

# 1

## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Naguib Mahfouz was born in Cairo, Egypt, on December 11, 1911. Gamaliya, the neighborhood where he spent his early childhood, was a crowded, bustling place. For Mahfouz, it was a microcosm of Egyptian society, a place where the dramas of ordinary people played out in streets and alleyways. In March and April of 1919, young Mahfouz witnessed the uprising of Egyptian citizens against British colonial rule. Demonstrations and rallies disrupted daily life. These events had a profound effect on Mahfouz, and their influence on his fiction is unmistakable.

After college Mahfouz entered the Egyptian civil service, and he held various government posts until his retirement. For many years, Mahfouz made little money from the publication of his fiction. He supplemented his government income by screenwriting. Many Egyptians are more familiar with Mahfouz's TV and film work than his novels and short stories. Mahfouz's cinematic experience influences the timing and pacing in many of his novels, including *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961).

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD. Students should keep a reader's journal while they are studying *The Thief and the Dogs*. Ask them to take notes in their journals as they listen to the CD.

Distribute photocopies of the Reader's Guide essays "Naguib Mahfouz 1911–2006" (pp. 6–7) and "Mahfouz and His Other Works" (pp. 12–13). Divide the class into two groups and assign each an essay. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it has learned.

### Writing Exercise

Using their reader's journal, have students list the three most important points they learned about Naguib Mahfouz from the essays and CD. Ask them to write two or three paragraphs examining how the things they learned might influence Mahfouz's work and why the information could be important to understanding *The Thief and the Dogs*.

### Homework

Distribute photocopies of the Reader's Guide essay "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3). Have students read the essay, the novel's Introduction (pp. 5–9, written by its translator, Trevor Le Gassick), and Chapters One and Two (pp. 13–33). Ask students to consider what the sheikh is trying to communicate to Said and the role the sheikh might play as the story unfolds.