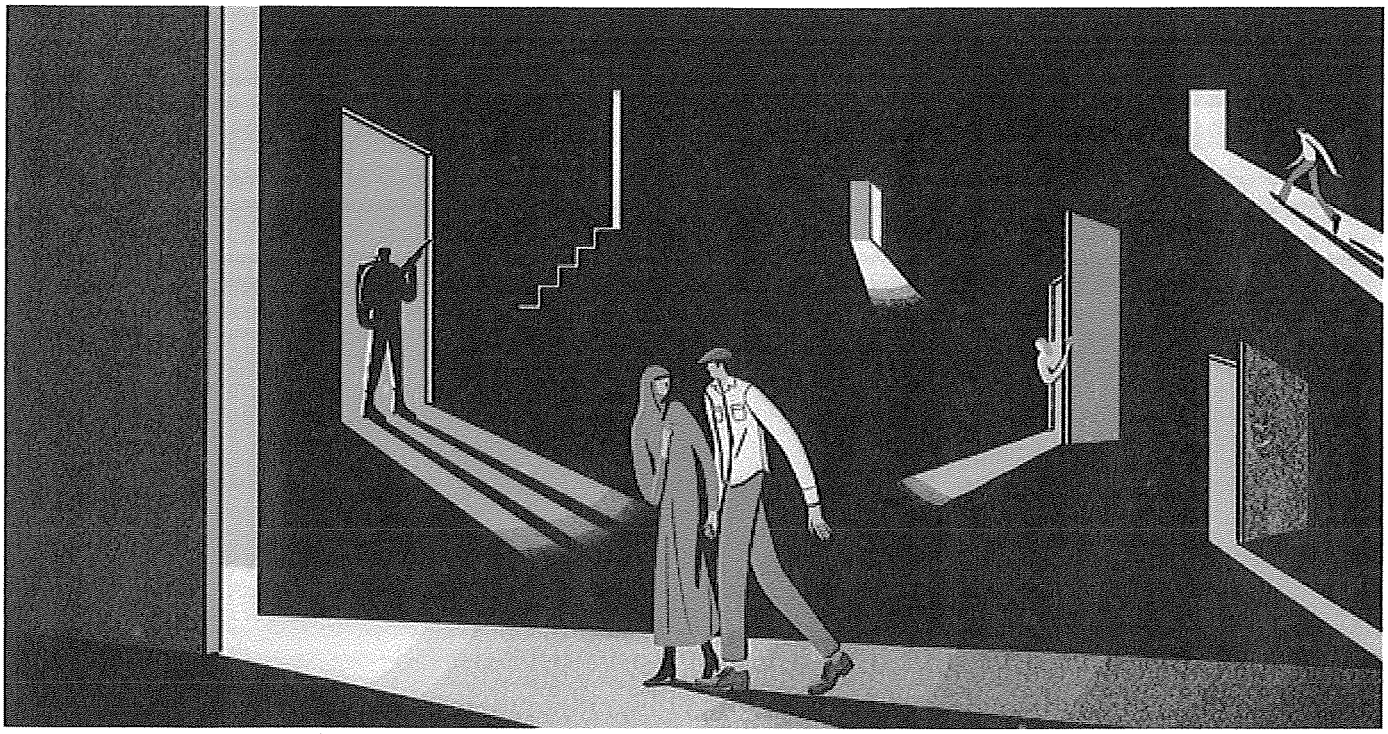
THE NEW YORKER

A NOVEL ABOUT REFUGEES THAT FEELS INSTANTLY CANONICAL

By Jia Tolentino March 10, 2017



In "Exit West," Mohsin Hamid rewrites the world as a place gorgeously, permanently overrun by migrants.
ILLUSTRATION BY JUN CEN

Refugee stories often focus on transit, for obvious reasons. Children travel thousands of miles unaccompanied, hiding in train stations and surviving on wild fruit; men are beaten, jailed, and swindled just for the chance to make it on a boat that, if it doesn't capsize and kill them, will allow them to try their luck in other dangerous seas. But in his new novel, "Exit West," Mohsin Hamid, the author of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" and "How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia," tells a story about migration in which the refugee's journey is compressed into an instant. (An excerpt from the novel ran in this magazine.) In the world of "Exit West," migration doesn't involve rubber rafts or bloodied feet but, rather, "doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away."

