



Reading in Egypt

Where Books Still Speak

by Sherine Elbanhawy, Gretchen McCullough & Lana Abdel Rahman

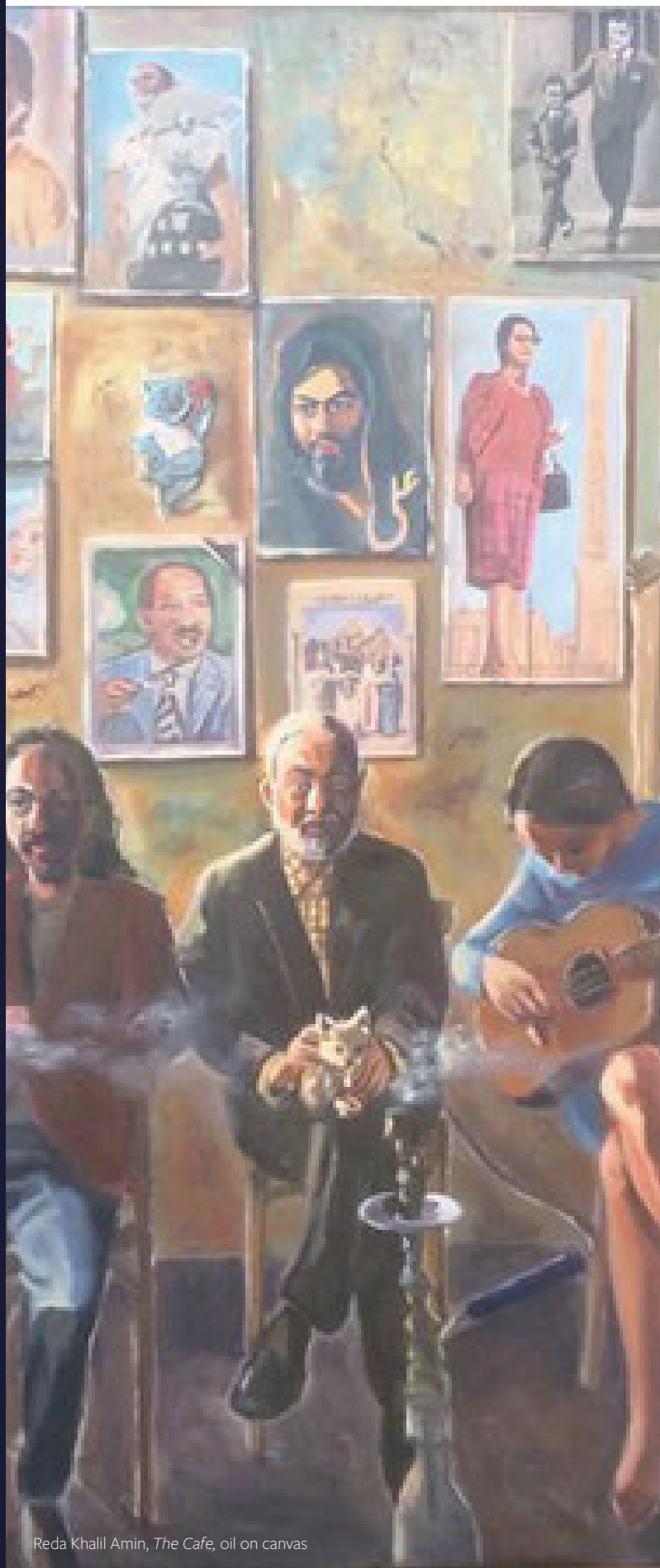
curated by Sherine Elbanhawy

Reading in Egypt is not a fixed habit or a measurable trend. It is a living practice—shaped by history and rupture, by language and loss, by the places where books are found and the communities that keep them in circulation.

Here, writer, editor, and translator Sherine Elbanhawy reflects on reading as resistance, tracing how books endure through feminist historiography, translation, and lived intimacy. Writer and translator Gretchen McCullough, drawing on decades of teaching, publishing, and translating in Cairo, maps the infrastructures that make reading possible—from bookstores and presses to translation programs and literary prizes. Lebanese writer and journalist Lana Abdel Rahman, writing from within Egypt's cultural field, captures reading in motion—as a social practice shaped by markets, memory, technology, and collective taste.

