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Exit West: A Novel



Synopsis

Longlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize “It was as if Hamid knew what was going to happen to America and the world, and gave us a road map to our future” At once terrifying and oddly hopeful. • Ayelet Waldman, The New York Times Book Review “Moving, audacious, and indelibly human.” • Entertainment Weekly, “A breathtaking novel [that] arrives at an urgent time.” • NPR.org As featured in the Skimm, on Late Night with Seth Meyers, Fresh Air, PBS Newshour, the cover of the New York Times Book Review, and more, 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of March 2017: When Nadia and Saeed fall in love in a distant unnamed city, they are just like any other young couple. But soon bullets begin to fly, fighter jets streak the sky, and curfews fall. As the spell of violence spreads, they flee their country, leaving behind their loved ones. Early in *Exit West*, the author Mohsin Hamid explains that geography is destiny, and in the case of his two young lovers, geography dictates that they must leave. Hamid offers up a fantastical device to deliver his refugees to places: they pass through magic doors. Rather than unmooring the story from reality, this device, as well as a few other fantastical touches, makes the book more poignant and focused, pointing our attention to the emotions of exile rather than the mechanics. Surrounded by other refugees, Nadia and Saeed try to establish their places in the world, putting up different responses to their circumstances. The result is a novel that is personal, not pedantic, an intimate human story about an experience shared by countless people of the world, one that most Americans just witness on television. --Chris Schluep , The Book Review

“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, The New York Times Book Review (cover)

“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

“Lyrical and urgent, the globalist novel evokes the dreams and disillusionments that follow Saeed and Nadia, and peels away the dross of bigotry to expose the beauty of our common humanity.” • Oprah Magazine

“A beautiful and very detailed look at what it means to be an immigrant. An incredible book.” • Sarah Jessica Parker on Read it Forward

“A little like the eerily significant Margaret Atwood novel, this love story amid the rubble of violence, uncertainty, and modernity feels at once otherworldly and all too real.” • New York Magazine

“The Strategist” This is the best writing of Hamid’s career. Readers will find themselves going back and savoring each paragraph several times before moving on. He’s that good.

Breathtaking. NPR.org “Nearly every page reflects the tangible impact of life during wartime not just the blood and gunsmoke of daily bombardments, but the quieter collateral damage that seeps in. The true magic of [Exit West] is how it manages to render it all in a narrative so moving, audacious, and indelibly human. Entertainment Weekly, “A rating “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. “ New Yorker.com “No novel is really about the cliché 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 “Brilliant | Its intelligently deployed surreal elements are also the best examples I’ve seen lately of how the nonrealistic is sometimes the best way to depict how an experience feels, as opposed to just the facts of what it is. “ Vulture “Skillful and panoramic from the outset... [A] meticulously crafted, ambitious story of many layers, many geopolitical realities, many lives and circumstances... Here is the world, he seems to be saying, the direction we’re hurtling in. How are we going to mitigate the damage we’ve done? “ The New York Review of Books “Like the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, but set in the real world. You’ll be hearing about it, so get into it now. • Spellbinding. “ BuzzFeed “A short, urgent missive in which each detail gleams with authorial intent.... Exit West is lit with hope. Hamid has said that “part of the great political crisis we face in the world today is a failure to imagine plausible desirable futures, and that “fiction can imagine differently. “ Exit West does so, and beautifully. May Hamid’s hopes turn out to be as prescient as his concerns already are.” “ San Francisco Chronicle “[An] ambitious and far-roaming tale of migration and adventure | which feels like something quite new. “ The New Republic “Hamid graphically explores a fundamental and important ontological question: Is it possible for us to conceive of ourselves at all, except in juxtaposition to an “other”?... What is remarkable about Hamid’s narrative is that war is not, in fact, able to marginalize the “precious mundanity of

everyday life. Instead — and herein lies Hamid's genius as a storyteller — the mundanity, the minor joys of life, like bringing flowers to a lover, smoking a joint, and looking at stars, compete with the horrors of war.

— Los Angeles Times

"In an era when powerful ruling groups — often in the minority — are gripped by a sense of religious and ethnic nativism, Mohsin offers these two, the millions they represent, and us, comfort: that plausible, desirable futures can be imagined, that new tribes may be formed, and that life will go on... If we are looking for the story of our time, one that can project a future that is both more bleak and more hopeful than that which we can yet envision, this novel is faultless.

— Boston Globe

"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

"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.

— The Atlantic

"Terrifying, hopeful, and all too relevant."

— People Magazine

"A thoughtful, beautifully crafted work that emphasizes above all the ordinariness and humanity of people who become refugees... Its language and ideas might have a particular resonance today, but they would be worth reading at any time."

