The Story of the Banned Book
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Naguib Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley*

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To Taha Hussein and Nasr Abu Zayd
A donkey cart passed under the window, loaded with clapping singers.

Recite a prayer for the soldier boy.

He threw off his fez for a job as a saint!

Qassem smiled, remembering the night Yahya had sung this hymn stoned on hashish. Oh, if things would only straighten themselves out, all you’d have to do is sing, alley of mine!

(Children of the Alley, 273)

“I’m a tourist in a museum where nothing belongs to me.

I’m merely a historian. I don’t know where I stand.”

(Kamal ‘ Abd al-Gawad, Sugar Street, 1085)
Contents

21 September 1959
No Taboos in Literature
Abd al-Nasser Asks a Question
An Angry Message
How Do Sheikhs Read Literature?
A Prisoner of Symbolism?
The Moral Education of the Citizen
I Am Not a Philosopher
The Search for the Manuscript
The Ultimate Origin

13 October 1988
14 October 1994
Confronting Sayyid Qutb
Publication by Force Majeure

30 August 2006
The Waste Land
The Neglected Commandments

Appendix: Documents

Articles by Naguib Mahfouz:
“On Bernard Shaw’s Back to Methuselah”
“My New Direction and the Future of the Novel”

6
Ashwak (Thorns)

The Reports of the Islamic Academy against Children of the Alley

Two Letters to Philip Stewart

A Letter to Dr Muhammad Hasan ‘Abdallah

Minutes of the Questioning of Naguib Mahfouz following His Attempted Assassination (1994)

Confession of the Individual Charged With the Attempted Assassination of Naguib Mahfouz

Glossary

References
21 September 1959

A sudden drop in temperature. The weather is almost cold. Autumn clouds cover Cairo’s skies. The communists are sitting in prison at al-Mahariq but the campaigns against them continue. An unknown burglar breaks into “Ibn Hani’s Vineyard” (the poet Ahmad Shawqi’s house, on the banks of the Nile at Giza); among the stolen items are “a palm tree made of gold” (a gift from Bahrain’s ruler, Hamad bin ‘Isa, to Shawqi to celebrate Shawqi’s installation as “the Prince of Poets” in April 1927), as well as a silver cup from the Feminist Union headed by Hoda Shaarawi.

The newspaper headlines speak of large demonstrations in Iraq against ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim following the execution of a number of the leaders of the Shawwaf Uprising. The weekly Akhbar al-yawm leads the most violent of the attacks, vilifying Qasim as “the Nero of Baghdad.” It also publishes a piece under the title “The Accursed Book,” stating that Qasim is a follower of the ideas contained in it and claiming that the book, which attacks Islam, has been put together by Soviet intelligence sources. It then devotes a full-page spread to the popular proselytizer ‘Abd al-Razzaq Nawfal refuting its ideas.

The main photograph in almost all the papers is of Abd al-Nasser, accompanied by ‘Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir, receiving the greetings of the masses from the window of the train on which they are returning from Rashid to Cairo. Two days previously, Abd al-Nasser had delivered a speech at Rashid as part of that city’s celebrations of the victories over the British Army in 1807. The captions focus on the abolition of feudalism, the distribution of plots of land to farmers, and the launching of “Nasser’s Project for Peasant Cattle Ownership.” At the same celebration, Abd al-Nasser handed out the prizes to the winners of the “On the Road to Freedom” competition organized by the Higher Council for Arts and Literature, in which participants had been invited.
to complete the short story of that name about the Battle of Rashid that Nasser had begun as a high-school student but never finished. Three hundred forty-one stories have been submitted and the Council’s Publications Committee has met fourteen times to select the three winners—Staff Officer Lt. Col. ‘Abd al-Rahim Haggag and Captains ‘Abd al-Rahman Fahmi and Faruq Hilmi.

In an article titled “How to Complete the President’s Story?,” Yusuf al-Siba’i, the council’s secretary-general, had complained at the exclusion of leading writers from the competition, resulting in a poor standard of contribution. The press had praised most highly the text by Haggag, even though it was the weakest artistically, perhaps because he was an officer and had used Abd al-Nasser as a character in his narrative and perhaps also because the story had been praised by Kamal al-Din Husayn, then minister of local government and president of the Higher Council for the Arts and Literature.

