



The reluctant fundamentalist

By Mohsin Hamid
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Genre & subject
Race discrimination fiction
Psychological fiction

Synopsis

At a café table in Lahore, a bearded Pakistani man converses with an uneasy American stranger. As dusk deepens to night, he begins the tale that has brought them to this fateful meeting.

Changez is living an immigrant's dream of America. At the top of his class at Princeton, he is snapped up by the elite "valuation" firm of Underwood Samson. He thrives on the energy of New York, and his infatuation with elegant, beautiful Erica promises entry into Manhattan society at the same exalted level once occupied by his own family back in Lahore.

But in the wake of September 11, Changez finds his position in his adopted city suddenly overturned, and his budding relationship with Erica eclipsed by the reawakened ghosts of her past. And Changez's own identity is in seismic shift as well, unearthing allegiances more fundamental than money, power, and maybe even love.

Author biography

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 PhD 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 United States 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*

He 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. He 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.

Discussion starters

- At the beginning of the book, Changez says that his companion's "bearing" gives him away as an American. What does Changez mean by this? What are his deeper implications?
- What do we learn about the American who sits across the table from Changez? How does Hamid convey this information? What do we never learn about the American? Consider how what we don't know about him influences our understanding of both Changez's monologue and the author's intent.
- Who is Jim, and why does he take such a liking to Changez? What do they have in common? Is his sympathy for Changez genuine?
- In Chapter 5, Changez is in a hotel in Manila, packing his suitcase and watching television, when he sees the towers of the World Trade Center collapse. "And then I smiled," he confesses. Explore this scene as the turning point of the novel — in terms of plot, character, scope, and tone.
- In Chile, Changez befriends the head of the publishing company his firm is there to value. Why are the two men drawn to each other? Why has Changez suddenly become so disinterested in his work? Who were the janissaries? Why does their history resonate so strongly with Changez?
- Discuss the two meanings of "fundamentalist" Hamid's title plays on — the first religious, the second suggested by Underwood Samson's business commitment to "Focus on the fundamentals." What do the different meanings suggest about the novel's themes?
- The Reluctant Fundamentalist turns out to be quite a page-turner — a political thriller that builds to a memorable conclusion. What exactly happens at the end of the novel? What clues or foreshadowing's tipped you off as to how the book would end? Why does Changez tell this stranger his story?
- Since 9/11, there has been a growing trend in contemporary fiction to write about the tragedy of that day and its aftermath. Compare *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with some other "9/11 novels" you have read. What sets it apart or makes it unique?

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