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Double entry ledger

Sayed Mahmoud weighs 2008 in the balance

In terms of its contribution to our cultural wellbeing, 2008 was a mixed bag. On the upside, talented writers won several prestigious awards. On the downside, bickering continued between conservatives and modernists, with Culture Minister Farouk Hosni often catching the flak.

The list of people who passed away during the year is long. Readers will certainly miss historian Yunan Labib Rizq, winner of the Mubarak Social Science Award and author of more than 30 books on Egypt's modern history, the most recent of which is *Al-Ayb Fi Zat Afandina* (Offending his Majesty). Rizq was a liberal writer with a knack for popularising historical information. He played a major role in the international arbitration concerning Taba, putting together the file of documents that helped Egypt win the case.

Raouf Abbas also passed away. The historian was best known for his writings on the history of the labour and communist movements as well as translations of, among others, Peter Gran, Paul Kennedy and Bernard Lewis.

We lost several distinguished journalists, including Magdi Mehanna, whose exposure of corruption made him one of the country's most loved columnists. Ragaa El-Naqqash, a towering figure on the literary scene, who brought attention to many new writers, will be sorely missed. So will Salaheddin Hafez, secretary-general of the Arab Journalists' Union and one of Al-Ahram's leading political commentators.

Kamel El-Zoheiri, poet, sometime surrealist and once editor of Al-Hilal, will be remembered for his tireless defence of the freedom of the press, especially during the late 1970s. The death of calligrapher and graphic designer Hamed El-Oweidi was also a big loss for Egyptian journalism.

Those interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict will remember Abdel-Wahab Elmessiri, a man who dedicated much of his life to chronicling the Zionist movement and a staunch opposition figure. In recent years, Elmessiri had been a leading member of the Kifaya movement.

Cinema goers were shocked by the death of director Youssef Chahine. Theatre also lost one of its best known directors, Saad Ardash. And the world of publishing is now without Mahmoud Madbouli, owner of the bookshop that carries his name.

There were good moments too. Ragaa El-Naqqash, Hamed Ammar and Saad Ardash won the Mubarak Prize. Writer Ibrahim Abdel-Maguid, pianist Ramzi Yassa, scriptwriter Osama Anwar Okasha and sculptor Sobhi Girgis won the State Award for Merit.

The State Award for Excellence in Literature went to writers Ahmed Sakhsoukh and Neamat El-Beheiri. Unfortunately El-Beheiri died of cancer a few months later.

The State Award for Social Sciences went to Mohamed El-Sayed Selim, Mohamed Fathi Abdel-Hadi and Galal Ibrahim.

The State Award for Art went to director Nasser Abdel-Moneim.

The State Award for Literature went to poet Fulaz Abdallah El-Anwar for his collection Sayedat Al-Atlal Al-Shamaliya (Lady of the Northern Ruins).

The State Award for the Novel went to Mekkawi Said, while Edward El-Kharrat won the Arab Novel Prize, awarded by the Higher Council for Culture every two years.

Bahaa Taher won the Arab Booker Prize for Wahat Al-Ghurub (Sunset Oasis) and Alaa Al-Aswani won the Bruno Kreisky Prize for the massively popular Emarat Yacoubian (Yacoubian Building). Gaber Asfour, director of the National Centre for Translation, won the UNESCO Award for Arab Culture, financed by the ruler of Sharjah, and young novelist Hamdi Abu Galil won the Naguib Mahfouz Prize awarded by the American University in Cairo.

Conservatism had its day in court, more than once. Sheikh Youssef Al-Badri won slander cases against Gaber Asfour, Ahmed Abdel-Moeti Hegazi, Gamal El-Ghitani and Mohamed Shaeir. Al-Badri also won a ruling stripping poet Helmi Salem of a state award for alleged blasphemy in the poem Shorofat Layla Murad (Balconies of Layla Murad).

Al-Badri started his career in litigation in the 1990s with the famous case that ended in a court ruling separating writer Nasr Abu Zeid from his wife. He is now suing the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the ministers of awqaf (religious endowments) and health.

Youssef Zeidan's novel Azazil, set in the early years of Christianity, made it to the shortlist of the Arab Booker Prize though clergymen objected to it and demanded it be banned. Not to be outdone, the Islamic Research Council called for a ban on Gamal El-Banna's Al-Marraah Al-Muslimah Bayna Tahrir Al-Quran wa Taqyyid Al-Ulama (Muslim Women between the Liberation of the Quran and Restrictions of the Ulama).

Private publishing companies, including some new comers, brought new writers onto the scene, including some bloggers. Some of the books, including Essam Youssef's Nos Gram (Half a Gram), were considered by critics to be short on creativity but nevertheless sold well.

Animosity continued between Culture Minister Farouk Hosni and his opponents among the country's intelligentsia, who don't think he should be nominated as UNESCO's next boss. Several writers and artists are unhappy with the scandals that have marred Hosni's tenure as minister of culture and speak bitterly of repeated fires in state-run theatres and the indictment on corruption charges of the minister's senior advisers. The state continues to support Hosni's nomination, unmoved by Israeli protests that he is not "normalising" enough with its agencies.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/928/cu4.htm>