At the international level, the newspapers are occupied with the first visit by the Soviet leader to the USA, where Nikita Khrushchev has delivered a speech at the United Nations demanding “abolition of the armies of all the world’s states, abolition of ministries of defense and military colleges, and limiting ourselves to small units for the maintenance of internal peace.” For its part, al-Ahram maintains its coverage, which began two weeks previously, of the arrival of Russian rockets in space, thus launching a new era of science and knowledge.

A number of newspapers keep up their campaign against what they call “the disciples of James Dean,” a small group of young Egyptian admirers of the American actor (1931–55), who shot to global stardom before completing his twenty-fourth year. His performance as Jim Stark in the film Rebel Without a Cause (1955) has made him a youth icon and his shocking demise in a car accident has lent him the glamor of legend, leading young people to imitate both his looks and his clothes. The press campaign accuses the same young people of rebelling against their
fathers and their generation, of performing a wanton dance called the “cha-cha,” of smoking cigarettes, and of letting their hair grow long and unkempt. Certain preachers in the mosques accuse them of corruption and decadence, while journalists and politicians demand that they be drafted into the army, to teach them manners and make men of them. All this uproar has found a willing ear in ’Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir, who has stepped in to deal with the phenomenon, ordering his men of the military police, in his capacity as minister of defense, to stop and shave the head of anyone whom they find dancing the cha-cha in a public place or singing ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz’s “Abu ‘uyun jari’a” (The Boy with Bold Eyes).

In al-Akhbar, Nasir al-Din al-Nashashibi interviews Prof. Sten Friberg, a member of the administrative committee of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who pronounces that “it is the fault of the Arab universities that no Arab has been nominated for the Nobel Prize,” while Ahmad Baha’ al-Din writes from Stockholm about Jean-Paul Sartre’s play The Condemned of Altona, which he regards as “the most significant work of literature since the end of the World War.”

In Cairo, the National Theater is presenting al-’Ashara al-tayyiba (The Lucky Card) and the Rihani troupe’s Hikayat kull yawm (An Everyday Story). The Kitabi (My Book) series is issuing an Arabic translation of Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago in two parts, and the series Maktabat al-funun al-diramiya (The Library of the Dramatic Arts) a translation of Tennessee Williams’s play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, while Riyad al-Sunbati has just finished setting to music “al-Hubb kida” (That’s the Way Love Is), with which Umm Kulthum is about to open her new season. The cinemas are full, with posters for new films taking up much of the advertising space in the newspapers, and on that one day we can watch more than fifteen foreign films, including Sophia Loren’s The Millionairess, Bob Hope’s and Jane Russell’s The Paleface, and Tarzan’s Greatest Adventure, as well as approximately the same number of Egyptian movies, including
‘Ashat li-l-hubb (She Lived for Love) with Zubayda Sarwat, al-Hubb al-akhir (The Last Love) with Hind Rustum and Ahmad Mahir, and Isma’il Yasin’s al-Bulis al-sirri (The Secret Police).

On that same day, al-Ahram newspaper began publication, on page 10, of the first installment of Naguib Mahfouz’s new novel Awlad haratina (Children of the Alley), an event announced on its front page a week earlier:

[set as extract]Al-Ahram has agreed with the great writer Naguib Mahfouz to publish his new long work, in installments. Mahfouz is a writer who has proved himself capable of portraying Egyptian life with the hand of a creative and highly gifted artist; thus the appearance of a new work by him has always been a literary event of outstanding importance for the history of the intellectual revival of recent years. Al-Ahram has signed a contract for one thousand pounds with Naguib Mahfouz granting it the right to publish his new story in its newspaper. Al-Ahram does not mention this sum—the largest paid for a single story in the history of the Arabic press—out of pride or presumption but to mark the start of a new era of appreciation for literary production. (al-Ahram, 14 September 1959) [end extract]

The large sum was not the only form in which al-Ahram’s celebration of Naguib Mahfouz manifested itself. The newspaper prepared for the event with what amounted to a publicity campaign, starting four days before publication with a long interview with the author by Inji Rushdi in which he spoke at length of his creative worlds, his experiences, his study of philosophy, and his love of music, and alluded briefly to the new novel (al-Ahram, 18 September
1959). And one day before, the following news item appeared: “Naguib Mahfouz in al-Ahram Tomorrow,” accompanied by two portraits, one of Mahfouz and one of the painter al-Husayn Fawzi, who had drawn illustrations depicting the novel’s characters.

