

Naguib Mahfouz

(b. 1911)

Egypt

506

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

HALF A DAY

Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. He was the first Arab writer to win the prestigious award and only the second from the African continent (Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian, had won two years earlier). At the time of the citation, Mahfouz was nearly 80 years old (he was born in Cairo on December 11, 1911) and the most famous writer of fiction in the Arab world. However, his reputation with Arab readers has not always been secure. Although he held a position as a civil servant in the Ministry of Culture for many years and worked as a journalist, several of his novels have been banned. In 1989, when the Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini placed the death sentence on Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses*, it was Mahfouz who, among Moslems, rose to his defense. His support of Rushdie led to a new round of threats against the Egyptian novelist: Moslem fundamentalists threatened to kill Mahfouz also, for what they considered blasphemy in his writings.

Mahfouz's undergraduate degree was in philosophy. He has remarked about his shift to literature, "I studied philosophy, and, until I was twenty-five, I wanted to continue. Then, I had a crisis and chose literature. But philosophy was important; it prevented me, I think, from becoming sentimental in a time when all my teachers were romantics." A prolific writer, by the time of the Nobel Prize Mahfouz had written nearly 25 novels and a dozen volumes of short stories, in addition to several plays and screenplays. In English, his most popular works have been *Midag Alley* (1981), *Miramar* (1983), and the more recently translated volumes of his Cairo Trilogy: *Palace Walk* (1990), *Palace of Desire* (1991), and *Sugar Street* (1992). The story reprinted here, "Half a Day," is from *The Time and the Place and Other Stories* (1991). Echoes of an Autobiography was published in 1997. (These dates are for the English translations.)

Commenting on Mahfouz's career, Roger Allen in *World Literature Today* has written the following:

Alongside a concern with the mundane but crucial issues of survival in the inimical environment of the modern city, Mahfouz shows a continuing and particular concern for such questions as the nature of madness, the alienation of modern man and his search for consolation, and the role of religion in contemporary societies dominated by humanistic values. His choice of venue for the various fictional worlds he has created has been the city, with a particular concentration on Cairo. . . . Unlike other Egyptian novelists . . . he has not used the countryside and its peasant population as a focus for criticism of the course of socialist policies in his country, but has concentrated instead on the sector with which he is extremely familiar: the bureaucrat class in the city.

I proceeded alongside my father, clutching his right hand, running to keep up with the long strides he was taking. All my clothes were new: the black shoes, the green school uniform, and the red tarboosh.¹ My delight in my new clothes, however, was not altogether unmarred, for this was no feast day but the day on which I was to be cast into school for the first time.

My mother stood at the window watching our progress, and I would turn toward her from time to time, as though appealing for help. We walked along a street lined with gardens; on both sides were extensive fields planted with crops, prickly pears, henna trees, and a few date palms.

"Why school?" I challenged my father openly. "I shall never do anything to annoy you."

"I'm not punishing you," he said, laughing. "School's not a punishment. It's the factory that makes useful men out of boys. Don't you want to be like your father and brothers?"

I was not convinced. I did not believe there was really any good to be had in tearing me away from the intimacy of my home and throwing me into this building that stood at the end of the road like some huge, high-walled fortress, exceedingly stern and grim.

When we arrived at the gate we could see the courtyard, vast and crammed full of boys and girls. "Go in by yourself," said my father, "and join them. Put a smile on your face and be a good example to others."

I hesitated and clung to his hand, but he gently pushed me from him. "Be a man," he said. "Today you truly begin life. You will find me waiting for you when it's time to leave."

I took a few steps, then stopped and looked but saw nothing. Then the faces of boys and girls came into view. I did not know a single one of them, and none of them knew me. I felt I was a stranger who had lost his way. But glances of curiosity were directed toward me, and one boy approached and asked, "Who brought you?"

"My father," I whispered.

"My father's dead," he said quite simply.