Together, these essays ask not simply what Egyptians read, but how reading persists—across languages and generations, through formal institutions and informal networks—insisting on meaning in the present. They share perspectives that reveal reading in Egypt not as a singular habit or market category but as a layered, adaptive practice—shaped by memory and infrastructure, by resistance and desire, by scarcity and abundance. Across bookstores and book fairs, reading groups and translation initiatives, personal encounters and collective rituals, books continue to circulate between languages, between generations, and between the intimate and the political. What emerges is not a unified reader or a fixed canon but a vibrant ecology of reading—one that refuses erasure, resists exhaustion, and insists on meaning even under pressure.

In Egypt, reading does not merely reflect reality; it actively participates in imagining how to live within it—and, at times, beyond it.



Reda Khalil Amin, *The Cafe*, oil on canvas



Reading as Resistance in Egypt

by Sherine Elbanhawey

From one decade to the next, from one generation to another, Egyptian readers cannot be confined to lists of bestsellers. Reading occurs elsewhere: among people, in conversations, in rooms. It happens at the anglo-Egyptian Bookshop downtown—still standing, still endearing, a quiet witness to decades of reading lives. It happens at Madbouli, where I bought my first novels, including *Little Women*. Later, it took place at the AUC Press Tahrir bookstore, where I encountered Naguib Mahfouz in translation for my high school world literature class. Our English teacher quietly defied the syllabus: if we procured the book ourselves, he would teach it. During a trip home to Egypt, I insisted on finding *Midaq Alley* (AUC Press, 1989). I learned early on that literature in Egypt travels not only across languages but also between institutions and acts of defiance.

Reading in Egypt has always been multilingual—Arabic, English, French, and more. It's common for readers to move fluidly between languages, compare originals with translations, and coexist with books in various linguistic registers. Five books stacked on my bedside table form a small but telling constellation. Haneen Al-Sayegh's *قائما على أنفسنا* [The Women's Pact] (Dar Al-Adab, 2023), short-listed this year for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, challenges ideas about marriage, gendered authority, and women's autonomy. Even though I don't belong to her Druze sect or even her country, the novel feels strikingly personal. It becomes a way for Arab women—across borders and differences—to speak about how we endure and resist the same constraints, how patriarchy reshapes itself while remaining structurally familiar.

The second book is Mai Serhan's *I Can Imagine It for Us: A Palestinian Daughter's Memoir* (AUC Press, 2025), which traces exile and inheritance through a lyrical, intergenerational lens. When someone from our inner fold—our writing group, our *Rowayat* editorial family—reaches the shelves and is celebrated, it becomes a collective event. Her success reinforces something fragile but necessary: that there remains a path for the artist in a world that is increasingly hostile to dissent, tenderness, and complexity.

Nearby sits Asmaa Alatawna's *A Long Walk from Gaza* (Interlink, 2024), translated by Michelle Hartman and Caline Nasrallah. Hartman—my McGill MA supervisor—has translated over twenty novels by Arab women writers, and here she helps carry testimony from Gaza into European exile. As Hartman notes, genocide has turned the novel into a historical record: “None of these places, streets, buildings, or neighbourhoods exist anymore.” Alatawna's prose is precise, unsparing in its critiques of patriarchy across Gaza, Israel, and Europe—targeting toxic masculinity, racial hierarchies, and religious discrimination—yet it holds the reader's engagement through intimacy and faith: faith in language, and in a free Palestine.

Alongside these three, Omar El Akkad's *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (Knopf, 2025), which names the moral exhaustion of our political present with a clarity that has made it widely read in Egypt and around the world. Lastly, Hyam Yared's francophone novel *La Malédiction* (Éditions des Équateurs, 2012), which I read in anticipation of a possible English translation, reminds me that Arabic literary worlds have long transcended linguistic borders, moving fluidly between French, English, and Arabic.

Literature in Egypt is not only what is read but how it is held, discussed, and kept alive.

Together, these books reflect how literature circulates in Egypt. Reading is not a solitary pursuit. Editors, writers, translators, poets, mentors, and readers sustain conversations across languages and contexts—not through isolated acts of consumption but through trust, curiosity, and care. Literature here is not only what is read but how it is held, discussed, and kept alive.

Some books endure in Egypt not because they are canonized but because they continue to speak. I would point to three. Radwa Ashour's *Granada Trilogy*, published by Hoopoe, an AUC Press imprint (2024), was named among the Arab Writers Union's Top 100 Literary Works of the Twentieth Century and selected by *Book Riot* as a Best Book of 2024 for Kay Heikkinen's luminous translation. Set in post-Reconquista al-Andalus, the trilogy offers a revisionist history from the inside out, treating women's labor, memory, and daily acts of care as forms of resistance to conquest and erasure.

