In his short story "Hikayat al-bāb", published as part of the collection Min hikâyät hádhā al-zamān, the Tunisian writer ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Madānī tells the story of a criminal in times gone by who committed an even worse crime than usual, and was sentenced to twenty or even thirty years in solitary confinement. Before entering his cell, he was summoned to appear before the Sultan, who told him that if he could escape—no matter how—he would be pardoned. The condemned man was delighted at this, convinced that he would be able to find a way out in five minutes. But the small, barred window which graces most prison cells was not to be found, and the walls were solid and impenetrable. The prisoner, however, would not give up: “Man makes his prison with his own hands, and it is for him to destroy it; that is the price of freedom”, he reflected. So he began to push at the door, day and night, until the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, and the months into years until just a week of the sentence remained to be served. So strong was his desire for freedom that he was still pushing at the door. At which point the prison guard, who had been laughing to himself, addressed him: “If you had pulled the door towards you instead of pushing it away from you, you could have got out of the cell on the first day”.1

This story, with its enigmatic ending typical of al-Madānī, seemed to me so apposite to the theme of the present conference that, despite being a newcomer to the field of Tunisian literature, I have felt bold enough to present a short paper on the man whom most standard accounts of modern Tunisian literature agree in describing as the “leader of the Tunisian avant-garde”.2

ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Madānī was born in Tunis in 1938, receiving his secondary education at the French Lycée Carnot in the capital, following which he studied in the Sociology Department of the University of Tunis.

1 Min hikâyät hádhā al-zamān, Tunis: Dār al-Janūb li-l-Nashr, 1982, pp. 27-29. Dr Mohamed Mahmoud has pointed out in discussion the similarity between this story and a short story by Kafka. In view of the other influences of Kafka in the work of ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Madānī, and the references to Kafka in al-Madānī’s discussion of al-Insān al-ṣifr (cf. below), some conscious or unconscious influence seems not implausible.

In 1961 he began writing for the press, contributing to a number of newspapers and journals, including *al-*Hamāt, *al-*Aḥad, *al-*Lughāt, *al-*Fikr, *Qīsās* and *al-*‘Amal. In 1963 he left Tunis for a short period in France, working on his return to Tunis as a journalist for a press agency. From May 1968 he was employed in the Arts and Literature Department of the Secretariat d’État aux Affaires Culturelles et à l’Information. Between 1969 and 1973 he edited the weekly *al-*‘Amal *al-*Thaqāfī, and he has also been associated with the publication *al-*Hamāt *al-*θaqqāfīyya, and with a number of other cultural activities, including the Maison de la Culture Ibn Rashīq, cultural programmes for the City of Tunis, the International Cultural Centre in Hammamet and the Carthage Festival. In 1988 he was awarded the Tunisian State Prize for Literature. In addition to his writing and editing activities, al-Madānī has been a leading member of the group of writers which established the Tunisian Nādī al-qīṣṣa in 1964.3

*Izz al-Dīn al-Madānī’s writings (the majority of which originally appeared in the Tunisian press) include novels, short stories, plays and criticism. His first work to appear in book form was a collection of short stories entitled *Khurāfāt*, published in 1968.4 Four parts of an unfinished experimental novel, entitled *al-*Insān *al-*ṣīrī, appeared in the periodicals *Qīsās* and *al-*Fikr between 1967 and 1971;5 and a second novel, entitled *al-*‘Udwan, appeared in 1969.6 A second collection of short stories, *Mīn ḥikāyāt hādhā al-zaman* (from which the extract above was summarised) was published in 1982. In the meantime, al-Madānī had also produced a number of plays, beginning with *Thawrāt sahib al-himār* (1970), and including also *Dīwan al-Zanj* (1972), *al-*Hallāj (1973), *al-*Ghufrān (1977), *Mawāliyya al-Sulṭān al-Ḥasan al-Hifṣī* (1977) and a number of other works.7 Indeed, it is arguable that *Izz al-Dīn al-Madānī’s most lasting contribution to Tunisian literature lies in the field of the drama—in which, as will be immediately apparent from the plays’ titles, the author not infrequently turns to Islamic history both as a source of inspiration, and as a mirror for contemporary Arab society. In the present short paper, however (in which I have been constrained by the availability of sources), I propose to concentrate on *Izz al-Dīn al-Madānī’s narrative works, pay-