

**In the Country of Men**, Jun 2007

Dear All,

One book "In the Country of Men" by Hisham Matar. Four groups. Each discussion different but fascinating.

Here are some of our comments:

I couldn't stop reading it- I felt very emotionally involved with the child  
I found the ending too sudden- I'd expected to be told how he had come to terms with his past  
I wouldn't usually have chosen to read this kind of book but I was glad that I had  
I didn't find reading it easy- I didn't like it - the subject was too depressing  
My knowledge of Libya was very limited before reading "In the Country of Men". I felt I had learned a lot.  
Had Suleimann known that he was betraying his family and friend? How aware is a 9 year old of the political situation?  
I was 9 years old when the wall came down and I was very aware of the situation- half of my family lived in the GDR and we hadn't seen them for years  
Suleimann's mother shouldn't have burdened her son with so much information about her past but she was so young- only 14 when she had to marry his father- she was just a child herself when she became a mother.  
Suleimann's mother was so lonely - she often only had him to talk to.  
Arranged marriage isn't necessarily a bad thing- my mother's marriage to my father was arranged in Singapore- but she had choice and was not forced to marry him. "Love will come eventually" is the principle and in her case it worked  
I can't say I enjoyed it but it was interesting to learn about Libyan history.  
I travelled backwards and forwards to Libya in the 70s. Fear pervaded the streets. I had a lucky escape from a dangerous situation by using my wits. Matar captures the atmosphere of fear very well in this novel but I was a little disappointed- I'd expected more detailed background.  
It was an excellent story but I'd been hoping for more.  
I didn't like the way the mother kept the boy as a "man substitute". he had little opportunity to just be a boy.  
  
As a picture of how a family tries to cope with a difficult political situation . it was very insightful. An older boy would have had a broader perspective.  
  
The boy believing that his mother is taking medicine- not drinking alcohol- was plausible  
  
I didn't realise that alcohol is illegal in Libya.  
  
Women have so little power in Libya- only in the home and as mothers.  
  
I found the televised public hanging very disturbing- very well written- but hard to take  
  
The mass hysteria and apparent pleasure in another's misfortune was an example of the dark side of human nature.  
  
There is relief in seeing someone else suffer- that it is not one's own family being punished  
  
I felt sympathy for the parents- I don't think parents always do the right thing.  
  
I could tell it was an Arab writing in English- the prose was so lyrical.  
  
I don't think Masar knew where and when to end the book- the ending was too short and sudden

I'm usually a fast reader but I found this book very heavy going. It was like a very hot day when every moment hurts-

My habit is to read in the evening . I could only read a small part at a time and then I had to put it aside.

I finished it in 3 days- I thought it was fantastic. I especially liked learning about another culture. It's very important to be made more aware of other cultural groups.

I didn't feel that the perspective of a 9 year old boy was authentic. I didn't like the language or the story.

The message for me was that you can't trust anyone!

I found it difficult to grasp the personality of the mother and why she sent her son to Cairo.

The mother sent her son to Cairo out of love and to make him safe.

I had a very hard time reading it- it was unpleasant but had to be done so that I could discuss it in the group

I thought it was wonderfully written but it was hard to empathise with a world so far away.

I mostly enjoyed reading it - especially decoding the 9 year old's meaning.

I had a wonderful time reading it- I loved his writing- especially the metaphors. I was inspired to do some research about Libya.

The mother and son relationship was developed very well.

I work with trauma victims( often Muslim women) and I don't usually receive a 9 year old's point of view- mainly the mothers' perspectives- so it was especially interesting for me.

I felt it fizzled out at the end.

I was amazed everyone liked it- I totally didn't like it. I couldn't be bothered with it- maybe because it was too depressing.

One of my favourite books is "The Kite Runner" and I was expecting to enjoy it as both books are similar in content. But it didn't match up to "The Kite Runner" and so I was disappointed. I found the different strands of the story rather confusing.

I'm a mother of two boys aged 10 and 8. I enjoyed reading about a boy's thoughts and impressions. I could relate to Suleimann's conflict of wanting to protect his mother but also desperately wanting to just be a boy. It was very realistic that he didn't like having to go to sleep at lunchtime!

Arranged marriage may work for some people but in the West at least we have the choice of messing up for ourselves!

The title is very telling- immediate events are caused by men- women have no influence outside the home

I thought that the title had a double meaning- men drifting further away from a state of innocence- going away from

paradise. Suleimann believes that mulberries are a gift from heaven. The only mulberry tree remaining is in Ustath Rashid's garden- he has not betrayed his friend and has been hanged .

Suleimann is searching for the meaning of being a man. For me, the title reflects that desire.

Economies are often manipulated- here in Germany we had to give up the mark and everything doubled in price! It was OK for the Brits because they were able to keep the pound.

