

# The Columbus Dispatch

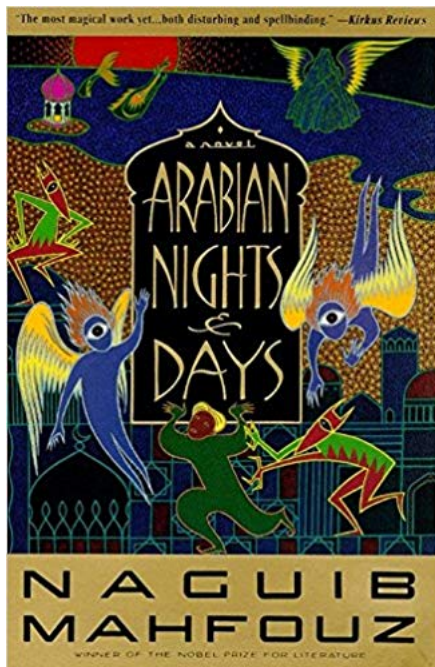
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## 'ARABIAN NIGHTS' SHIMMER IN THE MIND

*Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch*

Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer, dazzles readers with genies, gruesome executions, political discussions, prodigious treasures and magical talismans in *Arabian Nights and Days*. Entertaining and reflective, the novel - and many of its characters - are based on the classic *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

Through his wonderful mastery of language, Mahfouz invites readers to think about a host of modern-day dilemmas, all brought to light in the unlikely setting of a medieval Islamic city. But despite the beauty of the language, the real attraction of *Arabian Nights and Days* is Mahfouz's powerful storytelling.

First published in Arabic in 1979, this thought-provoking novel depicts the folly of the human condition. Each tale is studded with depth, wisdom, compassion and humor.

Playfully, the author drags the reader into a world where anything is possible, but one in which individuals must reconcile themselves with fate, free will and their own desperate impulses.

What will a seemingly good man do when he knows his actions will remain hidden?  
What will an evil man do after he becomes aware, for the first time, of the truth of his own evil?

Many of the characters are forced to grapple with widespread corruption in the world as well as their own psychic decay. The wonder is how Mahfouz so precisely reveals the trappings that imprison the human soul.

Vivid characters populate the city and frequent the cafes.

Sanaan al-Gamali is a wealthy merchant who has lived what appears to be a decent life. But when he is forced into an agreement with a genie to assassinate the governor of the quarter, Sanaan must also face his own act of unspeakable violence, one committed without other-worldly coercion.

There is Gamasa al-Bulti, the corrupt chief of police, who has hardened himself against the evil that his job and prestige require him to perform. Is he capable of goodness in his last act?

There is Aladdin, handsome, spiritual, innocent, and preyed upon by those in power. There is Sinbad the sailor, the adventurer who brings lessons of wisdom back to the awaiting sultan.

Arabian Nights and Days is a clever parable, used as a vehicle to criticize society, government and moral deterioration. It is also a stage upon which to entertain.

Mahfouz sends his characters on a journey in which their destiny hinges on the choices they make. Each decision can lead them down a path to death, true love or holy war. The universal charm of these characters and tales is rarely attained in today's literature. Reaching to one of the highest aims of literature, the book describes something about existence that can be best conveyed by telling a story.

The work of Mahfouz should be cherished. In a world often devoid of hope and meaning, it is rare to be offered both in such a gracious and enjoyable form.

**Nancy McAllister** is a Columbus book reviewer.

