

★ **Rotten Evidence: Reading and Writing in an Egyptian Prison****Ahmed Naji****Katharine Halls, Translator**

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A top-tier work of prison literature, Ahmed Naji's poetic memoir *Rotten Evidence* follows his 2016 sentencing by an Egyptian court for "moral turpitude" over a novel excerpt.

Beginning with Naji's entry into prison, the book expresses disbelief at his fate. Punished for the sexual activity, drug use, and expletives in his novel, Naji wondered if he was really a writer. But after a late-night encounter with a tough older prisoner who was weeping over a romance novel, Naji was sure: words are "as transparent as a drop of water ... too insubstantial to be grasped ... yet powerful enough to reduce the Rhinoceros's heart to crumbs."

The memoir is made up of nonlinear, beautiful personal reflections, flashbacks, and journal entries. Together, they reveal Naji's soul: he is a humble, astute man—a deep thinker on the subject of his own circumstances and the world around him. He read all that he could while incarcerated, all while dreaming of family gatherings at the seashore, with meals and laughter and goodwill.

Naji's dreams themselves are captured in surreal, sometimes whimsical terms—an effective counterpoint to the harshness of his waking hours. He reveals that dreams are prized by all prisoners—a portal to the world outside. After interpreting a cellmate's dream, he expanded to reading coffee grounds, giving the men around him small doses of hope.

Naji's own hope was growing thin when his conviction was appealed. During his confinement, Egypt's Writers' Union had rallied around him, as had PEN America. After serving ten months in prison, Naji's sentence was suspended. He left with a deep belief in the power of literature; with his manuscript intact, although it could have been seized; and with refreshed belief in himself as a writer.

DEBORAH TOBOLA (November / December 2023)

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