When the novel opens, rumors of those doors have started circulating in a nameless, besieged country, where Saeed and Nadia, the book's protagonists, live. They reside, at first, in an ordinary world. "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her," the book begins. The novel's sentences tend toward the long and orotund: "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class—in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding—but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are puttering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does." That last phrase is a statement of purpose for both migration and romance. This is a love story, too.

Saaed and Nadia fall for each other slowly, and then all of a sudden. War speeds up their courtship, the way it seems to hasten everything; on the eroding façade of Saeed's building, the rocket fire "accelerated time itself, a day's toll outpacing that of a decade." When the pair first speak about foreign places, on a secretive date at a Chinese restaurant, they imagine taking vacations to Cuba, or Chile, to deserts with "stars like a splash of milk in the sky." Nadia wears a full-length black robe, "so men don't fuck with me," she explains to Saeed, surprising him. She drops another black robe from her window to him, so that he can pass as her sister and enter her apartment. They smoke joints on their dates and text each other during work; one day, they do mushrooms that Nadia orders over the Internet. Meanwhile, "a group of militants was taking over the city's stock exchange." After Internet and cell-phone service abruptly vanish, there's a run in the city on supplies and cash. Saeed comes to Nadia's apartment with kerosene, matches, candles, and chlorine tablets. "I couldn't find flowers," he tells her.

Hamid draws enchantment from abstraction, in the style of a fairy tale, and his narrative vantage point shifts through time and space with a godlike equanimity. In one paragraph, he describes helicopters containing militant soldiers that "fanned out above the city in the reddening dusk . . . chopping, chopping through the heavens. Saeed watched them with his parents from their balcony. Nadia watched them from her rooftop, alone. Through an open door, a young soldier looked down upon their city. . . . The din around him was incredible, and his belly lurched as he swerved." Hamid, through this roaming narration, gently diminishes Saeed and Nadia, freeing them from

the burden of speaking for the millions who share their condition. They seem like the focal point of "Exit West," rather than its center, even though they're the only characters who are given names.

When the city reaches emergency conditions—raids, lockdowns, windows shattered by bullets—Saeed and Nadia seek out the mystical doors. An agent who speaks in whispers, like "a poet or a psychopath," guides them. "They knew there was a possibility this was the final afternoon of their lives," Hamid writes. They squeeze themselves through darkness and arrive in Greece, where they find a camp of refugees whose skin tones range from "dark chocolate to milky tea." Safe at last, they witness fatigue and bitterness in each other for the first time. (I kept thinking about how, in a different sort of novel, these glimpses might provide the impetus for the entire book.) They learn that the doors have become a global system of exit and entry. The "doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured."

Throughout Saeed and Nadia's story, Hamid intersperses vignettes of magic-realist migration, in which the circumstances and desires that govern the outcome of each crossing are as unpredictable as the trickster doors themselves. An old man from Brazil crosses to Amsterdam, meets another old man, and wordlessly falls in love. While contemplating suicide, a man in England comes across a portal to Namibia, where he remakes his life. A man sees two Filipino girls emerge in Tokyo, and follows them, "fingering the metal in his pocket as he went." When refugees emerge from doors in San Diego, an elderly veteran asks the police if he can be of assistance; they ask him to leave, and the veteran realizes that he, like the migrants, doesn't have anywhere to go.

There is, in "Exit West," constant underlying movement, and a sense that intrinsic laws of moral physics are at work. In a recent interview, Hamid noted that the current political paralysis in America and Europe could be attributed, at least partially, to our denial of the reality of mass migration. "The more that people who are economically freezing and precarious become aware of places where people are economically warmer and more safe, the more they want to move," he said, adding, "We need to figure out how to build a vision for this coming reality that isn't a disaster, that is humane and even inspiring." In "Exit West," Hamid rewrites the world as a place thoroughly, gorgeously, and permanently overrun by refugees and migrants, its boundaries

reconfigured so that "the only divisions that mattered now were between those who sought the right of passage and those who would deny them passage." He doesn't flinch from the mess and anger that come from redistribution and accommodation—but, still, he depicts the world as resolutely beautiful and, at its core, unchanged.