Reality, it appears, is always interwoven—artistically, intellectually, and politically. Naguib Mahfouz was writing the screenplay for Ihna al-talamza (We the Students), based on a story by Tawfiq Salih and Kamil Yusuf. Publicity for the film (starring Omar Sharif, Shukri Sirhan, Yusuf Fakhr al-Din, and Karioka) focused on its being “a film for every young man and every young woman, every father and every mother, every family and every household, a film that combats effeminacy and calls for strength and positivity!” according to a sentence written in large letters on the poster and which would seem to be an extension of the campaign to discipline “the disciples of James Dean.” People who knew Naguib Mahfouz and the ways of the cinema world thought it likely that the sentence had less to do with Mahfouz than with the producer, Hilmi Rafla, who spoke of the film, in the magazine al-Jil (The Generation) (“al-Sinima tu’addi risalataha nahw al-mujtama’,” al-Jil, no 406 [5 October 1959], 17), as part of a mission “against the likes of James Dean, the manifestations of whose effeminacy have multiplied and the instances of whose perverseness have become so widespread that they have resulted in the intervention of the morals police, now that sexual frustration has driven these persons down the path of pain, the path of evil!” Rafla stated that he had chosen Naguib Mahfouz to write the screenplay because “he is known for the profundity with which he studies situations, the power with which he portrays characters, and the brilliance with which he gives expression to feelings and reactions.”
Mahfouz was also writing the storyline for *Bayna al-sama’ wa-l-ard* (Between Heaven and Earth), a film produced by Salah Abu Yusuf that appeared in theaters simultaneously with the publication of *Children of the Alley* and that marks a shift in Mahfouz’s cinema work away from realism and toward an openness to the symbol, just as in *Children of the Alley*, where he abandons the “naked realism” that had reached its apogee with *al-Thulathiya: Bayn al-qasrayn, Qasr al-shawq, and al-Sukkariya* (*The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street*). The film poses philosophical questions whose answers divide, multiply, and are left hanging—like its heroes in their broken elevator—between heaven and earth.

Mahfouz’s thumbprint as scriptwriter, and one seeking creative solutions to the restrictions on the space available to him in the film, is clear. It was an artistic dilemma that Mahfouz had already succeeded in overcoming as a novelist. Indeed, he had excelled at exploiting it for his dramatic purposes in both *Zuqaq al-midaq* (*Midq Alley*), a novel whose events take place in a narrow alley, and in *Tharthara fawq al-Nil* (*Adrift on the Nile*), most of whose action occurs on a houseboat on the Nile. Throughout *Bayna al-sama’ wa-l-ard*, and despite the restricted space (out of which, even so, emerge worlds pulsing with life), Mahfouz poses questions about the limits of truth and fiction, death and life, sanity and madness, reality and the cinema. On release, the film met with little acclaim from either the critics or the public; years later Mahfouz explained its failure by saying that it was “an experiment in terms of the Egyptian cinema of the time, and its success may have come after the premiere. People weren’t used to that kind of film.” Referring to the source of his inspiration for this important experiment, he added, “They had made a film of the same type in America that was meant to be a nod to Hitler. Its hero tyrannizes people in a closed apartment, and the film did very well in the West” (*Yusuf al-Qa’id, Naguib Mahfouz in haka*, 28).
Some months previously, Salah al-Bitar, minister of culture and national guidance of the central government of the Egyptian–Syrian union (at the time, Sarwat ‘Ukasha was the minister in the Southern Regional, that is, Egyptian, government) had made a statement that had set literary circles in an uproar. The minister had said that “our literature does not sufficiently express the Arab-nationalist aspirations of the Arabs” (“Hal hunaka adab wihda wa-’adab tajzi’a?,” al-Gumhuriya, 5 March 1959). When al-Gumhuriya (The Republic) newspaper confronted the world of literature with the minister’s words, Naguib Mahfouz commented that “the movement for the revitalization of the Arab literary legacy and its study according to new programmatic principles, as undertaken by Taha Hussein, al-‘Aqqad, and others, is a part of the Arab Nationalist intellectual project. At the same time, any literature that is not actually against Arab unity must be counted as being for it” (Sabah al-khayr, 26 March 1959). Strangely, the poet Ahmad ‘Abd al-Mu’ti Higazi, in his comment, adopted a similar position to al-Bitar’s, considering that “the men of letters of the Southern Region [Egypt] are the Arab literary figures most accepted by and best known to the Arab masses. Despite this, they have fallen short in giving expression to the broad aspirations with which the emotional life of those masses pulses.” Higazi poured scorn on the excuses put forward by other writers (Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, Yusuf al-Siba’i, Amin Yusuf Ghurab, ‘Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir) in response to al-Gumhuriya’s investigation and called for “workshops to be held for the writers of the Northern and Southern regions at which Arab Nationalist ideas could be expounded and promoted,” going on to recommend
[set as extract] the conversion of the National Unity committees into cultural and intellectual schools where the People could be educated in the truth of the Nationalist creed, a creed that President Gamal Abd al-Nasser had been the first politician and intellectual to place, with great firmness and faith, before the Arab People in Egypt, it being the duty of youth to follow the path set by their leader until such time as it becomes a living reality and the very breath of every citizen. [end extract]

