



Chicago

By Alaa Al Aswany
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Introduction

Egyptian and American lives collide on a college campus in post-9/11 Chicago, and crises of identity abound in the extraordinary second novel from the highly acclaimed author of *The Yacoubian Building*. This is a story of love, sex, friendship, hatred, and ambition, pulsating and alive with a rich and unforgettable cast of American and Arab characters who are achingly human in their desires and needs. Beautifully rendered, this is an illuminating portrait of America, a complex, often contradictory land in which triumph and failure, opportunity and oppression, small dramas and big dreams coexist. *Chicago* is a powerfully engrossing novel of culture and individuality from one of the most original voices in contemporary world literature.

Questions for Discussion

1. Within *Chicago*, there are multiple storylines and characters, some Egyptian and some American. Was there a particular storyline that stood out to you or a character who you related to the most? What was it about this character or story that jumped off the page for you?
2. Al Aswany often uses daily personal things, such as cooking and clothing, to depict one's identity and how it interacts with the world around them. How did these different characters' daily routines inform who they are? How did people around them, especially the Americans, react?
3. The character Nagi's chapters are all told through his first personal journals, a major difference from the rest of the book. Why do you think Al Aswany decided to tell his story this way? Did you feel as if you got to know him as a character better than the others? Was this device effective for you?
4. Egyptian politics plays a major role in the book's plot and each of the Egyptian characters has very strong opinions about their homeland's president. How did Al Aswany use their opinions to better define their identities? Did the book make you more aware of Egypt's current political struggles? How did the book change, if at all, your views on democracy?
5. Tariq, perhaps more than the other Egyptian characters, is desperately torn between the social mores of Egypt and the newfound social freedoms he's being exposed to in the U.S., especially when it comes to his relations with women and Shaymaa. Have you ever been in a situation where being the outsider has changed the way you look at the world? Do you think Tariq's exposure to American society was ultimately good or bad for him?
6. Throughout the book, each of the female characters reveals new truths about their sexuality, both positive and negative. How do Shaymaa, Carol, Christine, and Marwa find that sexuality does or does not give them more power in their lives? Do you think the women in the book are treated fairly? Did you find that their treatment was ever a direct result of whether they were American or Egyptian?
7. Two of the Egyptian men in the book are married to American women. How did you feel this affected their marriages? Do you think their situations would have been any different had they married Egyptian women? How did marrying an American fulfill a sort of "American dream" for them? Do you think Ra'fat would have dealt with Sarah's drug addiction differently had he been married to an Egyptian woman?
8. Because of her race, Carol is forced to make major emotional sacrifices to care for her son. Have you even been in a position where you've set aside moral values in order to help a loved one? Were you surprised by John's reaction to Carol's situation?
9. As the storylines come to an end, there are some major surprises and some of the characters find themselves in very tough situations. Did you feel the novel ended on a hopeful note, or did you feel these characters' fates were doomed? Do you think Al Aswany was commenting on whether American relations with the Middle East could ever be resolved?
10. Unlike Al Aswany's other two books, *Chicago* is set in the U.S. How did the setting affect your interpretation of Al Aswany's goals and the characters' identities? Did you feel you learned more about Egyptian culture or about how Egyptians view the U.S.? Since the book was written by an Egyptian, did you feel his depiction of the U.S. and Americans was fair?

About the Author

Alaa Al Aswany is the internationally bestselling author of *The Yacoubian Building* and *Friendly Fire*, as well as two other books in Arabic. He is a journalist who writes a controversial opposition column, and he makes his living as a dentist in Cairo.