The novel feels immediately canonical, so firm and unerring is Hamid's understanding of our time and its most pressing questions. Whom are we prepared to leave behind in our own pursuit of happiness? Whom are we able to care for, whom are we willing to care for, and why are our answers to those questions so rarely the same? At one point, Saeed points out to Nadia that millions of refugees previously came to their own native country, "when there were wars nearby." Nadia replies, "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose." Comfort, she knows, can anesthetize one against concern for others. When a door leads Nadia to a beautiful house with a fine bathroom, the towels are "so plush and fine that when she emerged she felt like a princess using them, or at least like the daughter of a dictator who was willing to kill without mercy in order for his children to pamper themselves with cotton such as this." Hamid exempts no one from the cruelty that shadows contemporary life. At the end of a long sentence, just before Saeed and Nadia leave their home country, he writes that "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind."

Jia Tolentino is a staff writer at The New Yorker. Her first book, the essay collection "Trick Mirror," will be published in August. Read more »

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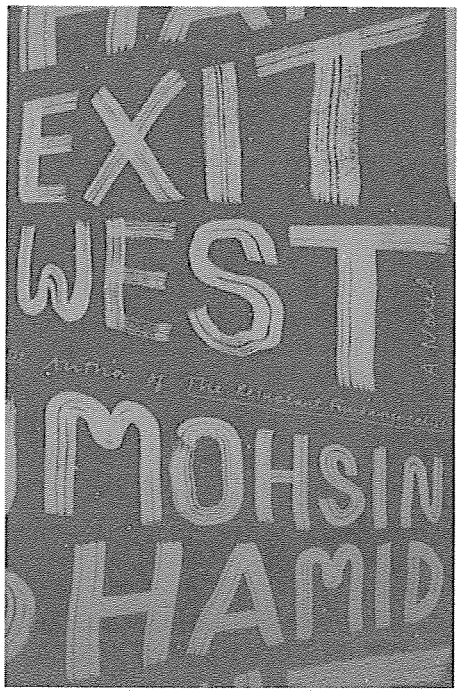
Escaping A World On Fire In 'Exit West'

March 1, 2017 · 7:00 AM ET

MICHAEL SCHAUB



Exit West

by Mohsin Hamid

Hardcover, 240 pages

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Despite what you may hear from alarmists, it's not easy for refugees to get to the United States — or really anywhere, for that matter. If they're even able to escape their own country, they face constant roadblocks and long waiting lists before they're able to establish themselves, however precariously, in another country. There are no magic doorways they can walk through that will just bring them to another land.

But what if there were? That's the question Mohsin Hamid poses in his haunting new book, *Exit West*. The fourth novel from the Pakistani-born author is at once a love story, a fable, and a chilling reflection on what it means to be displaced, unable to return home and unwelcome anywhere else.

The novel takes place in modern times — smartphones are mentioned more than once — in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war." Occasional skirmishes mean the residents are wary, but for the most part, people go about their business — including Saeed and Nadia, two young people who are classmates at a night business school.

The two befriend each other, and start spending time together, sharing meals, listening to music, smoking pot. It doesn't take long for Saeed to fall for the mysterious Nadia, who shuns religion even as she wears a black robe to conceal her body: "Saeed was certain he was in love. Nadia was not certain what exactly she was feeling, but she was certain it had force."

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Mohsin Hamid and 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'

But the situation in their city deteriorates. Tensions between the government and an outside group of religious radicals increase, and soon the rebels have essentially taken over the town, with refugees from the countryside trapped in the crossfire in the city streets. The radicals waste no time dispensing their harsh brand of justice: "The executions moved in waves," Hamid writes, "and once a neighborhood had been purged it could then expect a measure of respite, until someone committed an infraction of some kind, because infractions, although often alleged with a degree of randomness, were invariably punished without mercy."

After someone Saeed loves is killed, he and Nadia start investigating rumors they've heard about mysterious "doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this deathtrap of a country." They find a man who promises to escort them to one, and seconds after they step through it, they find themselves on a Greek island with fellow refugees from all over the world. It's a better existence than the one they had in their home country, but they grow restless, going through door after door, from Europe to North America, before they're ready to settle down.

Hamid does an excellent job portraying the relationship between Saeed and Nadia. It's a complicated one — they happened upon each other just before their world caught fire, and the nature of their friendship is fluid, and affected by Saeed's growing need to pray, to make some sense of what has happened to him and his family.