— Vox

"It was as if Hamid knew what was going to happen to America and the world, and gave us a road map to our future.

— This book blew the top off my head. It's at once terrifying and, in the end, oddly hopeful.

— Ayelet Waldman, New York Times Book Review

"Brilliant — [Hamid] highlights the stark reality of the refugee experience and the universal struggle of dislocation.

— Newsday

"If there is one book everyone should read ASAP, it is Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*... Short, unsentimental, deeply intimate, and so very powerful."

— Goop

"Spare and haunting, it's magical realism meets the all-too-real.

— W Magazine

"With great empathy, Hamid skillfully chronicles the manic condition of involuntary migration — *Exit West* rattles our perception of home.

— St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Taut but haunting.

— Vanity Fair

"Powerfully evokes the violence and anxiety of lives

lived under the drone-crossed sky. •Time Magazine
“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 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
“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
“Reading Mohsin Hamid’s penetrating, prescient new novel feels like bearing witness to events that are unfolding before us in real time.” •Seattle Times
“I have not been this emotionally moved by a book in years. By the end I was in tears and had to sit still for a bit to reflect. This timeless and timely love story is one we need; right now and forever. •Sarah Bagby, KMUW Wichita
“A great romance that is also a story of refugees; this couldn’t be more timely. •Flavorwire
“Exit West is a compelling read that will make you think about the times we are living in right now. •PopSugar
“A sly and intelligent book, written with Hamid’s extraordinary eye for character—their desires, hopes, grudges, and disappointments—all those faulty human things—that keep us alive and make us real. But what truly sets the book apart, both in Hamid’s oeuvre and contemporary fiction, is its warmth and generosity to its readers—something we need more of from books in our morally exhausting times. •Guernica
“Timely and original. •Business Insider
“Beautiful.” •The Rumpus
“Urgent and much needed—an antidote of sorts (one can only hope) in this moment of xenophobic fear and mistrust. •Mother Jones
“Eerily prescient. •Joyce Carol Oates, The New Yorker.com
“Brilliant. If you’re numb to the unending talk relating to migration policy, the platitudes and the protest slogans, this book provides a way to reignite much-needed empathy because, above all, Hamid reminds us that no matter how hard governments try, they can never really close doors. •Toronto Star
“A commanding yet fanciful outlook on the current climate of global immigration and international xenophobia, as told through the poignant love story of those caught in between. A beautiful rendering of the lives hidden in the folds of

war. "Every so often, the right author, the right story, and the right moment converge for an altogether perfect reading experience. I'm happy to tell you Mohsin Hamid is that author, Exit West is that story, and this is the moment." Parnassus Musing "While we've permitted ourselves to go soft, we can be thankful for the writers in the rest of the world who continue to write in the tradition of our greatest literary works. No surprise, then, that Mohsin Hamid belongs in that pattern| a writer celebrating the possibility of hope. That's what makes his latest novel so profound. "Counterpunch "Political without being didactic and romantic without being maudlin| Exit West is a richly imaginative work with a firm grip on what is happening to someone somewhere right this minute. "BookPage "[A] thought experiment that pivots on the crucial figure of this century: the migrant| Hamid's cautious, even fastidious prose makes the sudden flashes of social breakdown all the more affecting...Evading the lure of both the utopian and the dystopian, Exit West makes some rough early sketches of the world that must come if we (or is it you?) are to avoid walling out the rest of the human race. "Financial Times "[Quietly exquisite| A masterpiece of humanity and restraint, it is an antidote to the cruelty of a present in which those who leave the places of their birth seeking a better life are routinely demonized, imprisoned or left to die| There's a lightness to the author's lyricism, his every sentence fit to be whispered. It's the language of daydreams, where the deeply desired intermingles with the plainly surreal. "The New York Times "Hamid shows how determination cannot be crushed, that people have hope in desperation, and that their circumstances alter their lives immeasurably. "Winnipeg Free Press "Exit West operates on another plane| Beautiful and poetic even at its most devastating. "Book Riot "Remarkably current and timeless| A haunting and heart-piercing novel that reminds us to be courageous and to handle our shared humanity with great care. This is required reading. "Uli Beutter Cohen, Eye Level "Raw, poetic, and frighteningly prescient. "BBC.com "Spellbinding." "Booklist (starred) "Timely and resonant. "Publisher's Weekly, "Top 10 Most-Anticipated Literary Fiction of 2017 "One of the most bittersweet love stories in modern memory...a book to savor." "Kirkus Reviews "[Heartbreakingly relevant." "Library Journal