The second is Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, written in 1960, which won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1996 and was translated by Marilyn Booth over twenty years ago, with multiple reprints by Hoopoe. The novel follows Layla's political awakening during the anti-British demonstrations from 1946 to the Tripartite Aggression on Suez, connecting women's emancipation to national liberation within a leftist, anti-imperialist register that still feels incomplete. Booth's commitment to translating feminist lineages has been her lifelong pursuit. In January 2026 she received the Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for Zahran Alqasbi's *Honey Hunger* (Hoopoe, 2025), which the judges hailed as a "masterclass in poetic translation."

The third is Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, first published in 1964, with many editions since, and published in Arabic in 2013 by Dar al-Shorouk. Often called Egypt's *Catcher in the Rye*, the novel portrays characters caught between cultures, postcolonialism, belonging, and displacement—struggling with class, revolution, geopolitics, religion, and moral ambiguity in ways that remain painfully relevant. For

me, it was the book that bridged the gap between reader and writer, the one that made me feel—perhaps for the first time—that I was allowed to speak, that I might become a writer myself.

Classics like these remain perennial bestsellers because the conditions they describe persist. They are debated, passed around tables, pressed into hands with a conspiratorial "you have to read this"—not just because they echo a familiar world, but because they help us understand it. There is a deep comfort in encountering such companions from the past: books that voice our existential unease, validate both personal and political forms of oppression, and reflect us back as subjects whose voices matter.

What readers instinctively feel—through book clubs, recommendations, and repeated visits to certain texts—is mirrored by those who observe reading habits every day from within bookstores. Amal Mahmoud, CEO of Diwan Bookstore, one of Egypt's most influential bookselling establishments, states:

Historical fiction, crime, thrillers, and contemporary literary fiction continue to gain strong traction among Egyptian readers. Translated literature remains highly popular, with a noticeable rise in interest in Japanese and Korean fiction. Personal growth and self-help titles remain resilient and consistently attract a wide readership. At the same time, narrative-driven nonfiction—blending cultural, social, or philosophical reflection with storytelling—is increasingly sought after, as are memoirs and autobiographies with personal or historical depth. There is also a renewed and sustained interest in Egyptian history, cultural identity, and heritage, including republished classics and scholarly works.

Diwan's own journey mirrors this evolution. In 2020 the press released its first book without a clear, fully articulated vision—acting intuitively, responding to needs rather than blueprint. That vision crystallized soon after. The opportunity to publish Naguib Mahfouz transformed not only the press's catalog but also its sense of purpose. Securing the rights to Mahfouz's work in 2021 was more than a business milestone; it was a moral and cultural triumph. New covers targeted a young audience that had never before read him, reaffirming the enduring significance of literature in Egypt's public life and illustrating how reading is always connected to memory, history, and collective imagination. Mahfouz once again takes center stage, honored this year as the 57th Annual Cairo Book Fair Person of the Year (see *WLT*, Spring 2001, 205–13).

Amal's observation captures something fundamental about reading in Egypt today: its simultaneity. Genres do not replace one another but rather accumulate. Readers easily move between the novel and the memoir, the thriller and the philosophical essay, the translated bestseller and the rediscovered classic. Taste here is not linear; it is layered.

Resistance also manifests in messier ways. Used book stalls, the Azbakeya Wall, photocopied texts on street cor-



**In a global moment
that relentlessly
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still connect us.**



ners, pirated PDFs—these gray markets complicate any straightforward moral judgment. Piracy is unethical, yes. But it is also intertwined with economic realities: rising prices, stagnant wages, a cost of living that makes books unaffordable for many. To honestly discuss reading in Egypt is to confront this unresolved tension: how to maintain ethical publishing ecosystems while recognizing that access to knowledge has become increasingly unequal. Ahmed al-Qarmalawi, head of Diwan Publishing, insists that there must be government legislation against piracy and government funding for libraries to provide public access to books.

But all this insistence reveals that reading books remains essential to Egyptians even in a world bombarded by instant gratification. Books remain vehicles of resistance—asking us to slow down, to dedicate time to thinking, reading, absorbing, and imagining. They enable us to travel to new places, encounter unfamiliar lives, and forge unexpected forms of kinship. In a global moment that relentlessly individualizes us through screens and algorithms, books still connect us—to people long gone and still present, to histories that refuse to be erased, to languages that carry memory.