> "... he captures the feeling of being displaced beautifully — this is the best writing of Hamid's career.
>
> Michael Schaub

And he captures the feeling of being displaced beautifully — this is the best writing of Hamid's career. The novel is poetic, full of long, flowing sentences. Consider this excerpt about Hamid's increasing religious belief: "When he prayed he touched his

parents, who could not otherwise be touched, and he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who came after us and love us, and this loss unites humanity, unites every human being."

It's hard not to be in awe of writing like that, and Hamid somehow makes it look easy. There's not a wasted word in *Exit West*; every one is considered carefully. This makes every sentence hit hard — the writing makes it hard to put down, but readers will find themselves going back and savoring each paragraph several times before moving on. He's that good.

It's a breathtaking novel by one of the world's most fascinating young writers, and it arrives at an urgent time. Hamid encourages to us to put ourselves in the shoes of others, even when they've lived lives much harder than anything we've endured. We have nothing in common except the most essential things, the things that make us human — as Hamid writes, "We are all migrants through time."

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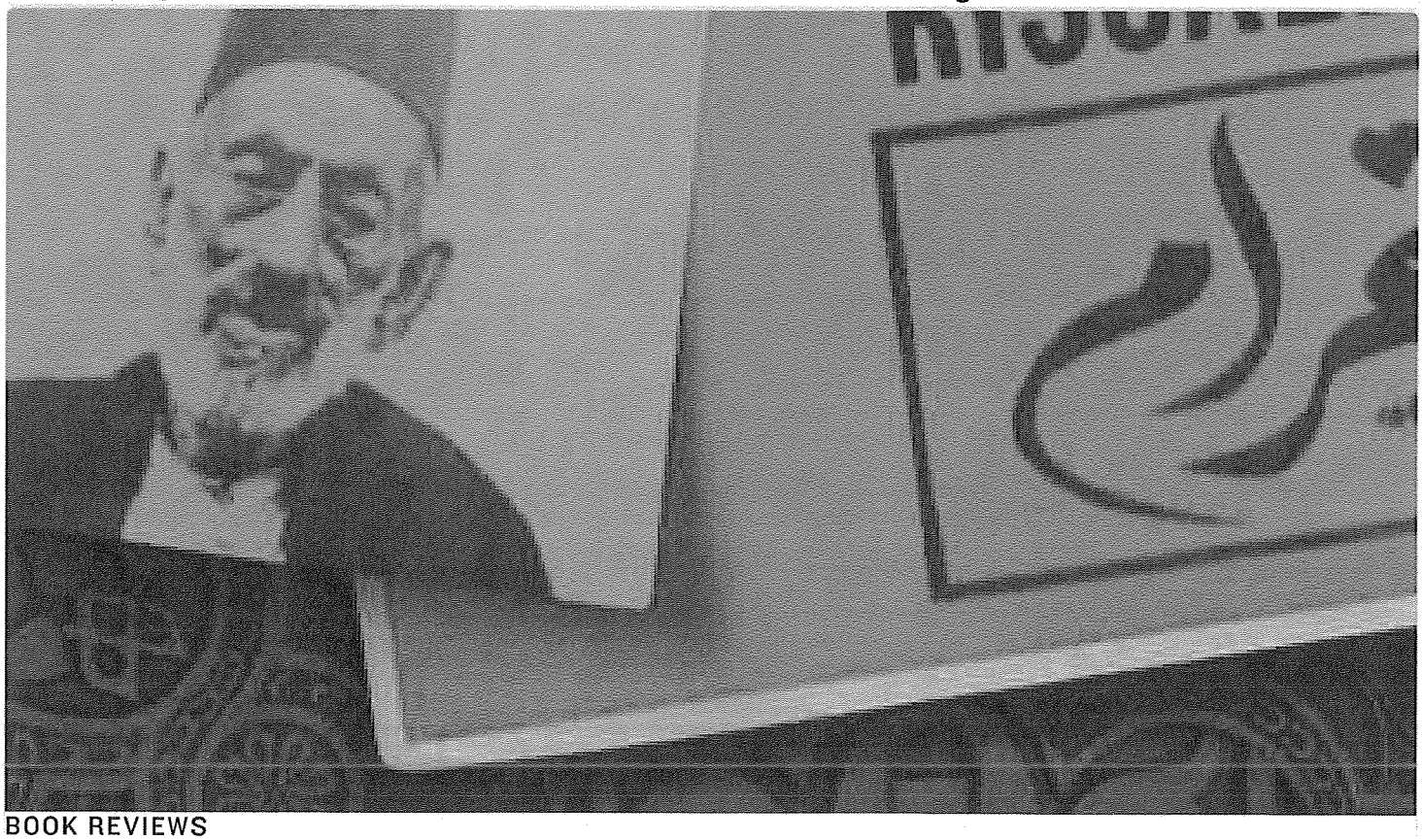

