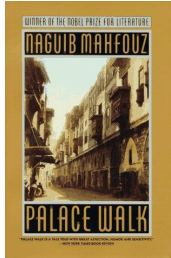


Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Diana Bridges

Palace Walk

Naguib Mahfouz



For Group Reflection and Discussion

Palace Walk is considered by many to be the best novel written by Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. It tells the story of a well-to-do family living in Cairo at the end of World War I.

1. What are your first impressions of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad and his wife? When is her name first mentioned? Do you think this is significant?
2. What does Mahfouz intend to convey in the following description of the family patriarch?

He performed it [prayer] with the same enthusiasm he invested in every aspect of life, pouring himself into each. When he worked, he put his whole heart into it. If he befriended someone, he was exceptionally affectionate. When he fell in love, he was swept off his feet. He did not drink without getting drunk. He was earnest and sincere in everything.

Is this how Al-Jawad sees himself or how he is viewed by outsiders?

3. Amina has spent all of her married life in the confines of her home, with the exception of occasional chaperoned visits to her mother's home. (See chapter 6.) Does her situation seem to be the exception or the norm in her neighborhood? What is her attitude toward her situation? Where does she find consolation?
4. There are four children in the household, ranging in age from teens to early twenties. How do they relate to each of their parents? How do they each resemble their parents?
5. Each of the children (Yasin, Khadija, Fahmy, Aisha, Kamal) has aspirations that are hampered by their

strict father. How does each pursue his/her dreams? What are the results?

6. Why is the father especially harsh toward Kamal?
7. Al-Jawad's double standard for men and women—and even between the women in his household and those outside—is illuminated when Yasin, his son from a previous marriage, is upset that his mother is marrying again. Al-Jawad calls her behavior “adultery disguised as marriage.” Does Al-Jawad disguise his adultery as marriage? How does Yasin follow his father's example?
8. When Al-Jawad goes out of town, Amina's children encourage her to get out of the house for once and visit the mosque of Al-Husayn, whom she has long revered. The result is disastrous. Are you surprised by her husband's response to her behavior?
9. In chapter 36, Al-Jawad has an encounter that leads to an important development in his family and in the return of Amina. What do we learn about Al-Jawad and about the local culture?
10. Shortly after Amina's wedding, both Yasin and Khadija are also married. What circumstances lead to these events? How are family dynamics changed?
11. How do Yasin and Fahmy find out about their father's secret life? How does each respond?
12. How does the family react to the presence of British soldiers in their neighborhood?
13. The book concludes with scenes of both new life and death. Which characters have experienced significant changes over the course of the story?
14. Which characters do you think are most devout? What do we learn about the practice of Islam from them?

15. Do you have a significant relationship with any Muslims? What have you learned about Islam from them? When you compare the daily practice of Islam with Christianity, what differences do you notice? What similarities do you notice? What cultural issues are important for the development of friendships?

16. If a Muslim friend asked you to recommend a novel that would help her understand Christianity, what would you choose? Why?

Diana Bridges is one of CBF's field personnel. She ministers among refugees in San Antonio, Texas.

next month:



In *Haiti After the Earthquake*, Paul Farmer, a medical doctor whose roots in Haiti run deep, provides a look at the immediate impact of the earthquake through the eyes of one of the world's foremost humanitarians.