Authors also find new ways to connect with their audiences. Writers of historical fiction like Reem Bassiouney turn novels into invitations to explore historical sites—guiding

readers through streets, monuments, and forgotten corners of cities, staging conversations in the very places where their stories unfold. Reading becomes physical, immersive, and social. Literature steps off the page and into the world.

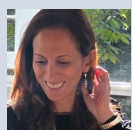
At the same time, new literary spaces continue to emerge. The Cairo Art Book Fair pushes the boundaries of form in its fourth edition, drawing increasingly larger crowds and attracting more contributors each year. Cairo Comix fosters hybrid storytelling, transitioning from underground to celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2025, honoring a century of Egyptian comics and bringing together artists, writers, and fans from across the region under one roof. Deena Mohamed, who began her comics during the Egyptian revolution and whose *Shubeik Lubeik* (Dar elMahrousa, 2018; Eng., Pantheon Books, 2022) was launched at Cairo Comix, has now gained international recognition, been translated into English and French, and demonstrates that there is a viable path for graphic novelists to succeed (see *WLT*, Jan. 2023, 14–18).

More than a decade after the revolution, reading in Egypt remains intertwined with political upheaval, pandemic challenges, economic instability, and ongoing genocide in Gaza. Yet book clubs flourish in bookstores, homes, and online spaces—forming small communities that insist on gathering

around texts even when the world feels increasingly dystopian and unjust. Readers revisit Orwell's *Animal Farm* and 1984 as a way to reflect on Edward Said's well-known assertion of speaking truth to power, even when those in authority avoid accountability.

For me, reading has always been a communal experience. My book clubs and writing groups do more than discuss books; we use them to delve into our lives—grief, joy, migration, aging, politics. Jhumpa Lahiri, Elif Shafak, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—these writers circulate widely not because of algorithmic trends but because they reflect realities that provide vocabularies for fractured belonging and postcolonial afterlives. The same ethos shapes my work with *Rowayat*, an online magazine, and our books: literature is kinship, survival, and resistance—surviving systems not built for us—by collectively building something together.

Reading in Egypt persists because it defies—commodification, erasure, silence, exhaustion. It adapts. It circulates. It insists on meaning even in hostile conditions. So, when we ask what is being read in Egypt, perhaps a better question is how reading continues—and what it refuses to surrender.



Sherine Elbanhawy is a writer, editor, and translator pursuing a PhD at the University of Birmingham. She is the founding editor of *Rowayat*, which highlights literature from the SWANA region, the Global South, and their diasporas. Her translation *No One Is on the Line: The Poetry of*

Mohsen Mohamed won the Eric Hoffer Micro-Publishing Prize.

Reading in Egypt: Bookstores, Translation, and Literary Infrastructure

by Gretchen McCullough

When I first joined the American University in Cairo in 2000, one of my favorite haunts was the AUC Bookstore on the downtown Tahrir campus. Nestled in Hill House, one of the buildings near the main entrance, it felt like entering Ali Baba's cave, crammed full of treasure: academic texts, books for Arabic courses, glossy Egyptology volumes, AUC Press titles, tourist guides, postcards of pyramids, and an eclectic selection of contemporary fiction. At the time, the bookstore functioned as both a scholarly and tourist hub.

But with customs duties and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in 2016, the price of imported books has become exorbitant. Like many readers, I now sometimes order an e-book for my Kindle, where a title appears almost instantly. For example, after watching an interview with James McBride about *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* on CNN, I ordered the e-book within minutes.

I still can't resist browsing at Diwan in my neighborhood, Zamalek, or at the AUC Bookstore when I am on campus. You cannot enter these bookstores without noticing the many different types of books AUC Press publishes. Founded in 1960,

the press first published novels by Naguib Mahfouz in English translation in the 1970s. Under the leadership of director Mark Linz, AUCP became more prominent in the 1980s. Linz negotiated a comprehensive agreement with Mahfouz in 1985 for the press to be his primary English-language publisher and worldwide agent for his translation rights. When Mahfouz was later awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, nine of his books were already available in English from AUCP. To date, the press has published more than forty of Mahfouz's books in English and licensed foreign editions of his books in dozens of languages. Other leading figures of Egyptian and Arabic literature have also been published by the press: Yahya Hakki, Yusuf Idris, Taha Hussein, and Tawfiq al-Hakim. More contemporary writers published by the press include Ibrahim Nasrallah, Zahran Alqasmi, and Bahaa Taher. Many accomplished women novelists have been published as well, including Latifa al-Zayyat, Radwa Ashour, Huzama Habayeb, and Buthaina Al Nasiri.