At this point, according to the minister, the man of letters would find himself propelled, without volition on his part, to give it expression (Sabah al-khayr; 26 March 1959).
As Ahmad ‘Abd al-Mu’ti Higazi claimed, Naguib Mahfouz had never written of the causes dear to Arab Nationalism. His preoccupation was with other ideas. In al-Akhbar, Mahfouz spoke to Anis Mansur of the strict regime he had set himself and of his extreme hatred of travel, because it “made a mess” of his life (al-Akhbar, 4 November 1958). Mansur asked him, “Imagine, Naguib, you’re asleep, and ideas and insights come thronging to you and you have to write them down immediately or they’ll be lost—what do you do?” Mahfouz replied, “You mean inspiration? In the first place, I never interrupt my sleep because if I did so I’d arrive at work exhausted and unable to do my job, or I’d be obliged to go back to sleep after recording those inspirations and that would complicate my life. I would, therefore, go on sleeping and pay no attention to them.” Anis Mansur called Mahfouz “the Train.” He wrote, “Naguib Mahfouz looks around him, and I realize that the station bell has rung and the Train is on its way home to eat, sleep, wake up, and start writing the first page of a long novel that he will finish after precisely two years and whose name will be Children of the Alley.” It was in this way that the press revealed, for the first time, the existence of a new novel by Mahfouz, and that he had started work on it.

Four months later, on his assumption of his new post as director for literary works at the Censorship Authority, al-Ahram asked Mahfouz, “What do you hope for?” to which Mahfouz responded, “I hope to be able to continue working on my novel Children of the Alley, which I’ve started” (al-Ahram, 11 February 1959). This was the first time that Mahfouz himself spoke of his novel, seven months before its publication.
Four days after Mahfouz’s interview with *al-Ahram, al-Bulis* (The Police) magazine published an extensive report on the new novel, which the magazine expected to cause a major sensation as soon as it appeared:

*set as extract* Naguib Mahfouz is currently writing a new novel, titled *Children of the Alley*, despite his earlier decision to give up writing altogether. Until this point he has completed seventy pages of the new novel, which will cause a major sensation when it appears. Naguib has never ceased writing for an instant. He is now forty-seven years of age, unmarried, and lives a modest and disciplined life. He leaves his government job at two in the afternoon, then he takes lunch at home and rests for a little. Afterward he reads and writes, daily, until 10 p.m. Then he goes to sleep, like clockwork, at 10 p.m. He is a great artist but, at the same time, a government employee who observes working hours and never ever arrives later than eight or whatever the official time may be. Naguib exudes vivacity, modesty, intelligence, and kindheartedness. There is a long history of such men in the world of talent and genius, and his like can never, under any circumstances, cease to produce art. And soon we shall be reading *Children of the Alley*. (*al-Bulis*, 15 February 1959) *end extract*

References by other magazines and newspapers to the long-awaited novel followed. The editor of *al-Jil* asked him (20 March 1959):

*set as extract*  
“What are you working on now?”
“A novel called *Children of the Alley* that I started in October 1958 and of which I’ve written 150 foolscap pages. It will be about 300 pages.”

“What is the subject of the novel?”

“Please don’t press me to answer that question.”

“Never mind the subject. What kind of novel is it?”

“And that too. It’s a novel of a new kind, unlike anything I’ve written before. So I’m scared. Very scared.” [end extract]

Three weeks later, the magazine returned to Mahfouz and asked him what prayer he would utter on the Night of Power. He answered:

[set as extract]“O Lord, help me to finish *Children of the Alley*, which I started last October! O Lord, let a ban on atomic weapons be agreed so that we can live to realize our hopes for our country and ourselves! O Lord, let the war in Algeria end with victory for the Arabs!” (al-Jil, 6 April 1959) [end extract]

*Sabah al-khayr* (Good Morning) magazine published an item describing the new novel as containing a new view of life on Mahfouz’s part and stating that he had put into it a set of ideas that would surprise everyone who followed his work (*Sabah al-khayr*, 16 April 1959).