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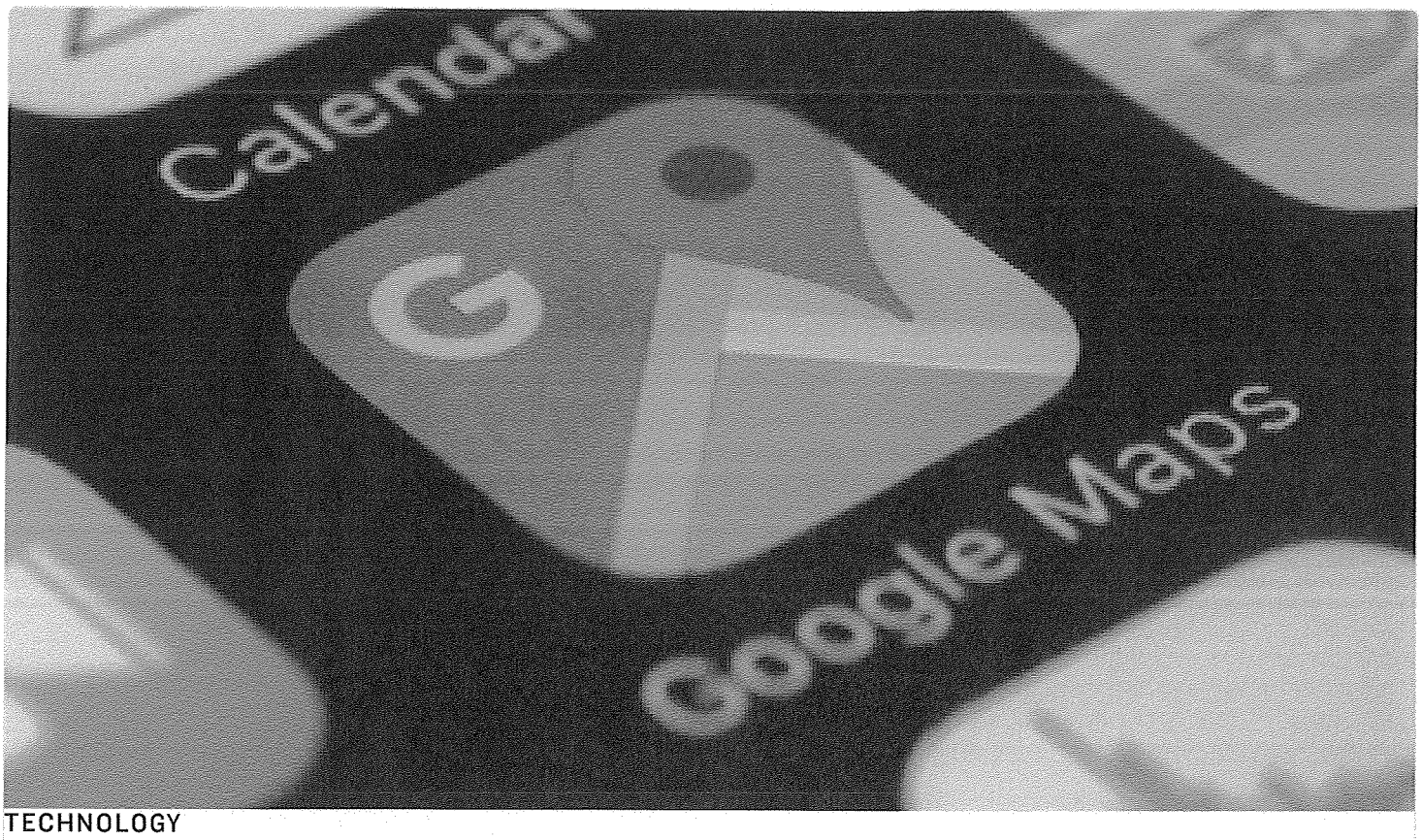

