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LETTERS FROM CAIRO

Letters from Cairo is a vivid memoir of the American experience of Nasser's Egypt, filtered through the perspective of two expat academics who navigate the epiphanies, adventures, and paradoxes of a country at a critical turning point.



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On the eve of the Six-Day War, a young American woman writes from her desk in Cairo to her parents thousands of miles away in upstate New York. Over hundreds of letters, she relates the greatest adventure of her life: the delights of molokhia soup, to camping under desert stars, to the seasonal flooding of the Nile, to the cacophony of street vendors. Lurking below the surface are the tensions animated by culture and politics: for Roberta as a highly-educated biochemist thwarted by her male Egyptian peers, and for her husband Franz, a labor researcher at the American University in Cairo, whose interest in the Aswan High Dam involves one of the most consequential and rarely documented flashpoints of Nasser's United Arab Republic.

Letters from Cairo weaves the accounts, travels, and discoveries of Roberta and Franz with the broader social and political history of the era to bring to life the story of a country as rich as it is complex. This

magnificent full-color facsimile edition includes over 100 letters and 75 historical photographs of Cairo, the Aswan basin, the Middle East, and North Africa, as well as an extensive Foreword, Historical Timeline, and multilingual transcription and English translation of its accompanying archival recording, "Sounds of Cairo." Taken together, the book's archival and audio elements immerse the reader in tangible experience, challenging us to consider the historical Egypt on the page alongside its current mythologies. For the historian, the storyteller, the person consumed by wanderlust, and anyone who believes in the capacity of life abroad to nourish vital exploration, *Letters from Cairo* is a must-have book.



CONTRIBUTORS



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editor

Laura Dolp is a practitioner, writer, and researcher about music as a site of human transformation. Her work often includes themes of music and spirituality, the interrelation of music and social spaces, mapping and musical practices, and the poetics of the natural world. Current projects include illustrations and poems for a dream-atlas entitled *Sophia* and an essay collection that explores the historical relationship between cartography and the musical score, *Maps and Music: Stories of the Cartographic Score*. She is also the editor of *Arvo Pärt's White Light: Media, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and co-author for *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

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Donna Rizk Asdourian, PhD was a Research Fellow at Fordham University (New York), focusing on "Women's Role in the Liturgy: the Coptic and Oriental Orthodox Churches." She holds a Masters from Holy Cross Orthodox Seminary, a Masters in Eastern Christianity from the University of Oxford, and a PhD in Theology from King's College London, and also did work in Austria, and in the field of Liturgical Studies in Berkeley. Her research interests include Coptic Orthodoxy, Armenian Studies, Liturgical Studies, and Women in the Church. She is also the founder of the nonprofit 501c, "Orthodox women's ministry." Donna is currently working on two book projects for women in the church.

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Emna Zghal is a Tunisian-American interpreter, translator, and visual artist. She is fluent in Arabic, French, and English. She also speaks and interprets from Spanish. She interprets at the United Nations, UNICEF, and the permanent observer mission of the African Union, as well as other international institutions. Her artworks have been exhibited widely in the United States, Tunisia, and beyond.

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Reviews

“In his pathbreaking work on human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that through our multitude of sensory experiences, spaces go from being vague abstractions to increasingly defined and meaningful places. Across our lives, we might undergo this process of converting spaces into places countless times, yet it is exceptionally rare to step into another’s experiences as this transformation unfolds. It is just the sort of privileged intimacy that *Letters from Cairo* offers, complementing the personal memoirs of Edward Said, his sister Jean, Leila Ahmed, Penelope Lively, and Olivia Manning.

This genre-bending collection is part book, part archive, part reflective essay. Its editor, Laura Dolp, helps us reconsider how new technologies allow us to rethink the archival collection, less as something cloistered and instead as something shared and creative. The result is a kind of accessible and revelatory material archive, striking in its beautiful simplicity ... a collection that is itself a piece of art.”

—Annalise DeVries, author of *Maadi: The Making and Unmaking of a Cairo Suburb, 1879–1962*

Sample Interview Questions

1. What inspired the creation of this book?

Letters from Cairo was a means for the editor, Laura Dolp, to discover for herself the omnipresent “Cairo” of her American childhood: the comforting taste of curry and grape leaves, the stories of their Nubian cook-suffragi Abbas, the centrality of a large brass tray that glowed from frequent use, and the intense, unfathomable beauty of the artwork on the walls. Dolp pieces together her family history in epistolic form: made possible by her mother’s assiduous record-keeping of her experience in Egypt and the safeguarding of her mother’s correspondences by her grandparents. Dolp’s subsequent Foreword to *Letters from Cairo* intertwines intimate family history and the broader social history of a nation.

2. What was the social/political/historical context in which the book was written, and why is it significant to the broader history of the Egyptian nation-state/its geopolitical position?