The transfer to the mark bore no comparison with the economic situation in Libya. Most people in Libya lost everything.

I can't bear injustice and the novel reminded me of how lucky we are to live in a democracy.

I didn't like the ending- it was too abrupt. The writing changed pace too suddenly.

Clearly we had many shades of opinion on our June choice "In the Country of Men" ranging from loving the book to not exactly hating it but finding it very difficult to read. We all agreed that it was not a light read. Set in Libya in 1979, we are faced with the tyrannical regime of Gaddafi and its impact on a 9 year old boy, Suleimann, and his family.

Hisham Matar sets the scene in Tripoli. The man Suleimann looks back at his last year in Libya as a nine year old. He says "the sun was everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliant and still beneath it. Every person, animal and ant went in desperate search for shade " We all agreed that we could feel the intense heat, sense the blaze of the sun and the relief of shade and a cool breeze. Matar's writing had a lyrical quality full of powerful imagery. egs "two dark lenses curved like the humpbacks of turtles over his eyes." " Palm trees bowed like old gossiping women at the edges of the city." " A breeze chilled by the vacant desert, moistened by the humming sea." An Arab writing in English? Some of us were very conscious of a poetic quality- symbolising an innate Arabic passion .

The central theme is Suleimann's relationship with his mother. She has been forced to marry his father at the age of fourteen. Committing the crime of having a coffee with a boy in a local cafe, she was shut in her room for days and to regain the honour of the family had to marry at once. (Suleimann's father) A much older man and her family's choice for her.

She even tells Suleimann that she tried to abort him. But it is clear that she has grown to adore her only son and refers to them being "two halves of one soul, two open pages of the same book." This is such a burden for Suleimann .She suffocates him with her neediness. And he has to be the man of the house and protect his mother whenever his father is away "on business."

However we all felt sorry for Mama. Our horror at the position of women in Libya was unanimous. But we thought that she should not have told Suleimann so much about her past and especially her initial hatred for his father. Yet she was just a child herself when she became a mother. We forgave her behaviour when we remembered that.

The political situation is revealed slowly through Suleimann's eyes and he of course does not understand most of what is happening. His father is secretly fighting for democracy and has written a book "Democracy Now" His kind neighbour Ustath Rashid is also involved in an attempt to overthrow the tyrannical regime of Gaddafi. Suleimann sees Ustath Rashid on television being challenged as a traitor and refusing to betray his father. He recognises Ustath Rashid's loyalty and bravery and then has to witness his horrific public hanging. We all found this passage difficult to read but very well written. The dark side of humanity- the pleasure in not being the victim- the mass hysteria- the potential evil in man- We discussed these issues and how it is painful to acknowledge that these are aspects of human nature.

His father returns, after being beaten up and tortured, saved from execution by other neighbours who are part of the regime. As his father recovers his parents grow closer. Suleimann observes that his mother responds to his father in a way she had not before. He had once seen them in bed together and his mother had been lying rigid, looking very unhappy and he had wondered if he should have rescued her. He then later sees them making love and it is clear to him that she is happier and responding to his father. We had some disagreement about his ability to understand what he had seen. Would a nine year old be able to tell the difference? We had some fun talking about our own childhood experiences - finding our parents making love or hearing them and wondering what was happening!

Had Matar effectively conveyed the world through the eyes of a nine year old boy? We were divided on this. Most of us thought that he had been successful. Some of us were frustrated that we didn't get a bigger picture- more detail of the political background. But overall we felt the strength of the novel was to be found in the sensitive portrayal of a boy caught up in the middle of a desperate family situation.

The ending was weak - hurried and too short. It is interesting that often the endings of the novels we have read have been flawed. It is the endings we have most often criticised- as though the writers have been desperate to get the novels over with! Here was another example. We would have preferred the ending to be at the point he was sent to Cairo. We learnt little about his life in Cairo- mainly that he coped very well. His apprehension at seeing his mother again after fifteen years is moving. His shock at realising how young she still is, only 39, is shared by the reader. The real fans of "In the Country of Men" didn't find the ending unsatisfactory. But most of us did.

"In the Country of Men" had definitely not been an easy read. We were faced with uncomfortable realities. Women in Libya have few rights, public executions are commonplace, Gaddafi's regime is tyrannical. He has been in power since 1969 - for 38 years. Democracy seems a long way off. -in so many parts of the world women still lead such restricted lives. Women in the West have not had the vote for very long either.

We were touched by the story of Suleimann and his mother. Their love for each other shone through all of the difficulties. We came away with the impression that love, awkward as it may be, is the only thing that can survive in times of terror. And we have to always appreciate, flawed as they are, our own democratic rights. Especially for women.

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