Kuwait’s *al-‘Arabi* (The Arab) magazine, less than two months before the novel’s publication, asked, “What are you writing now?” to which he replied, “The screenplay for a film about Saladin and my forthcoming novel, which I’m calling *Children of the Alley*” (*al-‘Arabi*, August 1959).
During the same interview, the interviewer asked him, “What is your opinion of ‘explicit’ literature?”

Mahfouz replied, “I believe in good literature, by which I mean profound, all-encompassing, humanistic literature that deals with the problems of mankind seriously and sincerely. Candor in such literature is comparable to candor in medicine and the law, since its very nature is to guide the reader toward reflection and the sublime, not decadence and vulgarity, and one can find such things in the Torah and the Qur’an. It may be that the fear of what is called ‘explicit literature’ may come not so much from its explicitness as from its superficiality and triviality, which has no purpose other than to titillate and sell copies.”

This led the magazine to give the interview the title “No Taboos in Religion—or Literature!”

Every response given by Mahfouz in every interview that preceded the novel’s publication indicates that he submitted the novel for publication immediately on finishing it. Mahfouz’s writing year ran from September to April, after which he would stop for the four summer months because of an eye allergy that first afflicted him when he was a student at the university. This means that Mahfouz finished writing the novel in April of the same year, before taking his “holiday for contemplation, cogitation, and relaxation,” as he called it.

At first, the attention of the press was focused not on the new novel itself but on the fact that Mahfouz had started writing again, after a long gap during which he had more than once announced his retirement from literature, for which silence, or pause, he had offered numerous justifications.
Mahfouz wrote nothing during the five years from 1952 to 1957, years that he named “the menopause” or “the drought.” When he finished his Trilogy, his publisher, Sa’id Guda al-Sahhar, had refused to publish it because of its length. Some, however, believe that al-Sahhar’s rejection of the novel had nothing to do with its size and that the true reason may be deduced from Mahfouz’s comments to Gamal al-Ghitani:

[set as extract]I made a big mistake, one I never committed again. During this period, I talked a lot about that kind of novel and expounded at great length my ideas and my intention to write something of the sort some day. A writer who had been listening to me went off and set about writing a novel of the same type, that is, a novel of generations, publishing it in six months. (Gamal al-Ghitani, Naguib Mahfouz yatadhakkar, 63) [end extract]

Sulayman Fayyad recounts the incident differently: “Mahfouz told [‘Abd al-Hamid] al-Sahhar, ‘I want to write a novel about Egypt.’ Al-Sahhar liked the idea and bet Mahfouz that he too could write ‘the story of Egypt.’ So they agreed to meet after a year to see which of them had
finished first.” Al-Sahhar finished before the date set and sent his novel to be published, but Mahfouz took longer. Speaking of al-Sahhar’s novel, he told Fayyad, “It’s nice. If only though he’d been able to give it a bit more time and not been in such a rush!” (personal interview, June 2014).

Mahfouz’s shock at [‘Abd al-Hamid] al-Sahhar’s deceit—especially when taken with the delay of five whole years in the publication of the Trilogy—caused him to stop writing. Additionally, in 1954, he married (the marriage remained a secret until revealed by Sabah al-khayr ten years later) and suddenly found himself responsible for three households—his mother’s, his wife’s, and that of his sister, whose husband had died leaving her with children to support. In such circumstances, as he says, “I had no choice but to find work from which I could obtain the additional income needed to face the responsibilities of marriage and my new family” (Raga’ al-Naqqash, Naguib Mahfouz: safahat min mudhakkaratih wa-adwa’ jadida ila adabihi wa-hayatihi, 141). He therefore resorted to another art, that of the cinema, which gave him a reasonable income, writing, during this period, around twelve screenplays. He also wrote the occasional short story, as evidenced by the publication, in al-Risala al-jadida (The New Message) magazine, of Laka ma tasha’ (Whatever You Wish Is Yours), a work not included in any of his subsequent short-story collections and to which no bibliography of his refers (al-Risala al-jadida, September 1958).