Taken together, these independent presses form a parallel ecosystem—less visible internationally, perhaps, but deeply rooted in local reading cultures.

As Nadia Naqib, director of editorial acquisitions, observes: "Part of our role is to make local writers heard—to give readers the region's viewpoint from within." She notes that the press has shifted its editorial strategy in the last fifteen years toward scholarly publishing and has improved its worldwide distribution. After the devaluation of the Egyptian pound (2016) and Covid (2020), the press pivoted to more cost-cutting strategies, such as the adoption of print-on-demand technology. Examples of some recently published AUC Press scholarly titles include *Time and Power in Azraq Refugee Camp*, by Melissa Gatter (2023); *Syria, Revolt and War in the Digital Age*, edited by Cécile Boëx and Agnès Devictor (2025); and *Visualizing Egypt: European Travel, Book Publishing, and the Commercialization of the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century*, by Paulina Banas (2025).

The press also has a long-standing reputation for publishing premier cookbooks and guidebooks on Egypt. The following three nonfiction bestsellers reflect the tastes of expatriate and local readers: *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide*, by Caroline Williams (updated 2018); *My Egyptian Grandmother's Kitchen*, by Magda Mehdawy (2006); and *The Birds of Egypt and the Middle East*, by Richard Hoath (2021).

Not surprisingly, there are countless books on Egyptology that appeal to amateur enthusiasts and professionals, including *Discovering Tutankhamun: From Howard Carter to the*



For readers of Arabic, there is a thriving independent press scene in Egypt.

Golden City, by Zahi Hawass (2025); *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, by Robert Armour (first published in 1986); and *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, by Salima Ikram (2015).

Another key part of the press's mission supports Arabic language learning in modern standard, classical, and Egyptian colloquial Arabic. For example, two bestselling books from this rich list of sixty-two titles are *Media Arabic*, by Alaa Elgibali and Nevenka Korica Sullivan, a resource for advanced learners of formal Arabic (revised 2014); and *Kallimni 'Arabi Bishweesh*, by Samia Louis (2011), a beginner's course for spoken Egyptian Arabic.

Hoopoe Press, the fiction imprint of AUC Press established in 2016, focuses on contemporary fiction from the Arab world and typically publishes four titles a year. Senior acquisitions editor Nadine El-Hadi explains that the imprint's mission is "to bring the voices, histories, and complexities of the Arab world to English-speaking readers." Recent highlights include Zahran Alqasmi's *Honey Hunger* (2025), translated by Marilyn Booth, and Radwa Ashour's *Granada* (2024), translated by Kay Heikkinen. *Granada* was a hit with my book club, which is a mix of long-term expatriates and English-speaking Egyptians.

The controversial Egyptian journalist Ihsan Abdel Koudous has experienced a literary revival with the recent publications of his novels, *I Do Not Sleep* (2022) and *A Nose and Three Eyes* (2024), translated by Jonathan Smolin. When *A Nose and Three Eyes* first appeared in Arabic in 1963, the novel was scandalous for its frank treatment of sexuality and its challenge to prevailing social norms—a provocation that continues to resonate with contemporary readers.

Every year, the American University in Cairo awards the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature to a writer from the Arab world; the winning work is translated into English and published by AUCP. For example, the late Syrian novelist Khaled Khalifa received the prize in 2013 for *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, which was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014. Translated by Leri Price and published by Hoopoe (2016), the novel traces the tragic fate of a family in Aleppo from 1960 to 2000, living under the yoke of the Assad regime.

Besides the Mahfouz Medal, there are other significant literary prizes in Egypt, including the Sawiris Cultural Awards and the State Literary Awards administered by the Supreme Council of Culture. Regionally, some of the most influential prizes include the International Prize for Arabic Fiction

(IPAF) and the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, both of which play a major role in shaping visibility, translation, and readership.

