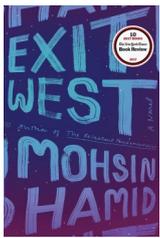


Exit West



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Several books use the concept of a magical door to provide characters entry into other worlds, or to better places in this one. *Exit West*, a timely novel about refugees by Man Booker Prize winner Mohsin Hamid, employs this device?but because of the power of his plotting and beauty of his prose, it's highly believable.

The novel begins when a young man, Saeed, meets Nadia in an adult evening class in an unnamed country at some point in the near future. Civil war wracks the country; terrorists and militants roam the streets.

In a brave moment Saeed invites Nadia for coffee, but?not pushing his luck?only to the cafeteria in their school building. From Nadia?s long black burka, he assumes she is fervently Islamic. She tells him, however, that she's not religious, and only dresses this way to protect herself from harassment by men. Unlike most young women of this city, Nadia drives a motorcycle and lives alone in an apartment. Soon Saeed visits, by climbing the steps past her landlady wearing her burka.

As love blossoms between Saeed and Nadia, the city erupts into more chaos: terrorist bombings kill some of their relatives, their bosses flee or disappear, and soon they don?t have the distraction of work to fill their days. Because the streets have become extremely risky, Nadia moves in with Saeed?s family, where his father soon calls her ?Daughter? and she calls him ?Father.?

The militants can enter the home any time, demand papers, and search for items they?ve deemed immoral. Nadia hides her record player deep in Saeed?s old room, and in the soil of a dead lemon tree, she buries her money. Hoping the tree will bloom again, they place it on the balcony, which used to be a great place to watch the street life below, but is now in a direct line for rifle shots.

About this time, the two hear rumors of secret doors that allow people to emigrate. They buy passage for themselves and Saeed's father from an agent, who may be so named because he helps with travel?or because he arranges illegal exits. At first they fear they've thrown their money away, but then they receive a message directing them to be prepared to leave the very next day.

Their exodus begins with the Greek island of Mykonos, where thousands of refugees fill myriad camps offering abysmal living conditions. Through luck and friendship, they ?buy? passage to another door and arrive in London, a city also transformed by refugees.

With *Exit West*, Hamid's own experiences as an emigré give his writing a rich authenticity?he knows how it feels to be an overwhelmed foreigner of color in a new place. The book explores the ties of family, religion, and nationality, and how easily these can unravel in a world divided by violence and hate. A thoughtful, memorable read that celebrates life despite war and hardships.

Posted by Dory L. on June 14, 2017

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