

Snow (review)

Snowa novel, by Orhan Pamuk

Reviewed by Charles Strohmer

In his aesthetic masterwork *The Little Drummer Girl*, acclaimed novelist John LeCarré lures the British actress Charlie, his main character, from the London stage into the violence and intrigue of Middle East terrorism ? you'll have a part in "the theater of the real" is the way Charlie's Israeli intelligence handler puts it to her. The novel itself is superior layered theater. *Snow*, by Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk is remarkable theater in its own way.

Many are the books today about Islam and the West, but *Snow* as novel takes us into that play of religion and secularism in a way that nonfiction "issue" books cannot possibly do. *Snow* as art invites readers into the world of conflicting impulses, tormented loves, and even farcical actions that can emerge from the warring values residing within individuals caught in the bitter and very real theater of today's collision between Western ideals and Islamic extremism. Pamuk, a Turkish writer and recipient of international literary awards, most recently for his previous novel *My Name is Red*, sits his readers down to this compelling drama during a three-day period in the life of the poet Ka, who has just returned from twelve years of political exile in Frankfurt to the remote Turkish town of Kars, the home of his cultured, middle-class youth. *Snow* as novel takes us into that play of religion and secularism in a way that nonfiction "issue" books cannot possibly do

Many are the threads of *Snow's* absorbing plot. Hoping for an anodyne solution to a long and depressing period in which poems have quit coming to him in Germany, Ka has accepted an assignment as a journalist to go to Kars to write about a wave of suicides by teenage girls forbidden to wear their head scarves at school. He arrives by bus at the start of a blinding 3-day snowstorm, which quickly seals Kars off from the Western world that is Ka's frame of reference. But it's the possibility for love, we learn, which is Ka's real motivation for accepting this assignment, for in Kars there lives the beautiful Ipek, a recently divorced friend of Ka's youth, and he has gone to boldly and abruptly declare his love (read: obsession).

The elation of romance is matched, if not surpassed, by the happiness Ka finds when a flurry of poems suddenly begin accumulating in his notebook. Nineteen in all over the three days, poems which Ka finds upon reflection to be organized around the "mysterious underlying structure" of a snowflake. But neither romance nor poetry can save Ka from a personal crisis of faith that becomes as disorienting as the city itself becomes in the play between religious radicals and secularists.

Ka's crisis of faith touches not only in his romance with Ipek but also his encounters with her sister, a political Islamist, the police, and many of the town's odd and zany characters, poverty-stricken families, and militant religious and secular groups. There's Nicep, a curious irony of religious student wanting to become the world's first Islamic sci-fi writer, who tells Ka that because Ka is of the intelligentsia he will never become a believer in God. There's the mysterious, charismatic Blue (outlaw? terrorist?), who is in hiding. In one of Ka's long conversations with Blue, in which Ka reasons that surely God must be the source of the happiness he is now experiencing through the new poems, Blue replies: "I don't want to destroy your illusions, but your love for God comes out of Western romantic novels... And know this: People who seek only happiness never find it." And know this: People who seek only happiness never find it

And in what is central to the novel, Ka, through the forceful personality of the famous actor and playwright Sunay Zaim, finds himself becoming the pawn of a leftist theater troupe. In collusion with a military determined to restrain local Islamist radicals, Zaim pulls off a bloody coup during a theater production in which gunshots ring out in a packed house. The intrigue that follows sets in motion events that endanger Ka's life, and it is only after Kars reopens to the West, when the snow finally ends and the roads are cleared, that we discover the end of his bid for love and happiness.

Like trying to understand a mystery inside an enigma is the Western mind facing Islam. This short review can't even begin to touch upon the sympathies, cognitive dissonance, and conversational insights that the elaborate *Snow* offers into the religious-secular play of tensions and contradictions that exist in the lives of many Muslims and which its author opens Western readers to. By its very

nature, art is invitational. It says: here's a ticket to some insights within a world you're not familiar with. Accept this invitation. You won't be disappointed. But, as LeCarré's Charlie learned, you might find some roles, including your own in the theater of the real, disturbing.

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