



OPEN WIDE

In the dentist's chair with Alaa Al Aswany, the Arab world's best-selling author

BY ALEX RITMAN

You must keep a line between dentistry and literature, otherwise you'll be in trouble," says Alaa Al Aswany in a deep and melodic voice before lighting up his fourth cigarette of the hour. "When you have toothache you need a dentist, not a poet or novelist."

Of course, he's right. A fiction-writing workshop shouldn't be first priority when wisdom teeth are making a painful lunge south. But in a small clinic hidden among the winding streets of Cairo's Garden City district, the worlds of dentistry and literature collide like nowhere else.

"I write my books here," says Alaa, pointing to the laptop on the humble desk he is sitting behind. Across the room, the menacing dentist's chair growls silently. "I live in the building, so I wake up around 6am, five days a week to do my writing. Afterwards I see my patients."

Being a full-time dentist and the Arab world's biggest-selling author might be an unusual combination of roles,



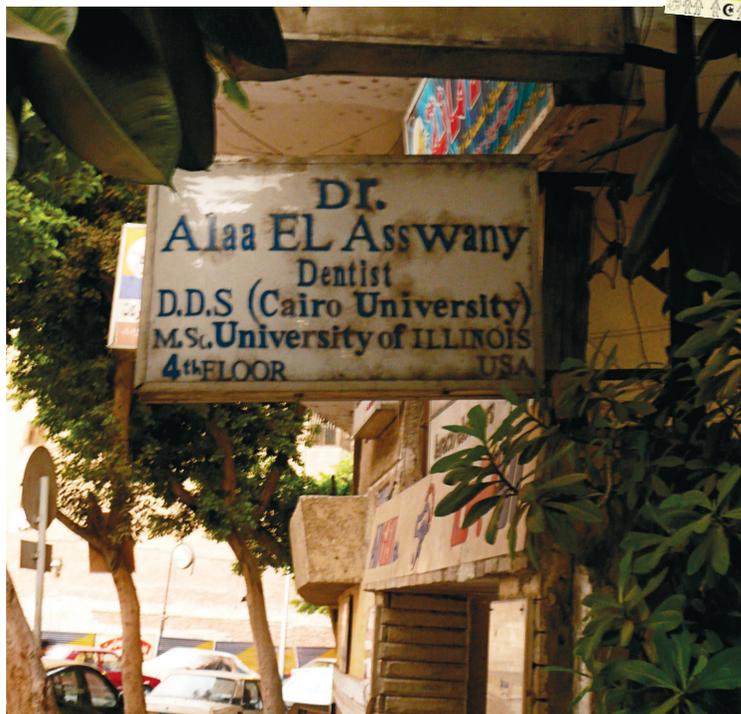
"I don't think Egyptians need a 600-page novel to know that the system is absolutely corrupt"

but it's a mixture Aswany sees as complimentary. "I need this contact with ordinary people," he says. "Success can be as dangerous as failure, because you can get separated from ordinary life. And being a dentist is a wonderful way to keep this contact with ordinary people."

And it's these everyday people that Alaa covers best. His 2002 novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, brought to life the trials and tribulations facing the fictitious tenants of a fading apartment block in downtown Cairo, where

Alaa himself used to work. Through these colourful characters' struggles, whether it be via corruption, sexual misadventures or class-based discrimination, Alaa, an outspoken critic of Hosni Mubarak, was able to dissect a society riddled with social inequalities. And while he admits that these issues were already widely understood – "I don't think Egyptians need a six-hundred-page novel to know that the system is absolutely corrupt" – *The Yacoubian Building* sold by the bucketload, becoming the Arab world's bestseller for five successive years.

Subsequent translations (now up to almost thirty languages), a hugely successful film (the most expensive ever made in Egypt) and a TV series have cemented Alaa's name as the foremost Arabic storyteller of his generation. He's since been credited with helping Egypt's famed fiction-writing industry pick itself out of the gutter it had been languishing in for at least two decades.



OTHER WRITERS WITH DAY JOBS

Franz Kafka

Worked in insurance while writing most of his fiction, including *Metamorphosis*

TS Eliot

His first four collections of poetry were published while he still worked in a bank

Vikas Swarup

India's Consul-General to Osaka, Japan is better known as the author of *Slumdog Millionaire*

Rajaa Al-Sanea

The Girls of Riyadh author is currently training to be a dentist in Chicago, the same school Aswany attended

"We had some kind of crisis in the eighties and nineties," Alaa admits. "People stopped reading fiction and private publishing houses stopped being interested in producing it. But now we've got three or four generations of Egyptian fiction writers who are selling very well."

His latest offering, *Friendly Fire*, a novella and collection of short stories set in Cairo, pays homage to Aswany's struggle to establish himself as a writer. Back then, the only route to validation for new fiction writers such as himself was via the government's own publishing company. "Each time I received a refusal, I would print five hundred to a thousand copies for friends and critics."

The name, he says, came from the first Gulf War in 1990. "How can fire that kills be friendly? I found this idea parallel with many stories in the book. Many times you can be hurt by the people who are closest to you."

Back to the little clinic amid the leafy criss-crossing streets of Garden City: There must be some overlap with the ordinary people whose gums he regularly inspects and the characters in his books? "Sure, you'll find some elements that are very close to people I know," he admits.

He also acknowledges that keeping his patients outside the margins of his scribbled notes is not always easy – especially given his admission that his surgery sometimes seems more like a social club than a medical practice. "Some patients come twice a week, and have become friends. We sit down, have a coffee together and they tell me about their lives."

He pauses, taking another long, satisfying drag on a cigarette which is in desperate need of an ashtray.

"I do fix their teeth as well, obviously." ☺

Friendly Fire, translated by Humprey Davies and printed by the American University in Cairo Press, is available now

► THE INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION HAS BEEN RUNNING FOR TWO YEARS. BOTH WINNERS HAVE BEEN EGYPTIAN