I did not know what to say. The gate was closed, letting out a pitiable screech. Some of the children burst into tears. The bell rang. A lady came along, followed by a group of men. The men began sorting us into ranks. We were formed into an intricate pattern in the great courtyard surrounded on three sides by high buildings of several floors; from each floor we were overlooked by a long balcony roofed in wood.

"This is your new home," said the woman. "Here too there are mothers and fathers. Here there is everything that is enjoyable and beneficial to knowledge and religion. Dry your tears and face life joyfully."

We submitted to the facts, and this submission brought a sort of contentment. Living beings were drawn to other living beings, and from the first moments my heart made friends with such boys as were to be my friends and fell in love with such girls as I was to be in love with, so that it seemed my misgivings had had no basis. I had

¹tarboosh A tassled cap often worn by Muslim men and made from felt or cloth.

never imagined school would have this rich variety. We played all sorts of different games: swings, the vaulting horse, ball games. In the music room we chanted our first songs. We also had our first introduction to language. We saw a globe of the Earth, which revolved and showed the various continents and countries. We started learning the numbers. The story of the Creator of the universe was read to us, we were told of His present world and of His Hereafter, and we heard examples of what He said. We ate delicious food, took a little nap, and woke up to go on with friendship and love, play and learning.

As our path revealed itself to us, however, we did not find it as totally sweet and unclouded as we had presumed. Dust-laden winds and unexpected accidents came about suddenly, so we had to be watchful, at the ready, and very patient. It was not all a matter of playing and fooling around. Rivalries could bring about pain and hatred or give rise to fighting. And while the lady would sometimes smile, she would often scowl and scold. Even more frequently she would resort to physical punishment.

In addition, the time for changing one's mind was over and gone and there was no question of ever returning to the paradise of home. Nothing lay ahead of us but exertion, struggle, and perseverance. Those who were able took advantage of the opportunities for success and happiness that presented themselves amid the worries.

The bell rang announcing the passing of the day and the end of work. The throngs of children rushed toward the gate, which was opened again. I bade farewell to friends and sweethearts and passed through the gate. I peered around but found no trace of my father, who had promised to be there. I stepped aside to wait. When I had waited for a long time without avail, I decided to return home on my own. After I had taken a few steps, a middle-aged man passed by, and I realized at once that I knew him. He came toward me, smiling, and shook me by the hand, saying, "It's a long time since we last met—how are you?"

With a nod of my head, I agreed with him and in turn asked, "And you, how are you?"

"As you can see, not all that good, the Almighty be praised!"

Again he shook me by the hand and went off. I proceeded a few steps, then came to a startled halt. Good Lord! Where was the street lined with gardens? Where had it disappeared to? When did all these vehicles invade it? And when did all these hordes of humanity come to rest upon its surface? How did these hills of refuse come to cover its sides? And where were the fields that bordered it? High buildings had taken over, the street surged with children, and disturbing noises shook the air. At various points stood conjurers showing off their tricks and making snakes appear from baskets. Then there was a band announcing the opening of a circus, with clowns and weight lifters walking in front. A line of trucks carrying central security troops crawled majestically by. The siren of a fire engine shrieked, and it was not clear how the vehicle would cleave its way to reach the blazing fire. A battle raged between a taxi driver and his passenger, while the passenger's wife called out for help and no one answered. Good God! I was in a daze. My head spun. I almost went crazy. How could all this have happened in half a day, between early morning and sunset? I would find the answer at home with my father. But where was my home? I could see only tall buildings and hordes of people. I hastened on to the crossroads between the gardens and Abu Khoda. I had to cross Abu Khoda to reach my house, but the stream of cars would not let up. The fire engine's siren was shrieking at full pitch as it moved

at a snail's pace, and I said to myself, "Let the fire take its pleasure in what it consumes." Extremely irritated, I wondered when I would be able to cross. I stood there a long time, until the young lad employed at the ironing shop on the corner came up to me. He stretched out his arm and said gallantly, "Grandpa, let me take you across."
[1989]

Translated by
DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES