

**Memories in Translation:
A Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature**

Denys Johnson-Davies
Cairo and New York: The American University
in Cairo Press, 2006. 139 pages.

The book's title and subtitle are both concise and apt characterizations. After more than sixty years of work as a translator and a writer, Johnson-Davies takes the reader on a journey through memories told as if relived through writing. The language is clear, fluent, and businesslike. Interspersed in the account are humorous anecdotes about some of his more embarrassing experiences as a translator.

The book has a foreword by Naguib Mahfouz (d. 2006), the Nobel Prize-winning (1988) Egyptian writer with whom the author had an acquaintance going back sixty years and several of whose books he translated. Twenty-two photographs show the author at various times in his life (1922-2000) at work, with friends, writers, poets, and various personalities. Every photograph is fully documented as regards location, names, date, and other

relevant information. The index contains names and terms used in the book, with references.

The book is divided into nineteen numbered chapters (no titles). Chapter 1 deals with the author's childhood, school days, and the choice he made to study Arabic. In chapter 2, we learn of his work at the BBC and other companies, his growing expertise in Arabic, and his first experiences in translation and writing. Chapter 3 deals with his move to Cairo, his work in institutions of higher learning, and his first contacts with writers and poets (among them Mahmoud Teymour, pioneer of the Arabic short story), many of whom eventually also became his friends.

Chapters 4 through 16 are each devoted to one or more writers/poets (the names are spelled as they appear in the book): Tewfik al-Hakim (chapter 4); Naguib Mahfouz (chapters 5 and 9); Yahya Hakki (chapter 6); Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Boland al-Haydari, Tawfic Sayegh, Yusuf al-Khal, and others (chapter 10); and Mohamed El-Bisatie, Said al-Kafrawi, Mahmoud al-Wardani, Gamil Atia Ibrahim, Yusuf Abu Rayya, Nabil Naoum Gorgy, Salwa Bakr, and Buthayna al-Nasiri (chapter 16). Chapters 17 and 18 focus on his original works, mainly children's books, and the circumstances under which they were written. Chapter 19, the conclusion, discusses the importance of translation through the ages and the translator as a craftsman.

Although each chapter is devoted to one or more authors, the author links them together with considerable skill. The resulting chain is not only a description of his own development as a translator, but also the evolution and dissemination of Arabic literature in the Arab world.

Although autobiographical, the book contains very little personal information. Johnson-Davies informs us that he studied law but never practiced. Through his memories, we meet a broad variety of personalities, including his teachers in several lands, some of whom were (or would become) well-known Orientalists (e.g., Bernard Lewis and R. A. Nicholson), famous prize-winning Arab writers whose works were translated (e.g., Naguib Mahfouz, Taha Hussein, and Tewfik al-Hakim), poets who wrote narrative fiction, modern female writers who abandoned traditional Arabic writing forms, illustrators, publishers, people in advertising, politicians, and critics.

The book is a veritable treasure trove of information about twentieth-century Arab writers, mostly from Egypt (where the author lived for most of his life) but also from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and elsewhere. He recounts the circumstances under which he met them, the kind of relationship they had, which compositions he translated, and, occasionally, his conversations with them and other personal details (including details missing

even from their biographies). Among his anecdotes are problems he encountered with Arab authorities in various countries due to misunderstandings or ignorance of local customs (he once spoke Arabic but was misunderstood, see p. 80). Also, his mastery of Arabic aroused suspicions that he was an English spy (his friends asked him more than once not to divulge the fact that he knew Arabic).

Among the translation difficulties mentioned in the book are choosing what to translate; different dialects inserted into the narrative (dialects differ considerably, sometimes even between neighboring villages), which occasionally could only be solved by questioning the original author; typographical errors in the source text, deletions by publishers, and mistakes made by the author (see p. 65); and difficulties in convincing publishers to accept translated works despite worries that the English-speaking public would not show an interest in such works. As an example of the importance of translation, Johnson-Davies argues that Naguib Mahfouz was given the Nobel Prize not only because of the inherent qualities of his writing, but also because of his international reputation following the translation of many of his works into English (see pp. 40-41).

The book suffers from a number of technical problems. First of all, there appears to be no uniform policy concerning Arabic terms and the names of works in English. Sometimes the name of a work appears only in Arabic; in other cases, only the translated title is given. Furthermore, no systematic rules of transcription are used for Arabic names and works of literature. According to the author, this is because his book is aimed at the public-at-large, not just scholars (see p. 78). I find it hard to understand how proper transcription could place any burden on the reader, professional or not.

The great quantity of names of people and literary works may perhaps prove somewhat daunting to the average reader. However, anyone with a professional interest in Arabic literature and/or translation will find this book of great interest. Any university where modern Arabic literature is taught should have a copy.

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