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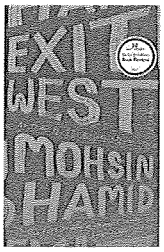

Exit West Reader's Guide

BY MOHSIN HAMID

Category: Literary Fiction

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READERS GUIDE

Discussion Questions for *Exit West*

1. "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class . . . but that is the way of things, with cities as with life," the narrator states at the beginning of *Exit West.* In what ways do Saeed and Nadia preserve a semblance of a daily routine throughout the novel? Why do you think this—and pleasures like weed, records, sex, the rare hot shower—becomes so important to them?

2"Location, location, location, the realtors say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians." What do you think the narrator means by this? Does he take a side? What about the novel as a whole?

3. Early in *Exit West,* Saeed's family spends a pleasant evening outside with their telescope, until "the sound of automatic gunfire, flat cracks that were not loud and yet carried to them cleanly. They sat a little longer. Then Saeed's mother suggested they return inside." How do we see the city changing around Saeed and his family? What effect does the subtle acceleration of violence have on the reader? On the novel itself?

4. What function do the doors serve, physically and emotionally, in the novel? Why do you think Hamid chose to include this speculative, fantastical element in an otherwise very "realistic" world?

5. In an interview with *Paste* magazine, Hamid says, "It's strange to say, but I really believe in these doors. . . . I think the doors exist in our world, just not the physical manifestation that I've given them [in the novel]." What do you think he means? Contrast this with the way he writes about technology in *Exit West*, as in this passage about smart phones: "In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out

SEARCH 0

an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be."

6. When it becomes clear that Nadia and Saeed will need to flee their city, Saeed is most fearful over leaving behind his family, his friends, the only home he's ever known, while Nadia is most concerned about the possibility of losing her autonomy, of being forced to rely on the uncertain mercy of others, of being "caged in pens like vermin." Why do you think their respective fears are so radically different? What do these fears say about them as characters, and in relation to each other?

7. The city where Nadia and Saeed live and from which they flee is unnamed, the only unnamed location in the book. Why do you think that is? What effect does this omission have on the reader?

8. "War in Saeed and Nadia's city revealed itself to be an intimate experience," the narrator states. In what ways are violence and intimacy linked throughout the novel? How does violence bring Saeed and Nadia together? How do you think their relationship might have evolved if their city had never been under siege?

9. Saeed tells Nadia, "'The end of the world can be cozy at times.' She laughed. 'Yes. Like a cave.'" What purpose does humor serve in a book like this?

10. With regard to her changing neighborhood, the old woman in Palo Alto muses, "When she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants through time." What do you think she means?

11. Do you think *Exit West* is a hopeful book? Why or why not?

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Exit West (Hamid)

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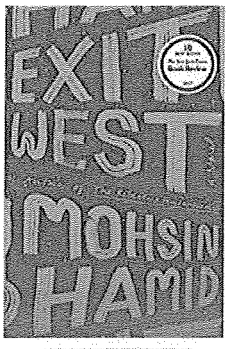
Exit West
Mohsin Hamid, 2017
Penguin Publishing
240 pp.ref
ISBN-13: 9780735212176



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Summary

Shortlisted, 2017 Man Booker Prize

An astonishingly visionary love story that imagines the forces that drive ordinary people from their homes into the uncertain embrace of new lands.

In a country teetering on the brink of civil war, two young people meet—sensual, fiercely independent Nadia and gentle, restrained Saeed. They embark on a furtive love affair, and are soon cloistered in a premature intimacy by the unrest roiling their city.

When it explodes, turning familiar streets into a patchwork of checkpoints and bomb blasts, they begin to hear whispers about doors—doors that can whisk people far away, if perilously and for a price. As the violence escalates, Nadia and Saeed decide that they no longer have a choice. Leaving their homeland and their old lives behind, they find a door and step through.

Exit West follows these remarkable characters as they emerge into an alien and uncertain future, struggling to hold on to each other, to their past, to the very sense of who they are. Profoundly intimate and powerfully inventive, it tells an unforgettable story of love, loyalty, and courage that is both completely of our time and for all time. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1971
- Where—Lahore, Pakistan
- Education—B.A., Princeton University; J.D., Harvard University
- Awards—Anisfield-Wolf Book Award; Asian American Literary Award
- Currently—lives in Lahore, Pakistan; London, England, UK; New York, NY, USA

Mohsin Hamid is a British Pakistani novelist and writer. His novels are *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

(2013), and *Exit West* (2017).