Once in a while I come across a novel that makes me wish I were teaching again, a novel that begs for questions and discussion. This is one of those novels. Its brevity belies its complexity. Its characters -- main, minor, fleeting, and implied -- represent humanity as it is today. Its premise, while fanciful, creates the opportunity for readers to wonder if we have the courage to radically change how we view others and the world in which we all live. I read in a review that this is a hopeful novel and initially I was suspicious that a novel centering on the plight of innocent refugees fleeing violence and death could ultimately proffer a hopeful message. But hope there is despite the literal impossibility of its central plot device. The doors are a metaphor; do we have the courage to open them to those with the courage to walk through? Told in a spare but descriptive narrative, Mr. Hamid challenges his readers to open their minds to the possibilities that the future holds.

Exit West is one of those novels that I'm still puzzling over, some time after finishing it. The author makes some interesting choices in terms of technique. So this review is really my reflections up to now rather than a settled opinion. First, Exit West is narrated by an omniscient narrator with a cool, detached voice. This adds to the sense that the events it describes are normal, unsurprising. It tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, who live in an unnamed city in a country on the brink of civil war. Saeed has light stubble and Nadia wears a black robe, at a time when people could still choose what to wear, so these choices meant something. They become involved and in contrast to their appearances, it is Nadia who has broken with expectations by living independently, estranged from her family, while Saeed still lives at home. At first they do the things new couples do. They text incessantly. They use recreational drugs by moonlight. They listen to music and negotiate their attitudes to sex. But the civil war takes first their freedom and then their safety. It seems like the only option is to escape. Saeed and Nadia leave through one of the doors by which refugees leave war zones, generally after handing over money to traffickers. The doors open and close apparently randomly, offering an abrupt dislocation from one place to another. It suggests something magical, without human agency, while the reality is anything but. While Saeed and Nadia's home city is unnamed, the events described feel contemporary and real. However the places where they go after they leave, which are named, known locations, are subtly different, as if we're looking at a possible future or an alternate reality. They are in social upheaval, they are more segregated, even less hopeful than they are now. Then there are vignettes throughout the book interrupting the main narrative, showing immigrants and refugees in other regions suddenly appearing through doors, as

if to remind us that this is happening everywhere, all the time. Saeed and Nadia are well realised characters, at once unique and recognisable. As they leave their home the narrative fragments and their stories become less absorbing. It is as if in becoming refugees, whose main preoccupation is survival, whose choices are circumscribed, they have less time to be psychologically complex and interesting, not only to a reader but perhaps to themselves. So while the story didn't engage me throughout the book, the ideas did, and still do. Exit West challenges you to think in new ways about a familiar issue, to question what you understand when you see generic terms like refugee or migrant applied to millions of individuals, who each has their home, their emotional life, their door, and has to make the decision to take that chance, or not, while they can.*I received a copy of Exit West from the publisher via Netgalley.

Relevance can be a burden, but it doesn't weigh on this novel in the slightest. Yes, the story seems torn from today's headlines. And yes, it addresses key questions about refugees, "natives", community, time and place and on and on and on. All this relevance, however, does not get in the way of an engrossing story, which is the lure that keeps us reading, and reading. Nor does it interfere with the development of the author's characters, vivid people about whom one comes to care intensely. The device of the doors is brilliant, enabling the author to compress his story so that he can concentrate on what matters rather than on bureaucracy. I only wish I had not read (and heard) quite so much about the novel before I actually read it; there are many treasures in this book, and it is best to discover them in the book. And that's enough from me.

I don't do book recommendations. I support writer friends by raising the flag for their books. I'll jump on the accolade train for personal favorites like Max Allan Collins, Algren, McMurtry, McDonald, William Krueger or Brian Freeman. Once a year I send my brother a list of what I liked because I know we like the same things. But I've always been hesitant to say to the world in general: "Read this! It's a story that will help make the world a better place!" But reading Exit West by Mohsin Hamid changed my mind. Because this is a story that matters. To all of us. It's a story of love set in a time of massive migration of refugees, famine, and war torn horror. (Sound familiar?) And whether you are a person who deals with the pain of the millions who have no home by building a wall so they won't get what you have; or a person who feels those cries of the wandering millions in your very bones, or any combination of both fear and sorrow; reading this book will help. Because what this world class writer does is what every great writer has

done since Cervantes scrawled out Don Quixote, he puts the reader deep in the story. And by showing the pain, the fear and even the hope, he offers up a way for all of us to share that unnamable connection that makes us all human. With a touch of magic, with writing so clear it shimmers like crystal and with a shared dose of our common humanity, this is a book that will be around forever. And if you read it, you'll know why.

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