

Hunger: An Egyptian Novel

Mohamed El-Bisatie

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As with his earlier works, Mohamed El-Bisatie's novel is set in the Egyptian countryside, about which he writes with such understanding. Episodic in form, it deals with a family Zaghloul the layabout father, Sakeena the long-suffering wife, and two young boys. The central theme of the book is hunger: the hunger of not knowing where one's next meal is coming from, and the universal hunger for sex and love. Sakeena's life revolves round trying to provide her family with the necessary daily loaves of bread that will stave off starvation. Labor-shy Zaghloul works on and off at one of the village's cafés, but prefers to spend his time listening in on conversations about subjects such as politics, which he would have liked to know more about, if only he had been an educated man. He is also intrigued by the stories told by young university students about their sexual exploits. Eventually chance presents him with a new job: to keep company with an elderly and over-fat man and help him on and off the mule he has to use for getting about. After looking in turn at the lives of the husband and the wife, the novel finally focuses on their elder son, who, although lacking the advantages of any sort of education, nonetheless shows more initiative than his father, and discovers his own way of contributing to the family bread larder. Despite its bleak title, Hunger is told with a lightness of touch and the writer's trademark wry humor.



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