From One Reader to Another

An invitation to read internationally

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writers in Translation programme, English PEN is teaming up with The Reading Agency and Free Word to invite book groups to read and discuss titles from the World Bookshelf, a unique online showcase of the most exciting contemporary literature available in English translation.

There are over 100 books on the World Bookshelf but here is a suggested reading list to get you started:

- *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt, Arabic)
- *Dreams from the Endz* by Faïza Guène (France, French)
- *Arab Jazz* by Karim Miské (France, French)
- *Compartment No. 6* by Rosa Liksom (Finland, Finnish)
- *The Lady from Tel Aviv* by Rabai al-Madhoun (Palestine, Arabic)
- *Vango: Between Sky and Earth* by Timothée de Fombelle (France, French)
- *The Devil's Workshop* by Jachym Topol (Czech Republic, Czech)
- *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* (for younger readers) by Fabio Geda (Italy, Italian)
- *Bronze and Sunflower* (for younger readers) by Cao Wenxuan (China, Mandarin)
- *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* by Saša Stanišić (Bosnia-Herzegovina, German)
- *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* by Alain Mabanckou (Congo, French)
- *The Goddess Chronicle* by Natsuo Kirino (Japan, Japanese)
- *Allah Is Not Obliged* by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast, French)
- *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim (Iraq, Arabic)
- *Morning Sea* by Margaret Mazzantini (Italy, Italian)
- *Sworn Virgin* by Elvira Dones (Albania, Italian)
- *A Perfect Crime* by A Yi (China, Mandarin)
- *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck (Germany, German)
- *The Sound of Things Falling* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Colombia, Spanish)
- *The Whispering City* by Sara Moliner (Spain, Spanish)

Share your thoughts about these books by leaving a comment on the website or by getting in touch on Twitter: @englishpen, @readingagency, @FreeWordCentre
The Yacoubian Building by Alaa Alaswany

This exceptional Egyptian novel – as mesmerising as it is controversial – caused an unprecedented stir when it was first published in Arabic. Welcome to the Yacoubian Building, Cairo: once grand, now dilapidated, and full of stories and passion. Some live in squalor on its rooftop while others inhabit the faded glory of its apartments and offices. Within these walls religious fervour jostles with promiscuity; bribery with bliss; modern life with ancient culture. At ground level, Taha, the doorman’s son, harbours career aspirations and romantic dreams – but when these are dashed by unyielding corruption, hope turns to bitterness, with devastating consequences.

About the author

Alaa Al Aswany is a journalist and the Arab world's bestselling novelist, the author of The Yacoubian Building, Chicago and Friendly Fire. By day a Cairo dentist where his first office was in the Yacoubian Building, and by night a writer, he is published in 22 languages worldwide.

About the translator

Humphrey Davies holds a PhD in Near East Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. He has spent 36 years working and living in the Arab world – 20 of these in Egypt, with lengthy periods in Palestine, Sudan and Tunisia. He works out of Arabic (both formal and four dialects: Egyptian Arabic, Sudanese, Tunisian and Palestinian).

For discussion

1. The Yacoubian Building is an ensemble cast novel, and it is fair to say that the building itself is one of the characters. How do the building's changes and degradations serve as a metaphor for social and political changes in Cairo since 1930?

2. Discuss (Francophile secularist) Zaki’s words to Busayna, ‘I can't fathom your generation. In my day, love for one's country was like a religion.’

3. Hatim Rasheed blames his sexual orientation on his parents’ ‘neglect’. Do you think moral judgment of paedophilia and homosexuality is doomed to be mutable, varying across cultures and times, or can there be universal values about them?

4. What are the incidents that propel Taha’s evolution from an intelligent schoolboy to vengeful fundamentalist? Are the wealthy tenants of the Yacoubian Building, the examination officials etc, inadvertently complicit in his radicalization?

5. Alaa Al Aswany’s deeply scathing and critical novel was published in 2007 and was a bestseller in Egypt for two whole years – a fact which suggested that the country might be on its way to embracing democracy. How do feel, reading this novel a few years on, after the Arab Spring and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood?