arabic works that are translated are done so courtesy of the translator's initiative. Do you think that this is a trend that will continue or will publishers take a more active role?

I think it is a trend that will continue. I do not see the time coming when publishers go to all the trouble of trying to find out if something worthwhile has been written in Arabic.

You touch upon the difficulties of writers in finding an audience both locally and abroad. What do you feel are the barriers Egyptian writers face in attracting readers?

A few years ago, a book by Max Rodenbeck came out about Cairo and he tells how he journeys in from Maadi daily and has never seen anyone on the train reading anything but a newspaper or the Quran. The fact is that Egyptians are not readers, and now with the availability of TV and the Internet, they are less inclined to make the effort. The writing and reading of fiction is not considered a serious pursuit, and is thought of, religiously, as detrimental to spending ones time advantage advantageously. It is not for nothing that “The Thousand and One Nights,” which in the West is regarded as one of the world great classics, has no place in a curriculum of Arabic literature.

Yes, I feel that Egyptians are reading less ... This situation means that Egypt has no real publishing set-up. No Egyptian boy or girl can be heard to say to their father, ‘I want to be a publisher when I grow up.’ Quite simply, there is no room for butchers in a country of vegetarians.

Of course there is a lack of marketing and promotional support, just as there is a lack of editors. As I point out in the book: those are necessary ingredients of any publishing house.

Naturally, the hope of every Arab writer is to find someone to translate and publish him in a foreign language.

*Memories in Translation*

By Denys Johnson-Davies

The American University in Cairo Press, 2006

Hardcover, 131 pages

**Author's Recommendations**

Johnson-Davies recommends these works as essential to a library modern Arabic fiction:

1. Naguib Mahfouz's Trilogy
2. "Maze of Justice" by Tewfik Al-Hakim
3. "A Season of Migration to the North" and "The Wedding of Zein" by Tayeb Salih
4. "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" by Yahya Hakki
5. A volume of short stories by Yusuf Idris
6. "Tigers on the Tenth Day," a volume of short stories by Syrian Zakaria Tamer
7. "The Bleeding of the Stone," a short novel by Libyan author Ibrahim Al-Koni
8. "A Last Glass of Tea," a collection of short stories by Mohamed El-Bisatie

<http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=2180>

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Reference :

[http://www.egyptsearch.com/forums/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get\\_topic;f=12;t=000098](http://www.egyptsearch.com/forums/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=12;t=000098)

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