

## Q&A with the Author (cont.)

**Q: This epic features two strong characters, Tekla and Isis. Did you begin with them or did they emerge as you reflected on the events of Tahrir?**

It was a little of both. I began, as I almost always do, with the conceptual structure of the book and as I began to write with this in mind it became apparent that the book, in order to anchor it and keep it from becoming too amorphous, needed these characters, needed actual and specific human bodies moving through time and space. I wanted to write the poem in a way as a charting of their migration, as a reminder to myself and my readers of the deeply human implications of any political or social change. I wanted to chart the way these changes can transform two specific people, the way that the twenty-first century has become bifurcated in complex ways. I also wanted to be sure that, as a Copt and as someone who identifies with a pre-Arab Egypt, that “minority” point of view was also present, hence the names Isis and Tekla.

**Q: When did you realize you were a poet and what made you commit to your craft?**

I think the idea of being a poet began in my middle or late teen years and the realization came after I had really dedicated myself to the study and practice of the art... I think, as cliché as it may sound, it is language that made me commit [to poetry]. It was a deep desire and love of what language can do, of wanting to cultivate language as a form of musical notation to create a sense of song in my life and to understand my surroundings. It was about an ongoing sense of discovery in realizing that language is, in some manner, boundless and that this thing which is so intimate, personal, and common to us, can actually do so much to shift our perspectives on the world. Like any writer, simply put, I am in love with language and try to find a way to highlight it, rather than abuse it, as is so often the case.

**Q: How do the ancestors help or inspire your process?**

I have always felt that any artist is part of an intellectual and artistic lineage and a historical trajectory that no doubt originates with ancestry. For myself I feel that I am often very consciously working from that historical root and that those whom I claim as my ancestors have in so many ways defined the moment I presently find myself in... It is through community from antiquity to the present that we find ourselves able to create new work.

To read the entire Q&A with Matthew Shenoda, visit: [arabamericanmuseum.org/MSQ](http://arabamericanmuseum.org/MSQ)

2015

## ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

The Arab American Book Award is a literary program created to honor books written by and about Arab Americans. The program, managed by the Russell J. Ebeid Library & Resource Center at the Arab American National Museum, generates greater awareness of Arab American scholarship and writing through an annual award competition and educational outreach. Learn more about past and present winners at [arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward](http://arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward).

The goal of the Reading & Discussion Guide project is to increase the audience for Arab American literature and stimulate discussion about the winning books' themes and topics.

This project has been made possible by  
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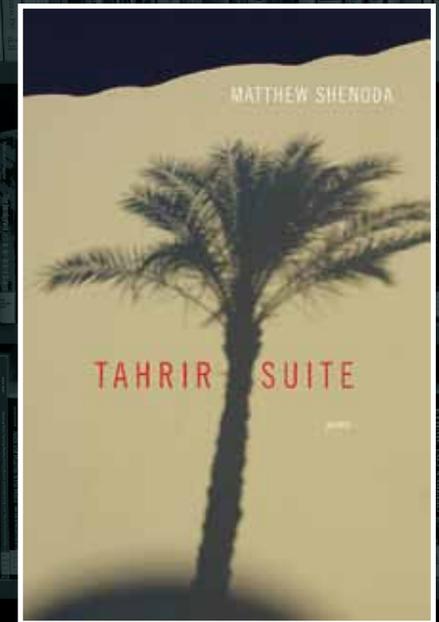
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2015

## ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

George Ellenbogen  
Poetry Award Winner



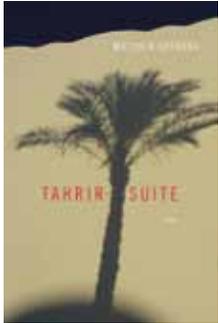
## READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



2015

## ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

George Ellenbogen  
Poetry Award Winner



### *Tahrir Suite*

by Matthew Shenoda  
Triquarterly/  
Northwestern University Press

## SUMMARY

*Tahrir Suite* is an epic poem about a young Coptic couple's journey from their home in Egypt, which is undergoing a revolution during the Arab Spring. It is clear that our main characters are resilient, yet they feel alienated both in their home country and their new country. The two are moving between not only borders, but also languages, cultures, and political systems. This work deeply explores the meaning of home and migration through the diasporic journey of Tekla and Isis.

## HISTORICAL & CULTURAL THEMES IN THIS WORK:

- Migration and immigration
- Revolution (Arab Spring)
- Alienation (At home and abroad)
- Family and love
- Faith and the consequences of revolution, migration

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on the differences in the meanings of the words 'migration' and 'immigration.' What do you think the differences are?
2. Do you relate to Tekla or Isis more? Why and how do you relate?
3. Are you an immigrant or the child of immigrants? In what ways is this epic familiar to your own family's journey? In what ways is it unfamiliar?
4. Tekla eventually overcomes his feelings of alienation. Can you recall a time you felt alienated, and how you overcame it?
5. The book ends with a sense of hope and freedom. What are your own definitions of hope and freedom? What role does poetry or literature play in your ability to define these terms?
6. Can you plot your own epic journey? Try making an outline using Joseph Campbell's narrative pattern: [mythologyteacher.com/documents/TheHeroJourney.pdf](http://mythologyteacher.com/documents/TheHeroJourney.pdf)

## About The Author



**MATTHEW SHENODA** is a writer and professor whose poems and essays have appeared in a variety of newspapers, journals, radio programs, and anthologies. His debut collection of poems, *Somewhere Else* (Coffee House Press), was named one of 2005's

debut books of the year by *Poets & Writers*. He is also the author of *Seasons of Lotus*, *Seasons of Bone* (BOA Editions Ltd., 2009) and editor of *Duppy Conqueror: New & Selected Poems by Kwame Dawes* (Copper Canyon Press, 2013).

Shenoda is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago. He has served on the board of directors of several arts and education organizations and is also a founding editor of the *African Poetry Book Series*. He lives with his family in Evanston, Illinois. You can follow him on Twitter @matthewshenoda

## Q&A with the Author

**Q: Though the book is titled *Tahrir Suite*, this epic could be about any country, any revolution, any immigrants. How did you manage to create a work that is so universal?**

When I first embarked on the poem cycle, things were changing so rapidly in Egypt and Tahrir that I knew from the start this could not be a book only about that. I knew that any proclamations made specifically about the uprising in Egypt would be undone within moments. I knew that any revolutionary force is ongoing and longstanding and as a poet in that moment, my job then was not to document, as a journalist does, but to create a kind of "sense" out of these events... It also felt specifically necessary for me to create a text that reflected and implicated my own position as a diasporic Egyptian. In that sense, I think there are major intersections with many immigrant communities, migration experiences, and diasporic realities that are shared and can be understood across cultures and geographies.

(continued)