Letters from Cairo relates the experience of two American academics, Franz Dolp (1936-2004) and Roberta M. Dolp (1938-), a young couple who spent two and half years as researchers in Cairo in the mid-1960s. As a poignant piece of historical testimony, *Letters* provides unique evidence for a form of American involvement in Nasser’s Egypt (known at the time as the United Arab Republic) during a critical period in its formation as a modern nation state. Its narrators describe the personal challenges of American researchers at the American University of Cairo (AUC) when Nasser’s national ambition was about to push his country into direct conflict on the Arabian peninsula, and to amplify its problem of economic sustainability. *Letters from Cairo* also illustrates two facets of American interests in Egypt in the mid-1960s; one was industrial, wedged between Russian and American power, and the other was scientific, in support of US military presence in Africa. Although their authors were far from home, the letters also rehearse the political debates that occurred between a radicalized American post-war generation and their parents during the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater campaign.

Letters from Cairo also displays a holographic quality of writing under censorship, where it was safer to discuss American politics than the immediate circumstances. Late in 1966, the lack of cooking oil or the confounding politics of American University provide a backdrop to a nation on the road to war. Unbeknownst to Franz and Roberta, their departure in December 1966 is followed months later by a remilitarized Sinai Peninsula and Israel’s devastating attack on Egyptian airfields. Egypt’s subsequent defeat affects every aspect of its economy and their standing in the Arab world for decades afterward.

3. In what ways does *Letters from Cairo* relate social, cultural, and artistic values?

The letters describe daily encounters such as the delights of molokhia soup, camping under desert stars, the seasonal flooding of the Nile, and the cacophony of street vendors. We meet their Nubian cook Abbas, a stark reminder of the hierarchies of Cairo's social life, as well as daily evidence of foreign presence. Franz comments on the French, Italian, German, and Russian that he hears on his train rides to Aswan, and Roberta describes the cosmopolitanism of Egyptian life, including the well-heeled neighborhood of Zamalek, and her impressions farther afield in Alexandria. She describes their trips to Siwa and other archeological sites, and shares their abiding love of classical Islamic art. Over many months, they adjust to expat life, taking the seasons of Cairo and its natural environment in stride. Her determination to speak Egyptian pays off and cultural mishaps become less frequent. During their lengthy summer trips of 1965 (Greece and the Middle East) and 1966 (North Africa) her missives have an air of adventure, and include visceral descriptions of the wonder of now heavily-damaged or lost ancient sites.

4. In what ways are Franz and Roberta's political positioning as American expatriates reflected in these letters?

As a labor economist, Franz had been invited as part of a multidisciplinary team at the Social Research Center at AUC to study the impact of the High Dam construction on the town of Aswan. Nasser's increasing political control within the United Arab Republic and move toward anti-colonial nationalization had tightened the reins on public critique and, as the letters reveal, US-led academic research was also under suspicion. From the beginning, Franz encountered significant resistance by Aswan officials toward his requests for access. By December of 1964, Roberta writes that the Dam project is "off" and from that point on Franz shifts his attention to other industries.

This book is also a memoir of time abroad in the Middle East by two members of the Silent Generation, when their education and critical capacities clashed with the general tendency of their generation not to challenge the status quo. Gender politics are clearly at play too. Roberta's struggle to be taken seriously as a professional scientist by the Egyptian elite highlight not only cultural tensions but also Roberta's contradictory American conditioning, where highly-educated women frequently encountered glass ceilings. *Letters* is a spirited account of transformation, intellectual investigation, and exploration.

5. Tell us about the key features of this book. How do the audio, aesthetic, and visual archival elements contribute to the whole package?

The full-color facsimile edition features over 100 letters from Roberta and Franz Dolp, 75 historical photographs of Cairo/Aswan Basin/North Africa, as well as an extensive Foreword (which contextualizes the historical and sociopolitical environment, the role of the Social Research Center at AUC, and the complex stakes of the Aswan High Dam project), a Historical Timeline, and a multilingual transcription & translation

(from French, Egyptian, Qur'anic Arabic, Coptic, & Chinese) of the accompanying archival recording "Sounds of Cairo," that features the famed Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum. The letters—with their original quality, color, and detail rendered perfectly in facsimile form—provide a strong sense of what the reading experience was like for the initial recipients. These memorable and beautiful facsimile copies will entice any history, art, or travel lover, and perhaps most of all, anyone wishing to round out their historic book collections. Taken together, the audio and archival elements of *Letters* supply an immersive encounter with storytelling: the reader can, very literally, hear and see the lost world that the letters animate.

6. What are the implications of this book as it pertains to the history and legacy of Egypt, and more specifically The American University in Cairo and the High Aswan Dam Project?

Given that this book centers around the story of two American academics, *Letters* is best read in tandem with books that relate the lived Egyptian experience of Cairo in the mid-1960s. Other contemporary texts amplify the devastating effects of the Aswan High Dam Project on the country's archaeological and artistic landscape. Many temple and archaeological sites were forcibly transplanted and/or destroyed. Others were moved out of the country (for example the Temple of Dendur, now in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York). Today, this impact on the region's patrimony continues through preservation and restitution efforts. The Six-Day War, which occurred shortly after the time that these letters were penned, had enormous consequences on the economic and political course of the dominant Egyptian nation-state. International politics are still shaped by this period, as Egypt continues to navigate diplomatic backchannels with the United States. For AUC, the development of their Press and the Social Research Center represented significant institutional gains. In 1960, the university tripled its enrollment, offering a new host of professional programs for students, both Egyptian and international. Franz and Roberta's entry into AUC was concurrent with a new age of transcultural engagements, connection, and growth for the institution.