More recently, the Palestinian poet-novelist Ibrahim Nazzari, whose work has been published by both AUC Press and Hoopoe, was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, sponsored by the University of Oklahoma and *World Literature Today*. To date, four of his novels have appeared in English between the two presses: *Gaza Weddings*, *Time of White Horses*, and *The Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (all translated by Nancy Roberts), and *Inside the Night*, translated by Bakr R. Abbas.

Still, many talented writers in Arabic never cross the bridge into English through AUC Press, owing to editorial priorities, literary trends, and market considerations. Hoopoe, for its part, does not publish translations of poetry or short fiction, leaving important genres underrepresented in English translation.

For readers of Arabic, however, there is a thriving independent press scene in Egypt. Notable examples include Miraya, Sefsafa, Al Kotob Khan, Tanmia, Afaq, and Dar Al Ain. I know Afaq well, and they have published a wide range of works, including contemporary Arabic poetry, philosophy, classics in Arabic translation, and collaborative projects such as the publication of Arthur Rimbaud in cooperation with the French Institute in Cairo. They also published my first collection of short stories, *Three Stories from Cairo*, a bilingual edition with the English translated into Arabic by poet Mohamed Metwalli. In a recent conversation, Mostafa Al-Sheikh described how his business has changed since Covid-19: while he maintains an office downtown, the physical bookstore has closed, and sales now mainly occur through major book fairs across the region.

Dar Al Ain stands as another key pillar of Egypt's independent publishing landscape. Directed by Fatma El-Boudy, the press was recognized in 2023 with the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for its contributions to publishing science, history, translation, and literature. Dar Al Ain has published numerous writers shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, including Khaled Khalifa, Yassin Adnan, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Ahmed Abdel Latif, and Mohammed Abdel Nabi, as well as a broad spectrum of contemporary novelists and essayists whose work might never be translated into English but remains essential to Egypt's literary life. Taken together, these independent presses form a parallel ecosystem—less visible internationally, perhaps, but deeply rooted in local reading cultures—one that fosters experimentation, preserves literary memory, and ensures that reading in Egypt remains diverse, contested, and very much alive.



Gretchen McCullough's stories, essays, and reviews have appeared in the *Barcelona Review*, *Archipelago*, *National Public Radio*, *Story South*, *Guernica*, *The Millions*, and *LARB*. Her most recent book is *Shahrazad's Gift* (2024). She also co-translated Mohamed

Metwalli's poetry collection, *A Song on the Aegean Sea* (2022). Currently, she is on the faculty at the American University in Cairo.

Reading in Motion: The Egyptian Reader Today

by Lana Abdelrahman

translated by Sherine Elbanhawy

In the Egyptian imagination, the book has long belonged to both the street and the home: from newspaper vendors and pocket book stalls to the famed stalls along the Azbakeya Wall to the long-running Reading for All project, which for years promoted the idea of cultural democracy and broad access to knowledge. With the new millennium came sweeping changes: the disappearance of old distribution outlets, the rise of modern bookstore chains, shifts in book pricing and formats, and the emergence of the internet—both a rival and a lifeline.

Within this constantly shifting landscape, the notion of the “bestseller” cannot be reduced to pure taste alone. Rather, it is the product of intersecting forces: seasonal events such as the Cairo International Book Fair; reader recommendations circulating on social media; book clubs; and literary prizes. Together, these forces animate—and continually reshape—the reading market. Still, certain broad tendencies can be traced: a clear longing for history when rendered in compelling narrative form; a growing centrality of the novel as the genre most capable of bridging art and popular appeal; and the rise of crime fiction, thrillers, and fantasy as wide gateways into reading, particularly for younger generations.

At the same time, the Egyptian experience reveals a striking paradox. Works of formally complex literary craft are no longer confined to elite readerships. In specific cases, they have found a place on bestseller lists by balancing literary depth with narrative appeal. Meanwhile, the expansion of reading formats—from print to digital, from text to audio—has revived a fundamental question: Has the reader changed, or have the pathways to the text changed instead?

Hassan Abdel Mawgoud is an Egyptian writer and journalist. He has published two novels, five short-story collections, and four books of memoir and literary journalism. The recipient of the Dubai Cultural Journalism Award, the Youssef Idris Short Story Prize, a Sawiris Cultural Prize, and the Cairo International Book Fair Award for Best Short Story Collection, his works have been translated into English, Spanish, French, and German. He is currently managing editor of *Akhbar Al-Adab* and discusses how reading is a collective ritual:

It is impossible to predict the trajectory of Egypt's publishing market or to determine how a book enters—or exits—the bestseller lists. Publishers may place high hopes on a title only to see it stumble. Still, certain seasons consistently boost sales more than ordinary days, most notably the Cairo International Book Fair. During this annual event, families often allocate a modest budget for books, while children and young adults might set aside part of their allowances—turning book-buying into a shared ritual tied to a specific moment in time. Only afterward do bestseller lists begin to take shape.

