

# Carleton College

ALUMNI ADVENTURES

Explore the world

## *Ancient Egypt & the River Nile*

January 8-23, 2017

### **Suggested Pre-Journey Reading**

July 2016, by Rob Oden

#### **I. Highly Recommended**

Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*. New York: Anchor Books / Random House, 1995. Many of you will be familiar with the work of Egypt's Nobel Prize winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz, who is often, and I think aptly, compared with Dickens. *Midaq Alley* is one of his earlier works, and, unlike later Mahfouz novels, it's of manageable length. My own favored way into different worlds, different cultures, is through novels, and this one is simply a superb entrée into the lives of ordinary Egyptians in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. (PAPER, 304 Pp.)

Khaled Al Khamissi, *Taxi*. London: Aflame Book, 2008 (also, Bloomsbury, 2012). And speaking of novels, this is at once your best and most enjoyable guide through the corruption and economic inequities which eventually prompted Egyptians, in January of 2011, to demand a new government. Originally written, uniquely, in colloquial Arabic rather than in more formal classical Arabic, *Taxi* is a collection of brief chapters, each purporting to record a conversation between the author and a taxi driver. Aside from its window into how most Egyptians lived, the novel also demonstrates the wry wit and humor for which Egyptians are so justly known. (PAPER, ca. 200 pages)

Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. If any of you love maps, as do I, you're going to like this book. A constant frustration for all who begin to study the history of ancient Egypt is the initially baffling way in which Egypt's capital cities, religious and administrative centers, and national boundaries shift over time. Even the names of cities, largely the result of Greek translations of much earlier Egyptian names, are confusingly similar. Thus, there is (north to south, or more properly, Lower Egypt to Upper Egypt) a Heliopolis, a Herakleopolis, a Hermopolis, and a Hierakonpolis. The many maps in Manley's volume are of great help in tracing these shifts and these names. In addition, Manley includes brief chapters on other topics of great interest, e.g., pyramids, Egyptian language and writing, the Amarna Letters, and the Biban al-Moluk (Valley of the Kings). (PAPER, 144 pages)

Ian Shaw, *Ancient Egypt: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Books, 2004. Shaw's volume, in the recent but already prized OUP 'Very Short Introduction' series, is somewhat redundant after Manley's *Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. Still, I find a real clue to learning lies in repetition, so that reading two different and brief accounts of, e.g., Old Kingdom History or Egyptian writing can be helpful. In addition, Shaw is among the deans of Egyptology today and his book, even as "Very Short" as it is, is among the most sophisticated available today. Finally, and as the title suggests, the book is portable, so that you might easily bring this volume along on our trip. (PAPER, 208 pages)

## II. Further Reading

Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004. The *New York Times* calls this novel “captivating and controversial,” and that it certainly is. *The Yacoubian Building* has been a best-seller throughout the Arab world since its initial publication. It’s much about the obstacles in the way of career success for most Egyptians. (PAPER, 255 pages)

Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, and other volumes in the *Cairo Trilogy* (Anchor, 1989, and other editions). I’ve noted above the delights one experiences in learning about the lives of ordinary Egyptians today in reading Mahfouz’s novels. Exploring the relevant sections of most good bookstores or of on-line sources will reveal to you many others of his novels, so if there is time, enjoy them. (PAPER, 504 pages)

Max Rodenbeck, *Cairo: The City Victorious*. New York: Knopf, 2000. I’ll admit to feeling some significant ambivalence about this volume. On the one hand, it’s a readable, page-turning survey of Cairo’s history and geography and culture over the entire span (pre-history until today) of the city known in classical Arabic as al-Qahira, “The Victorious.” On the other hand, Rodenbeck displays that characteristic and often irritating cynicism in which English travel writers seem to delight. I guess I just love Cairo too much to enjoy much belittling of time-honored customs and habits. Still, one learns an awful lot about Cairo and Egypt in 300 pages. (PAPER, 300 pages)

Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. This comprehensive book is as long and detailed as Shaw’s *Very Short Introduction* is not. But it’s very solid and much the most up-to-date history of ancient Egypt available today. Since the volume is edited by Shaw, individual chapters are written by a collection of Egyptologists, and the quality of the chapters varies. The chronology I will follow – and I’ll distribute a handy chronology during our trip – is that of Shaw’s volume. (PAPER, 552 pages)

W. Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egyptian: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. This splendid anthology, edited by Kelly Simpson, long one of my fellow American University in Cairo Trustees, is the finest one-volume collection of ancient Egyptian primary sources. There is no replacement for listening attentively to the voices of ancient Egyptians and we hear these voices in Simpson’s anthology. (PAPER, 624 pages)

G. Willow Wilson, *The Butterfly Mosque* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010). Wilson’s memoir, which my wife, Teresa, recently discovered, may well be the finest and most successful attempt to bridge, or, better, destroy, the cultural gap between Americans and Egyptians. Throughout relentlessly self-reflective, *The Butterfly Mosque* is the thoughtful story of an American atheist who becomes a Muslim in Egypt, and of her non-stop struggle to explain her personal and religious transformation to doubting Americans and Egyptians.

## III. Guide Books

Many of you will already have a favored Travel Guide Series and you should feel free to choose the Egyptian volume in your favorite series. The *Lone Planet* guides are uniformly quite good. The American University in Cairo Press, which is among the finest presses anywhere, publishes a fine Egypt guide book in the Spiral Guide Series.