Early life and education

Hamid spent part of his childhood in the United States, where he stayed from the age of 3 to 9 while his father, a university professor, was enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Stanford University. He then moved with his family back to Lahore, Pakistan, and attended the Lahore American School.

At the age of 18, Hamid returned to the U.S. to continue his education. He graduated from Princeton University summa cum laude in 1993, having studied under the writers Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison. Hamid wrote the first draft of his first novel for a fiction workshop taught by Morrison. He returned to Pakistan after college to continue working on it.

Hamid then attended Harvard Law School, graduating in 1997. Finding corporate law boring, he repaid his student loans by working for several years as a management consultant at McKinsey & Company in New York City. He was allowed to take three months off each year to write, and he used this time to complete his first novel *Moth Smoke*.

Works

Hamid moved to London in the summer of 2001, initially intending to stay only one year. Although he frequently returned to Pakistan to write, he continued to live in London for eight years, becoming a dual citizen of the United Kingdom in 2006.

Moth Smoke, tells the story of a marijuana-smoking ex-banker in post-nuclear-test Lahore who falls in love with his best friend's wife and becomes a heroin addict. Published in 2000, it quickly became a cult hit in Pakistan and India. It was also a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award given to the best first novel in the US, and was adapted for television in Pakistan and as an operetta in Italy.

His second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, told the story of a Pakistani man who decides to leave his high-flying life in America after a failed love affair and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It was published in 2007 and became a million-copy international best seller, reaching No.4 on the *New York Times Best Seller* list. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, won several awards including the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Asian American Literary Award, and was translated into over 25 languages. *The Guardian* selected it as one of the books that defined the decade.

Like *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was formally experimental. The novel used the unusual device of a dramatic monologue in which the Pakistani protagonist continually addresses an American listener who is never heard from directly. (Hamid has said *The Fall* by Albert Camus served as his model.)

His third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, was excerpted by *The New Yorker* in their September 24, 2012 issue and by *Granta* in their Spring 2013 issue.

As with his previous books, it bends conventions of both genre and form. Narrated in the second person, it tells the story of the protagonist's ("your") journey from impoverished rural boy to tycoon in an unnamed contemporary city in "rising Asia," and of his pursuit of the nameless "pretty girl" whose path continually crosses but never quite converges with his. Stealing its shape from the self-help books devoured by ambitious youths all over "rising Asia," the novel is playful but also quite profound in its portrayal of the thirst for ambition and love in a time of shattering economic and social upheaval. In her *New York Times* review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani called it "deeply moving," writing that *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* "reaffirms [Hamid's] place as one of his generation's most inventive and gifted writers."

Hamid's 2017 novel, *Exit West*, is about a young couple, Nadia and Saeed, and their relationship in a time where the world is taken by storm by migrants.

Hamid has also written on politics, art, literature, travel, and other topics, most recently on Pakistan's internal division and extremism in an op-ed for the *New York Times*. His journalism, essays, and stories have appeared in *Time, The Guardian, Dawn, New York Times, Washington Post, International Herald Tribune, Paris Review*, and other publications. In 2013 he was named one of the world's 100 Leading Global Thinkers by *Foreign Policy* magazine.

Personal life

Hamid moved to Lahore in 2009 with his wife Zahra and their daughter Dina. He now divides his time between Pakistan and abroad, living between Lahore, New York, London, and Mediterranean countries including Italy and Greece. Hamid has described himself as a "mongrel" and has said of his own writing that "a novel can often be a divided man's conversation with himself." (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 3/17/2017.*)

Book Reviews

In spare, crystalline prose, Hamid conveys the experience of living in a city under siege with sharp, stabbing immediacy. He shows just how swiftly ordinary life — with all its banal rituals and routines — can morph into the defensive crouch of life in a war zone...[and] how insidiously violence alters the calculus of daily life.... By mixing the real and the surreal, and using old fairy-tale magic, Hamid has created a fictional universe that captures the global perils percolating beneath today's headlines.
Michiko Kakutani - New York Times