Drawing on my extensive experience in cultural journalism and my role as an editor at Diwan Publishing, I can outline some aspects of Egyptian readers' preferences bearing in mind their inherent variability.

One cannot ignore readers' strong desire for history told through literary narrative, as evidenced by the impressive sales of novelist Reem Bassiouney. Although she has written beyond historical settings, her success in this area has encouraged her to continue uncovering history's hidden corridors—transforming archival material into compelling narratives. A similar motivation drives the success of Osama El-Shazly's *The Papers of Shimon the Egyptian*, indicating a widespread urge to explore the past.

This impulse also explains the popularity of archive-focused works and life-writing: Mohamed El-Shammaa's book on Mimi Shakib; Mohamed Shoair's studies of Naguib Mahfouz; Mohamed Abu El-Ghar's writings on Egypt's Jewish communities; and Ashraf El-Ashmawy's novels of modern Egyptian history, such as *Maximum Speed: Zero*. Readers, it seems, are seeking their histories—both personal and collective.

Some works marked as having craft complexity have managed to break free from narrow literary circles and reach a broader audience through bestseller lists. The most striking example is the fiction of Tarek Imam, especially *Cairo Maquette*. His writing requires slow, careful reading,

yet his recent success indicates that the forces which sustain reading can sometimes outweigh those that hinder it.

A similar reaction is seen in the work of Ezzat El-Kamhawi, whose nonfiction began with *The Icon* and continued with *The Travellers' Room*—opening a path to a broader readership and attracting new audiences to his novels as well.

Gamal Mahmoud, head of purchasing and distribution at Bibliotheca Bookstore, gives insights on independent bookstores:

Egypt's cultural landscape is marked by diversity and richness. Reading continues to be one of the most important pillars of cultural awareness across social groups. Bookstores, in their various forms, remain vital to this ecosystem.

Public libraries are found throughout Egypt's governorates and attract a diverse group of readers and knowledge seekers, while academic libraries support researchers and scholars across disciplines.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Egypt saw the emergence of independent bookstores that offered new, inviting styles, spaces that transformed young readers' connections to books.

Bookstores have diversified in form and subject matter: street stalls, traditional shops, and modern cultural spaces

The Egyptian experience reveals a striking paradox. Works of formally complex literary craft are no longer confined to elite readerships.





offering integrated experiences. One such example is Bibliotheca, which caters to readers aged nineteen to forty and hosts multiple book clubs in Arabic and English.

Novels and short-story collections continue to be the most popular, followed by history, biography, and memoir, then philosophy and psychology. Younger readers, in particular, still seek variety and experimentation, a trend reflected in the popularity of literary discussions and author events.

Mohamed Ismail is an Egyptian French novelist and telecommunications engineer. He holds a BA from Ain Shams University and an MA from the Sorbonne. Born in 1974, he has published several novels, including *It Happened in Shengen*, *The Visitors' Gate*, *The Soul Thief*, and *The Awaited Mahdi of Paris*. He lives between Cairo and Paris and discusses how time has changed reading in Egypt:

Being born in the 1970s means growing up with books—and this is my story. I discovered the world of imagination early, through many doors, and lingered there until I decided to create my own worlds within it—worlds only readers can visit.

As a teenager, books were easy to find at newspaper kiosks everywhere. You couldn't walk ten minutes without passing at least three. They sold children's magazines, pocket books for teenagers, novels, and short-story collections published by Al-Ahram and Al-Akhbar presses—by both famous and lesser-known writers alike.

Then came the golden age of books with the Reading for All project launched in 1991. And if you wanted used books for a few coins, your fortune awaited you at the Azbakeya Wall: thousands of stacked works, and it was impossible to return home empty-handed.

As a young man, I welcomed the arrival of the internet—only for it to strike the first blow against print

newspapers, marking the end of subsidized books with the disappearance of newspaper vendors. I returned to downtown bookstores and Dar Al-Maaref, which required a long tram ride—so I bought multiple books, knowing the journey would not be repeated often.

