

## 9/22/2023: SPECTER OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

*A person's body affects the way they navigate the world, and their experiences in it. How much power does a body (with regard to, for instance, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) have over, or in, an artist's work? And, with what devices can a writer affect issues their body can present—for instance, via symbolism, or by changing media, or in the physical circumstances of reading and writing?*

### 1. Mansoura EZ-ELDIN (Egypt)

I belong to a culture that has always valued inspiration and considered poets to be prophets of sorts. In the pre-Islamic culture, a poet was a prophet, or at least a visionary who was able to see that which lies beneath the surface.

In those days it was believed that every great poet has a double or a spirit companion who resides in Wadi 'Abqar -- which means: Valley of Genius. This legendary valley located somewhere unknown in Saudi Arabia was thought to be inhabited by the jinn. This way, the poet was considered a kind of mediator, who receives divine revelations. It's almost as if they valued poetry to such a degree that they couldn't accept that it could be written by mortal humans. The divine, or at least the Jinn, must have been involved in its creation.

In the tradition of Arabic poetry, they distinguished between *الشاعر المطبوع* and *الشاعر المصنوع*. The first is a born poet; poetry comes naturally to him and he can improvise great poems whenever he wants. In contrast, the second kind of poet is a made poet who needs to work hard to improve their craft and skills.

Needless to say, the first kind was more respected and admired. The Arab critics have always admired the artist whose art comes easily to him, without exerting too much effort, and have always considered this as a sign of an exceptional talent. This point of view continued to prevail for many centuries and it became applied to creative writing in general afterwards.

An Egyptian pioneer short story writer in the twentieth century used to brag about not having a big home library. It seems that he wanted to say that he owed nothing to previous writers and he depended entirely on his natural gift. Another well-known novelist used to announce proudly that he had never needed to rewrite or even edit any of his novels.

But during the last few decades, the situation has changed a lot. There's much more interest in writing as a craft that needs to be honed. Creative writing workshops are flourishing and many aspiring

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International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) 304 EPB Gerber Lounge

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Mansoura Ez-Eldin (Egypt), Loren Glass (UI English Department), Ali AlShaali  
(UAE)

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writers join them. A lot of established writers give tips on how to write a good book, and some of them even write books about that topic.

I myself have acted as mentor to many creative writing workshops; some of them were organized or sponsored by prestigious institutions such as The Arabic Booker Prize and Storytell. In these workshops, I focus on helping aspiring writers not to be enslaved by rules and writing tips. It's vital for us as writers to break the rules, but in order to master the art of breaking said rules, we must first learn them.

This is how I approach writing. I also believe that we writers need to learn how to train our so-called muse, to summon it when needed, and even to create it.

We must lure inspiration, by trying to live as writers all the time. By that I mean, I do my best to activate the mindset of the writer, through paying attention to the tiniest details of the world I live in, to the people I meet and to everything I happen to pass by, because I believe that writing begins long before the writing process itself: it starts with the way we see the world and interact with it.

The most fruitful phases in my career were when I immersed myself in writing on a daily basis. No matter how tired or busy I was, I would sit down to write, not waiting for the so-called muse. In general, I snatch inspiration from everything around me, trying to turn everything in daily life into art, both through precise observation and wild imagination. I write down my dreams and any interesting dialogues I happen to overhear anywhere around me, I keep journals and take notes and photos.

I don't mean that writing is just a calculated process. Talent is the most important aspect in writing and art in general, but alone it's not enough. It could be wasted if the writer doesn't nurture it through reading, training and expanding their horizons.

On the other hand, there should be a balance between the use of innate talent and professional skill while writing. It's quite vital for any writer to work on bettering his skills and to be the first critic of his work.

Writing is one of the loneliest professions. A writer works all alone. She takes risks and learns from her faults. I dare say that the most valuable lessons that each writer learns are the ones they learn out of the writing process, out of the artistic obstacles they face while writing their works.

Nowadays writers are put under huge pressure; they feel obliged to be successful according to a very narrow notion of success, which comes down to the number of copies their books sell. In the Arab world, they are expected most of the time to play an essential role in promoting their works. Many publishing houses just publish the book and don't exert any effort to promote or distribute it. As a result, writers find themselves wasting precious time doing tasks that they are not capable of doing, instead of concentrating on their writing.

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Finally, to sum up, whenever I'm asked: is being a writer a job or a calling? I say it is a calling that should be treated as a job, and a job that should be treated as calling!

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