When journalists or critics would ask Mahfouz about this pause in his output, he would justify his silence in a variety of ways. Sometimes he would say that he had “found himself to be exhausted” and his vision depleted by the writing of the Trilogy, other times that he had “understood life before the Revolution and lived it to the full, but
the post-revolutionary period is a new stage in our lives, a stage that requires a different way of thinking and more time before the artist can depict it or express it in a well-grounded work of art, for the new society needs a new artist” (Gamal al-Ghitani, Naguib Mahfouz yatadhakkar, 101). Sometimes he would add, “The Revolution has achieved its goals, and society no longer holds issues that provoke me” or “the pre-revolutionary period is now a lifeless corpse and no longer worth writing about,” or that the novels that he used to write “followed a traditional pattern suited to the fixed, stable society of its day with its clear landmarks and which no longer works for a society full of changes and transformations.” (Husayn Eid, Naguib Mahfouz: sira dhatiya wa adabiya, 224)
of July 1952 treated that generation as rivals and insisted on wiping them off the Egyptian political map, forcing them to choose one of two, and only two, options: “acknowledge that the revolution of 1952 was the beginning of the country’s history and that everything that had gone before was nothing but corruption and betrayal (thus murdering their own history) or stay absolutely silent and withdraw from public life, placing padlocks on their mouths,” as Salah ‘Isa puts it in his *Shakhsiyat laha al-‘ajab* (Characters to Wonder At, 541). Al-Dabbagh’s friend, Samir ‘Abd al-Baqi, says of the crisis of their generation, “We were the vanguard of a revolution and now we’re the debris of one!” (*Autumn Quail*, 118). Al-Dabbagh’s problem, according to Salah ‘Isa, is that

> [set as extract] he hates the new era with his heart but cannot hate it with his head and even though he greets the news of the revolution’s success in expelling the British from Egypt with satisfaction, he cannot escape a lack of enthusiasm, touched with anger, for no better reason than that it had not occurred at the hands of his own party. Thus al-Dabbagh and his generation remain captive to a sense of disappointment because they participated in the making of the revolution but, when it was victorious, it treated them, inexplicably, as enemies, and forced them to make an evil choice, between unreserved support and everlasting silence! (Salah ‘Isa, *Shakhsiyat laha al-‘ajab*, 541) [end extract]

Al-Dabbagh’s silence does not last long. One evening in 1957, while sitting under the statue of Saad Zaghloul in Alexandria, he encounters a young man he had interrogated in the past, when his party was in power, and a long conversation ensues. The youth invites him to discuss the affairs of the world, as a better alternative to sitting in the dark under Zaghloul’s
statue. Al-Dabbagh realizes that the young man is inviting him to shrug off the superfluous mantle of his sensitivity and to resume his struggle for his country and his people. Al-Dabbagh, though he hesitates briefly, then “jumped to his feet in a sudden drunken spurt of enthusiasm and started after the young man with long strides, leaving the seat behind him sunk in solitude and darkness” (*Autumn Quail*, 118).

True, one cannot establish a literal link between the real character Naguib Mahfouz and the fictional character al-Dabbagh, but there are similarities in that both belong to the same generation that the July 1952 revolution “forced to make an evil choice, between unreserved support and everlasting silence!” And both, in the end, abandoned their silence.

During his silence, Mahfouz was “searching for a new kind of literary creation, or new sources of inspiration, different from *Midaq Alley*, *Khan al-Khalili*, and *Sugar Street*, and for new characters different from the effendis and master craftsmen that he had repeatedly presented in his stories. The problem with such literary renewals is that they require a similar renewal in the life of the writer. They require journeys and human discoveries beyond the borders of the café and the office of the Arts Authority and the home” (*Sabah al-khayr*, 27 March 1958).

It was this that made Mahfouz, when interviewed by *al-Idha’a* (Broadcasting) magazine, ask his interviewer to write a kind of proclamation in the lead-in to the interview.

[set as extract]Naguib Mahfouz has asked me to publish an announcement on his behalf, as follows: “The writer of realism is fed up with realism. He is sick of people’s pains and the unmediated manifestations of their lives and has nothing new to write about them. When he writes again, he will either write in a new way—one whose features have yet to
However many the responses given by Mahfouz for his failure to write and no matter how contradictory they may sometimes have been, there can be no doubt that his “silence” (as he referred to it in a number of press interviews) was not passive. Indeed, it took on philosophical and artistic dimensions and became in itself “a source of power exactly like writing” or “a contemplation of existence in order to broaden the capacity to investigate the meaning of reading and writing.” It was, thus, the silence that grants the creative artist “the opportunity to rename things and words, so that he may protect his inner self and his culture” (‘Ali ibn Tamim, al-Nuqqad wa-Naguib Mahfouz, 327).

