

Transcontinental World: The Best Books to Understand Egypt
By KEITH RICE - April 12, 2017

As home to one of the oldest histories of any modern nation, Egypt is a fascinating and diverse culture steeped in antiquity. It is the largest country in the Arab world and has been a central player in Middle Eastern politics since officially becoming an independent republic after the 1952 revolution, following decades as a British Protectorate.

Egypt has made headlines worldwide in recent years as one of the countries swept up in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Egypt has since been subject to varying degrees of unrest with accusations of authoritarian tactics and potential human rights violations leveled at Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who led the military-backed coup against former President Mohammed Morsi in 2013 and orchestrated a brutal crackdown on dissenters and protesters on his way to winning election to the presidency in 2014. In early April 2017, President Trump reversed course on recent U.S. foreign policy by meeting with, and expressing full-throated support for, Al-Sisi at the White House.

However, despite Al-Sisi's attempts to quell the turmoil that has plagued the country since 2011, violence and acts of terrorism, orchestrated at times by ISIS, continue. Most recently, suicide bombers attacked two Christian churches during Palm Sunday services, leaving forty-nine dead and at least 100 injured at the time of this writing.

Despite the current and tenuous political situation in Egypt, the country's diverse history and nuanced cultural tapestry has fostered a strong literary tradition steeped in not only the nation's storied past, but also in the cultural and political complexities that define Egypt. As the country begins to evolve, and as Egyptian people work to move beyond recent tragedies, look to the below books to find a better understanding of the nation.

The cover of the book *The Cairo Trilogy*

The Cairo Trilogy

Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street

Naguib Mahfouz

Cairo-born author Naguib Mahfouz is one of Egypt's most celebrated contemporary writers. Winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, Mahfouz published thirty-four novels and hundreds of short stories in his seventy-year-plus career. *The Cairo Trilogy*, his most well-known collection, and comprised of the books *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street*, traces three generations of the family of Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, who rules his family with an oppressive hand while maintaining a secretive and hedonistic life. In a broader sense, the trilogy is a scathing allegory of Egypt's ruling class.

City of Love and Ashes

Yusuf Idris

City of Love and Ashes earned Yusuf Idris the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1997. The novel centers on two Egyptians, Hamza and Fawziya, who fall in love against the backdrop of the 1952 Revolution with Egypt struggling for independence from Great Britain and its allies within the country.

The Map of Love

A Novel

Ahdaf Soueif

This Booker Prize finalist from Cairo-born author Ahdaf Soueif chronicles a cross-cultural love story across two generations. It follows an American journalist and her love affair with an Egyptian – one that mirrors the courtship of her great grandparents approximately 100 years earlier.

Chronicle of a Last Summer

A Novel of Egypt

Yasmine El Rashidi

In her debut novel, Egyptian author Yasmine El Rashidi charts the coming-of-age and political awakening of a young woman in Cairo. Beginning in the summer of 1984, the novel follows the woman throughout her life: first as a child confused by the disappearance of her father, then as an aspiring filmmaker amid burgeoning unrest, and finally as a writer set on exploring her own past against the volatile overthrow of President Mubarak in 2011.

American War

A novel

Omar El Akkad

This dystopian novel from Egyptian-born Omar El Akkad contemplates the effects of a second American Civil War on society. The story centers on a young woman named Sarat struggling for survival when war breaks out across the U.S. in the year 2074. It is a shattering saga of family suffering made all the more powerful in this current and deepening partisan divide.

The Days

Taha Hussein

Taha Hussein is among the most influential writers and intellectuals of twentieth-century Egypt. His celebrated three-part autobiography presents an intimate view into Egyptian life through three distinct periods of Hussein's life – his

childhood at the turn of the nineteenth century, his time as a college student in the early 1900s, and his work to obtain a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1917.

Maryam's Maze

Mansoura Ez Eldin

Writer and journalist Mansoura Ez Eldin quickly became one of Egypt's most promising novelists with the publication of *Maryam's Maze* in 2004. The novel centers on a woman struggling to find her place in an oppressive Egyptian household. Ez Eldin followed up *Maryam's Maze* in 2009 with the novel *Beyond Paradise*.

Revolution 2.0

Wael Ghonim

In the summer of 2010, Wael Ghonim, then an executive at Google, anonymously launched a Facebook page to protest the death of an Egyptian man, at the hands of security forces attempting to quell the unrest that would lead to the Arab Spring. Ghonim's page sparked a social media presence that would prove to be a major component of and organizing tool for the Arab Spring protesters. Shortly after the protests began in 2011, Ghonim was captured by the Egyptian government and brutally interrogated for twelve days. *Revolution 2.0* recounts his harrowing story.

The Yacoubian Building

Alaa Al Aswany

This controversial bestselling novel from Alaa Al Aswany explores the corruption, extremism, and sexual repression of Egypt throughout the 1990s. Set in an apartment building in downtown Cairo, a series of interlocking narratives provides a scathing critique of Egyptian society in the latter twentieth century.

The Collar and the Bracelet

Yahya Taher Abdullah

In this collection of short stories, Yahya Taher Abdullah traces the lives of a family in the Egyptian village of Karnak – where Abdullah was born – through the trials of the British campaign in the Sudan, World War II, and war with Palestine. The stories within weave a portrait of life during Egypt's most tumultuous moments.