Hamid exploits fiction's capacity to elicit empathy and identification to imagine a better world. It is also a possible world. *Exit West* does not lead to utopia, but to a near future and the dim shapes of strangers that we can see through a distant doorway. All we have to do is step through it and meet them.
Viet Thanh Nguyen - New York Times Book Review (*cover*)

No novel is really about the cliche called "the human condition," but good novels expose and interpret the particular condition of the humans in their charge, and this is what Hamid has achieved here. If in its physical and perilous immediacy Nadia and Saeed's condition is alien to the mass of us, *Exit West* makes a final, certain declaration of affinity: "We are all migrants through time."
Washington Post

In gossamer-fine sentences, *Exit West* weaves a pulse-raising tale of menace and romance, a parable of our refugee crisis, and a poignant vignette of love won and lost.... Let the word go forth: Hamid has written his most lyrical and piercing novel yet, destined to be one of this year's landmark achievements.
Minneapolis Star Tribune

Hamid doesn't avoid or sugarcoat the heartache and hurt accompanying contradiction and change, as people "all over the world were slipping away from where they had been." But he also has the courage to...see change as an opportunity.
Milwaukee-Wisconsin Journal Sentinel

With great empathy, Hamid skillfully chronicles the manic condition of involuntary migration... *Exit West* rattles our perception of home.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

A dark fable for our turbulent time, *Exit West*...portrays a world of transience, violence, and insecurity that rhymes with our world of porous borders and rabid tribalists.
Dallas Morning News

Hamid rewrites the world as a place thoroughly, gorgeously, and permanently overrun by refugees and migrants.... But, still, he depicts the world as resolutely beautiful and, at its core, unchanged. The novel feels immediately canonical, so firm and unerring is Hamid's understanding of our time and its most pressing questions.
NewYorker.com

A remarkable accomplishment...not putting a human face on refugees so much as putting a refugee face on all of humankind.... Hamid's writing—elegant and fluid...—makes *Exit West* an absorbing read, but the ideas he expresses and the future he's bold enough to imagine define it as an unmissable one.
Atlantic

Hamid's timely and spare new novel confronts the inevitability of mass global

immigration, the unbroken cycle of violence and the indomitable human will to connect and love.
Huffington Post

Hamid's storytelling is stripped down, and the book's sweeping allegory is timely and resonant. Of particular importance is the contrast between the migrants' tenuous daily reality and that of the privileged second- or third-generation native population who'd prefer their new alien neighbors to simply disappear.
Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Both mellifluous and jarring, this novel is a profound meditation on the unpredictable temporality of human existence and the immeasurable cost of widespread enmity. *—Terry Hong, Smithsonian BookDragon, Washington, DC*
Library Journal

(*Starred review.*) [A] richly imaginative tale of love and loss in the ashes of civil war. ... One of the most bittersweet love stories in modern memory and a book to savor even while despairing of its truths.
Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, please use our LitLovers talking points to start a discussion for Exit West*...then take off on your own*:

1. In what way does war distort everyday life for those who live in its midst? How does Mohsin Hamid convey the fear of truck bombs and snipers, armed checkpoints and surveillance drones? What effect does it have on the people who live through it? Have you ever lived in a war zone?

2. Describe Nadia and Saeed, their outward personalities and inner thoughts. Nadia is more driven, perhaps, while Saeed is more introspective. What attracts them to one another?

3. After the two leave home, they end up in a makeshift refugee camp. Talk about what that was like?

4. In the couple's attempts to immigrate to other countries and other continents, Hamid writes, "It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born." What do you think he means?

5. Why do you think the author uses the device of a magical door, almost as if purposely recalling C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*? In what way

is crossing territories, always under threat of thirst, punishing heat and sun, or frigid nights, comparable to stepping through a magic door?

6. Saeed continues to pray. What is he praying for? What does he believe prayer is about?

7. How does the hardship of exile change Saeed? How does it change Nadia, who seems more adaptable? Most of all, how does it test—and ultimately change—their relationship?

8. The primary story of Nadia and Saeed is interrupted with stories of threats and travails in other corners of the world. For what purpose might Hamid have interjected those brief scenarios?

9. How does each new home they settle in receive the couple? How are they made to feel? How well do they blend in to the existing cultures and population?

10. What does one of the book's final declarations mean: "We are all migrants through time."

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