

Arabs in the Mirror



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出版者:

出版时间:2008-2

装帧:

isbn:9780292717282

What is an Arab? Though many in the West would answer that question with simplistic stereotypes, the reality is far more complex and interesting. Arabs themselves have been debating Arab identity since pre-Islamic times, coming to a variety of conclusions about the nature and extent of their "Arabness." Likewise, Westerners and others have attempted to analyze Arab identity, reaching mostly negative conclusions about Arab culture and capacity for self-government. To bring new perspectives to the question of Arab identity, Iraqi-born scholar Nissim Rejwan has assembled this fascinating collection of writings by Arab and Western intellectuals, who try to define what it means to be Arab. He begins with pre-Islamic times and continues to the last decades of the twentieth century, quoting thinkers ranging from Ibn Khaldun to modern writers such as al-Ansari, Haykal, Ahmad Amin, al-'Azm, and Said. Through their works, Rejwan shows how Arabs have grappled with such significant issues as the influence of Islam, the rise of nationalism, the quest for democracy, women's status, the younger generation, Egypt's place in the Arab world, Israel's role in Middle Eastern conflict, and the West's "cultural invasion." By letting Arabs speak for themselves, "Arabs in the Mirror" refutes a prominent Western stereotype - that Arabs are incapable of self-reflection or self-government. On the contrary, it reveals a rich tradition of self-criticism and self-knowledge in the Arab world.

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