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You Cannot Teach Writing – But You Can Provoke Talent

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Panel: Teaching Writing

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YOU CANNOT TEACH WRITING – BUT YOU CAN PROVOKE TALENT

Teaching creative writing is not something that is very widespread in Egypt or the Arab world. In fact, such programs do not even exist in universities there. In Egyptian universities, writers aren't hired to teach because universities are inflexible in their assumption of what constitutes appropriate academic study. They teach the history of literature, but they don't teach the act or process of creative writing. Regarding this fact, we have to ask ourselves: can literature be taught?

In 2006, a very elegant bookshop called *Kotobkhan* opened in my neighborhood. It was the first of its kind in this bourgeois area, where members of the Egyptian upper-middleclass are literate, but not very accustomed to literary culture. The owner, who is the wife of one of my friends, invited me to the opening, and during the party we began to discuss ways to stimulate cultural events in her new shop. I suggested the organization of a creative writing workshop.

This suggestion, to form a workshop, emerged from an old desire of mine. I wanted to treat writing in a different way, in an interactive frame with others, especially after the emigration of most of the literary friends with whom I started my writing career. I was missing this interactive forum for ideas and experiences and wanted to form a new community of writers.

The idea behind the first workshop was to address the issue of how to take personal narratives, such as diaries, memoirs and blogs and transmute these personal experiences into creative writing. So we publicized the workshop on the internet and asked potential participants to present some samples of their previous writing, so that we could select writers with the degree of talent required to work on the project. We chose eleven participants from dozens of applicants. And then, work began on a weekly basis. Each session in the bookshop lasted for two hours. I had thought that participants would be drawn from the residents of the neighborhood, but what amazed me was that the participants were coming from different places in the city. One of them even came from a northern city seventy miles from Cairo. Their ages ranged from twenty-five to forty and they came from a wide variety backgrounds and professions.

I started by suggesting that they write a page or two on a particular theme, and the next week, we discussed what they had written. From the paragraphs they wrote, we collectively chose the strongest parts and removed what we considered weak or superficial, but we kept the nucleus of

the piece, the part that had the most potential to be extended. We continued this way, with the writers periodically taking on a new theme, and engaging in the same process of editing the weak portions and keeping the core of the narrative. Not all of the writers continued until the end of the season—at the end, eight of the original eleven remained. And after nine months, we had an anthology of short stories that was published by the same bookshop as the fruit of its first writing workshop.

The second workshop was offered under the title “Your First Novel.” We chose participants using the same method, except that they also had to present a one- to two-page proposal for a novel that they wanted to focus on during the workshop. Again, we had dozens of applicants, and we chose twelve. On the same weekly basis, we discussed the strong and weak aspects of the manuscripts. As the challenge of novels was stronger than that posed by short stories, five writers continued to the end of the workshop, which lasted six months. By that point we had five new novels, and five new novelists. The style and content of the five novels are very different, from a romantic comedy to one in the labyrinthine style of Borges. We are currently in the process of editing the novels for publication.

Now, three years since the first workshop began in Cairo, four other writing workshops are held: two in the capital, one in Alexandria, and another in Mansoura, which is northeast of Cairo. All of them are held in bookshops or cafés, which are a new space in the Egyptian cultural scene.

For decades, the literary field in Egypt lay virgin in its test of amateur writers. And now, the scene is changing into one of more industrialization and commercialization. The publishing industry is becoming stronger, and literary prizes are becoming more numerous. And this has increased the need for learning writing. This grows parallel with the spread of writing workshops in Egypt. But still, the question remains: can we, as writers, teach writing? Or can we only provoke talented amateurs to produce work that is genuine?