

This much-loved Mahfouz masterpiece is a rich account of life in a back street in a poor quarter of medieval Cairo. While the novel focuses on a willful young woman whose ambition to escape the confines of the alley leads her into prostitution, a pageant of other vivid characters, from the cafe owner who likes boys to the man who creates maimed beggars and from the young man with the faithful heart to the rake and the pimp, fleshes out the picture of a society in crisis and transition. Though set during the Second World War, the characters' alienation from the prevailing political system and the desire of many of them to escape the economic and social stagnation of the alley give the work an unexpectedly up-to-date flavor. Mahfouz presents his characters with wry humor and a relish for the contradictions and fallibilities innate in people everywhere (even the alleys beloved spiritual mentor beats his wife). This new translation of one of the writer's best known works has been undertaken to celebrate the centenary of his birth on 11 December 2011.

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