Then came the era of air-conditioned bookstore chains, where one could sit at a round table with a cup of coffee and flip through newly bought books. These outlets couldn't survive on the slim profit margins of old distribution kiosks, so prices increased. The industry entered a new phase—bright white paper, glossy covers rivaling fine art. For a time, readership shifted: book prices became out of reach for low-income readers after decades of cultural democracy.

The internet wasn't the only culprit. While it disrupted distribution channels, it also revived book piracy, with Telegram pages and channels promoting stolen works. The founder of the Abjaj project acknowledged this and suggested an alternative: an Arabic digital library that safeguards authors' and publishers' rights while lowering costs through a monthly subscription. I found my haven there—as a reader whose schedule no longer permitted frequent bookstore visits, and as an Arab expatriate for whom purchasing new Arabic novels had become rare.

Facebook filled the void left by literary pages in newspapers; reader recommendations became influential drivers of book sales. Audiobook platforms emerged to keep up with the fast pace of modern life, with reports indicating a rising demand for crime fiction among younger readers—though I still prefer reading to listening.

I discovered e-book devices over a decade ago, and gradually my physical library diminished until it completely vanished from my new home. My paper books disappeared just as family photo albums and VHS players had before them. If images and films now reside in digital



clouds without mourning their physical copies, books too have followed—read directly from the cloud.

Sama Ziada runs the reading group Hekayat Nuqush and oversees literary salons at several Alexandria bookstores. She studied literary criticism and has been moderating author discussions in Cairo and Alexandria since 2022. She shares her experience with reading groups:

In recent years, Egypt's reading market has experienced notable shifts in literary preferences, making it crucial to monitor popular genres to understand what genuinely interests readers.

One of the most significant changes has been the rise of reading groups, which now serve as social platforms for exchanging experiences, sharing opinions, and influencing collective reading choices.

Crime fiction, thrillers, and fantasy—often called “popcorn literature” by many—consistently top sales charts. Their authors enjoy widespread recognition, including Mirna El-Mahdy, Noha Dawoud, and fantasy writers such as Osama Al-Muslim.

Historical novels are second in popularity, followed by translated works—especially crime, horror, and suspense by authors like Raphael Montes, Stephen King, and Dan Brown. Prize-nominated novels also gain significant visibility; once a book is shortlisted or wins an award, its sales increase substantially, regardless of the author's nationality. This trend goes beyond Arabic literature alone.

As for my personal experience, I have been a reader since childhood, growing up with the works of Al-Mazni, Al-Aqqad, Al-Manfaluti, and Naguib Mahfouz, whom I first read at the age of twelve. My relationship with reading has remained close and has developed over time.

Today, my reading preferences are diverse. I embrace risk and variety, not afraid to venture into unfamiliar

Reading in Egypt today thus unfolds as an open field of plurality and experimentation, governed by no single law or definitive taste.

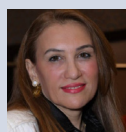
genres or voices, convinced that literature is a vast landscape that invites exploration. Still, I have particular affinities—for Latin American, Russian, and French literature; for experimental forms in Arabic writing; and for philosophical works and magical realism. My reading often leans toward Borges, José María Merino, Albert Camus, Nietzsche, Sylvia Plath, Gorky, Sartre, Gioconda Belli, Saramago, and Kundera.

In Arabic literature, I have aimed to read the complete works of writers such as Mohamed El-Mansi Qandil, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Radwa El-Aswad, Lana Abdel Rahman, Ahmed Abdel Latif, Maysara Salah El-Din, Waheed El-Tawila, Buthaina Al-Issa, and Mostafa Moussa—alongside a special fondness for Alexandrian writers like Hend Gaafar, Heba Allah Ahmed, Mohamed Ghoneima, Mohamed El-Abbadi, and Mostafa Zaki.

Managing a reading group and coordinating literary salons in Alexandria has profoundly shaped this literary immersion, opening endless avenues to writers and texts. Reading, I believe, develops in stages, much like education itself. Those who start with entertaining literature often deepen their reading over time—through experience, curiosity, and ongoing engagement.

Reading in Egypt today thus unfolds as an open field of plurality and experimentation, governed by no single law or definitive taste. It is a scene where bookstores converse with reading groups, memory with technology, pleasure with knowledge. And the question remains: what do we read—and how does that reflect what we live, what we lack, and what we seek in both past and present?

Translation from the Arabic



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