The period of silence and abstention endured for a while, then Naguib Mahfouz suddenly began writing again. In 1957, he felt a strange tingling running through his body and, as he told Raga’ al-Naqqash, “I found myself drawn once again to literature” (Raga’ al-Naqqash, Naguib Mahfouz: safahat min mudhakkaratihi wa-adwa’ jadida ‘ala adabihi wa-hayatihi, 141).

Mahfouz’s own ideas about that period tended toward the religious, the Sufistic, and the philosophical: the idea for Children of the Alley was seen as coming to grant a rebirth in the writer within him that he believed had died. Mahfouz was guided to the title of his new novel by a song from his childhood: “Children of Gabalawi, Charm Our Snakes!”—a song to which he had alluded in his novel Khan al-Khalili, when Ahmad Akif leaves the Sakakini neighborhood for Khan al-Khalili, to escape the German and Italian air raids during the Second World War. Early on during his stay in the new district, Ahmad Akif opens the window and looks out onto
the street. He finds it filled with groups of boys and girls shouting and laughing. They have divided themselves into teams, each of which is enthusiastically engaged in playing some game. “Dust flew up in the air and noise was everywhere. He realized that from now on an afternoon snooze was out of the question. He heard some amazing tunes too (Khan al-Khalili, 20): “Hey There, Cameleer!” and “Children of Gabalawi, Charm Our Snakes”—the same song that the children chant in *Children of the Alley* in front of the café:

[set as extract]Children of Gabalawi, charm our snakes!

Are you Christians or are you Jews?

What do you eat? We eat dates.

What do you drink? We drink coffee.

(*Children of the Alley*, 166) [end extract]
Abed al-Nasser Asks a Question

Of all the news items about Mahfouz’s return to writing with a new, and unusually interesting, novel, the most interesting and tantalizing was that published by al-Idha’a’s editor-in-chief Hilmi Sallam. It consisted of just a few lines in the “Literature and Men of Letters” section, as follows:

[set as extract]Al-Idha’a is pleased to inform its readers that it has come to an agreement with Naguib Mahfouz for the publication of his new novel Children of the Alley. The magazine will commence publication in installments immediately following the summer vacation. (al-Idha’a, 2 May 1959) [end extract]

Despite its announcement, al-Idha’a never did publish Children of the Alley: the novel went instead to al-Ahram. How, then, did it end up there?

We have many stories to choose from, including what Mahfouz himself said and what Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal said. The differences between these two versions are minor and may not change much.

According to Mahfouz’s account, as related to Raga’ al-Naqqash, Ihsan Abdel Kouddous put on a celebration for him on the occasion of his being awarded the State Prize in 1957, at Abdel Kouddous’s house on Qasr al-‘Ayni Street, which was attended by writers and journalists, the most illustrious of whom was Kamil al-Shinnawi. During the party, ‘Ali Hamdi al-Gammal, managing editor of al-Ahram, approached Mahfouz and told him that he was speaking to him on
behalf of Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, the newspaper’s editor-in-chief, who wanted a novel from him that he could publish in installments. Naguib recounted:

[set as extract]I hadn’t yet begun writing *Children of the Alley*, so I excused myself on the grounds that I didn’t have a novel ready for publication. I promised Ali Hamdi al-Gammal that the next novel I wrote I would send to *al-Ahram*. When I finished writing *Children of the Alley*, I remembered my promise, contacted al-Gammal, and took him the typescript of the novel, which he read, liked, and declared he would publish without editorial intervention. It seems al-Gammal read it as an ordinary novel about an Egyptian alley where a conflict occurs between two gangs of local bullyboys. (Raga’ al-Naqqash, *Naguib Mahfouz: safahat min mudhakkarathi wa-adwa’ jadida ’ala adabihi wa-hayatihi*, 143) [end extract]

When I asked Haykal how the novel came to *al-Ahram*, he answered, “It came to ‘Ali Hamdi al-Gammal, who got nervous and postponed publication without telling me. It seems Naguib complained to Husayn Fawzi, who told me about the novel, and I told Husayn Fawzi, ‘We can’t deny access to a novel by Mahfouz, however critical or acerbic, especially after we chased after him to write for *al-Ahram* and used Tawfiq al-Hakim as an intermediary more than once and even though Mahfouz asked us to wait until he had retired’” (personal interview, 25 January 2015).

