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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

As a class, examine the following quotations by Mahfouz from *Naguib Mahfouz at Sidi Gaber: Reflections of a Nobel Laureate 1994–2001*:

There are no features that are the exclusive prerogative of good literature, beyond the comprehensiveness of the ideas in which it deals, and the depth and vision of the work.

Literary excellence is a standard that applies across national boundaries.

The ultimate goal of any writer is to satisfy both the elite and the average reader. Shakespeare's ideas may be profound, his characters of a complexity that must be studied, yet his plays are never wanting in humor and humanity. These traits make them accessible even to those who cannot understand the many references and allusions with which they are rife. Because of this uncanny ability to touch the cultured and the uneducated alike, Shakespeare's plays have universal appeal.

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a book to greatness? Ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Thief and the Dogs*? Is this a great novel?

Read Handout Three: The Literary Legacy of Naguib Mahfouz. A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Mahfouz create in *The Thief and the Dogs*?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a letter to a friend in their journals. The student should make an argument that explains why *The Thief and the Dogs* has meaning for all people, even those who have no interest in other times or other places. What can be learned from reading the literature of other cultures? Is *The Thief and the Dogs* just an Egyptian story, or can it also be considered universal?

Homework

Students will finish their essays and turn them in at the next class.