From its very beginnings modern Egyptian prose has critically followed and reflected the state and problems of Egyptian society against a background of political changes and coups. We should remember, at least, how it reacted—sometimes immediately and at other times with a waiting period—to the tumultuous events of 1919, to the onerous atmosphere after losing the Six-Day War in 1967, and to the shadows of Nasser’s rule. This book by Stephan Guth, with a somewhat astonishing but expressive title, points out how some Egyptian writers have perceived and depicted the period of Sadat’s rule and the social and moral consequences of his “open-door” policy /ṣiyyāsat al-infiṭāḥ/.

Guth assembled a rich material for his subject during two study trips to Cairo (1987-88, 1990). In the foreword he notes he chose to analyse those authors whose works represent, from the contextual viewpoint and that of style and genre, the broadest spectrum. They are: 1) Fathi Ghānim, Qālīl min al-hubb ... kathīr min al-ṣawf (novel, 1985); 2) İlājīb Māḥfūz, Aḥl al-qimma; Huḥb fauğa ḥadbat al-haram (two short stories from the collection Ḥuḥb faūqā ḥadbat al-ḥaram, 1979); 3) ʿAbdūh Ḫuṭbī, Ṭarrīk al-qālīb (novel, 1982); 4) ʿṢunḏālāḥ Ibrāḥīm, Al-Lajnā (novel, 1981); 5) Jāmāl al-Ǧīḥānī, Rīsālāt al-bāṣāʾīr fi ʿl-mašāʾīr (novel, 1989).

In the first part of the book (pp. 3-22), conceived as an introduction to the subsequent analyses, the author speaks about all the relevant aspects of the infiṭāḥ period. He describes the political measures of President Sadat, and the process of drawing away from the Soviet Union and opening up to the political and economic influence of the West. He pays special attention to the new orientation of the Egyptian economy and its negative effects on the living standards of most of the people. He shows through concrete facts how these changes influenced the cultural climate in Egypt.

The focal point of the second part (pp. 25-199) are analyses of the above-mentioned six works. The method that Guth has chosen fully corresponds to the task he set himself. He avoids speculative considerations, interprets consistently from the text and concentrates on its content and thematic aspects. This is not to say, of course, that he completely forgets the formal viewpoint. Guth includes in his explanation the structural form of the work or its linguistic plan, if such an approach leads to a deeper understanding of it. However, the dominant principle of his method is to establish what the examined text reveals about the given period and its society.

The basic components of Guth’s analyses are the content of the work and its main figures. At first glance it might seem that such a “traditional” approach will deal only with the phenomenal aspects of reality and remain on the surface. But Guth soon convinces us of the opposite. He reads the works under examination with remarkable perception and proves able to extract from them many
valuable observations. He alternates a variety of viewpoints in regard to the reality depicted in these writings and thus reveals both their additional new forms and features. Analyses of the individual works (especially the novels of Fathi Ghânîm, Ṣun‘allâh Ibrâhîm and Jamâl al-Ghîtânî) are so deep and exhaustive that one could say they are partial sociological studies and sociopsychological characteristics of the figures. At the same time, Guth adheres consistently only to the examined text, all his conclusions are drawn only from the work itself which he approaches objectively and without emotion, and as a rule he even refrains from evaluating its artistic qualities. Only in the chapter about Ibrâhîm’s novel al-Lajna does he openly reveal his admiration and states that he regards this novel as “one of the most ingenious” works of modern Arab literature (... eines der genialisten der modernen arabischen Literatur; p. 117).

But this is a somewhat exaggerated claim. He employs exact analytical-descriptive methods of approach in the chapters in which he tries to depict the macrostructure of the novels by Ālîd Jubâyr (pp. 82-87) and Jamâl Ghitânî (pp. 173-178). The reader who does not know Jubâyr’s novel will find it hard to follow Guth’s explanation at this point.

The third part of Guth’s book (Themes and forms of the infitâh literature—pp. 201-294) has a more synthesised character. It sums up the results of analyses of the preceding chapters and attempts to create a compact picture of the infitâh era. It places the works under examination in the context of literary trends in Egypt from the mid-1960s. Guth deals in detail with the views of Edwar al-Kharrât who has coined the term hassâsiyya jadîda (modern sensitivity) for this period of literature. Among its main features is a new concept of reality, a new vision of the world, rejection of existing “established” realism with its “mimetic approach”, using means of artistic expression of western literature and, simultaneously, an inclination to one’s own cultural tradition.

Furthermore, Guth describes how the political situation is mirrored in the works examined. His picture is entirely negative: the loss of the political-economic independence, the growing influence of the West and the rich Arab Gulf States and as a result of this anti-Americanism and criticism of Egypt’s leadership. Another thematic focus in these analysed works are the serious changes in the macrostructure of society. Guth demonstrates them chiefly in the relation between established strata and newcomers, parvenus and parasites, and he then speaks of other aspects: about emigrants going abroad for work, about the situation of the middle classes appreciably affected by the infitâh because they have lost the status they had enjoyed, about disrupted inter-human relations, the decline of traditional values and the forfeiture of national feeling.

In the fourth part the author acquaints the reader with a new literary-scientific method, so-called analysis of components, and he considers the possibilities of its application.

Special attention should be paid to the long and very full footnotes and annotations which are truly an indispensable supplement to the text itself. Guth often cites secondary literature and the views of literary critics and reviewers. During his second stay in Cairo, in 1990, he fully documented how these six works were received by Egyptian literary critics.

The book concludes with a very useful biography of the authors and a list of their most important œuvres. The genre characteristics (novel, collection of stories) are not given for Fathi Ghânîm. The big bibliography even includes the significant Russian-written work by V.N. Kirpîchenko about Egyptian prose in