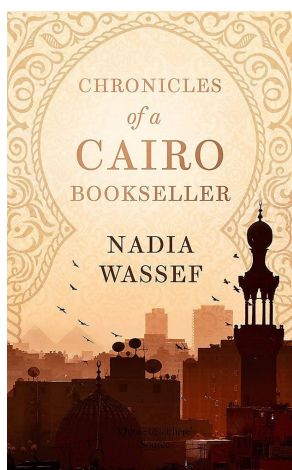


Book Review: *Chronicles of a Cairo Bookseller* by Nadia Wassef

Reviewed by Claire Bianchi



Shelf Life: Chronicles of a Cairo Bookseller is a memoir by Nadia Wassef, one of the three women who co-founded Diwan, Cairo's first independent bookstore. At the time of its founding, the notion of public space for culture or creative output that was free from the influence of Egypt's government was virtually unfathomable. As Wassef states in the book's prologue: "Starting a bookstore at this moment of cultural atrophy seemed impossible—and utterly necessary."

The memoir follows Wassef's decade-long journey opening Diwan and managing its multiple franchises through vignettes organized by store sections: The Café, Egypt Essentials, Cookery, Business and Management, Pregnancy and Parenting, The Classics, Art and Design, and Self-Help. It's a clever framing device that anchors the narrative in place; you can almost imagine yourself wandering Diwan's aisles, dragging your fingers along spines in various languages including Arabic, English, and French.

Throughout the memoir, Wassef is not shy about her own upper-class status in a starkly divided Cairo. Yet even with this privilege, the sexism and prejudice she confronts are deeply illuminating, underscoring how patriarchy cuts across class lines and, in some ways, how those with relative safety and access have a particular responsibility to push against it.

Among the most striking anecdotes is Wassef's visit to the Censorship Bureau, where officials flag *The Naked Chef* by Jamie Oliver purely on the basis of its title, attributing it to the West's "loose morals." She manages to talk them down and ultimately forges an uneasy alliance with the bureau, helping her avoid future shipping holdups. In another vignette, she reflects on curating the "Pregnancy and Parenting" section, an experience that ultimately prompts her to interrogate her own approach to motherhood and culminating in a request to have her tubes tied after her second child, only to be asked whether her husband has approved. To this she replies, "they're mine, not his. Tie them!" Wassef's observations in the "Egypt Essentials" and "The Classics" sections also examine how books shape our understanding of a culture's history, depending on who is doing the writing: the colonized or the colonizer. Together, these scenes reveal how even the most ordinary books can become political objects, and how broad accessibility to diverse perspectives is essential to a truly prosperous society and to advancing the rights of marginalized communities.

Positioned as a "portrait of a country hurtling towards revolution, a feminist rallying cry, and an unapologetic crash course in running a business under the law of entropy," *Shelf Life* delivers on all three counts. For Western readers, and particularly Americans, Wassef's story is a reminder of liberties we rarely question: the right to read freely, to publish without permission, and to browse without fear. Her account shows how government control over books and culture reinforces patriarchal power and narrows whose voices are heard, making *Shelf Life* an important touchstone in conversations about ethics in publishing and the responsibilities of those who shape what reaches readers. Wassef's story emphasizes that books are not a luxury, as many in Egypt had come to conclude; books are vital pillars of culture that sustain fundamental rights like equity, knowledge, and opportunity. Her memoir poses urgent questions about publishing ethics and accessibility: Who gets to tell stories? Who decides which stories are allowed? And how should everyone involved in the publishing ecosystem—from authors and editors to publishers and booksellers—be held accountable for safeguarding these freedoms?

As a pioneer not just for women booksellers but for business owners more broadly, Wassef chronicles the extraordinary resilience required to carve out a "third space" for intellectual life to flourish within a repressive system. Her voice remains fierce, witty, and unsparing. If there's one qualm, it's that the narrative occasionally feels disjointed and might have benefited from more sustained or contrasting perspectives. Still, at just 240 pages, *Shelf Life* is a compact, punchy read for anyone interested in global publishing, feminist activism, or the transformative power of books.