Haykal continued:
I asked al-Gammal to bring it to me immediately, took it home with me, and read it in a single evening. In the morning, I decided to publish it right away in daily installments, not weekly as had previously been the way with literary works. I took this decision for two reasons. First, it was a long novel and publishing it on a weekly basis might have taken a whole year, which was too long: it might give anyone who wanted to exploit the novel for religious purposes enough time to halt its publication. Second, I grasped the message of the novel and its enormous significance.

At first, publication proceeded extremely smoothly. After publication of installment number 17, however, according to Haykal, complaints started, and demands that al-Azhar take action to halt publication. News of all this found its way, naturally, to Abd al-Nasser, who asked Haykal, “What’s going on?” Haykal explained all the factors involved, ending with the words, “Any novel written by Naguib Mahfouz has to be published, down to the last word.” Abd al-Nasser agreed to let the novel be completed. However, as the outcry grew, Abd al-Nasser brought the matter up again with Haykal, who made the following proposal: “Have them form a committee of scholars of al-Azhar and let them look into the matter.” Haykal explains his reasons for making this request as follows: “I wanted to gain enough time to complete publication of the rest of the novel. The committee did in fact decide to halt publication. This happened ten days from the end of the novel but publication continued until the end, and I took care to finish the final installment with the words ‘The End.’”

Haykal seems to have had an intuition, from the start, of the political complications into which publication would drag him. One of these was a violent attack on the novel, part of which was directed at al-Ahram and which, in turn, led him to write a short article one week after the
start of the publication of Children of the Alley, on page 6 of the newspaper, titled “Freedom of Expression.” This was in effect the start of a counterattack in which Haykal put up a heated defense of literary freedom. Haykal made a further contribution to the developing battle by giving space on al-Ahram’s pages to articles and readers’ letters that addressed society’s problems and criticized the regime in a gentle, non-aggressive way. Notable in Haykal’s short piece is his insistence that one of the most important issues facing society at the time was freedom of opinion. He writes:

[set as extract]Freedom of opinion does not lie in angry, excited headlines directed against a particular person. It does not lie in campaigns launched with fury and ferocity in a search for scapegoats. Freedom of opinion is freedom to discuss. Liberated thought is a prerequisite, and the release of this thought as spoken discourse on the tongue, or silent discourse on paper, is a result. Without the prerequisite it is impossible to arrive at the result, and without the result, the prerequisite has no point. This is what we understand freedom of opinion to be. (al-Ahram, 28 September 1959) [end extract]

Haykal stated that he did not himself delete a single word from the novel and denied absolutely that he would have asked Mahfouz to do so, stressing the incorrectness of the findings of the Swedish researcher Marina Stagh, in her book The Limits of Freedom of Speech—in which she relied on an article published in al-Hilal (The Crescent) magazine—concerning certain incidents during the crisis and her insistence that Haykal had demanded of Mahfouz that he censor his own work by deleting numerous passages that might add to the protesters’ fury.
Haykal chose al-Husayn Fawzi to illustrate the novel as published by *al-Ahram*, the newspaper acclaiming the artist before publication in the same manner as it did Mahfouz: “The lines drawn by al-Husayn Fawzi emerge from the very core of our lives, the very same source from which Naguib Mahfouz also draws his feelings and emotions” (*al-Ahram*, 20 September 1959).

Fawzi may have been chosen for this task because he had been born and raised in Cairo and was raised in the Hilmiya district, which had much in common with the environment that Mahfouz so loved to depict in his works. Al-Husayn drew one hundred illustrations for the novel. Describing his experience with the work, he recounted:

*[set as extract]* When *Children of the Alley* reached me, I was running a fever. Despite this, I left my house in Giza to go to *al-Ahram* for a meeting with the editor-in-chief Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal. We exchanged thoughts and I got the idea. I started to read and understand the novel. I found it to be a living novel, powerful, that gave me the inspiration for my illustrations, then their actual form as published. (*al-Ahali*, 22 February 1989) *[end extract]*

Al-Husayn Fawzi believes that the campaign against Mahfouz by men of religion led to “the poisoning of the atmosphere around the novel, which as a result was never allowed to fulfill the role that its author had hoped for it in terms of its meaning and deeper objectives.” He adds, “This collaboration created a movement in the arts, one that turned newspaper illustrations into something of value with which to enrich a literary work and give it a clear voice. Many readers who were my students at the Faculty of Fine Arts told me while it was being published that they
would be holding on to their copies because of the drawings. Similarly, the drawings inspired some of the high school students who had collected them to enter the various fine arts faculties."