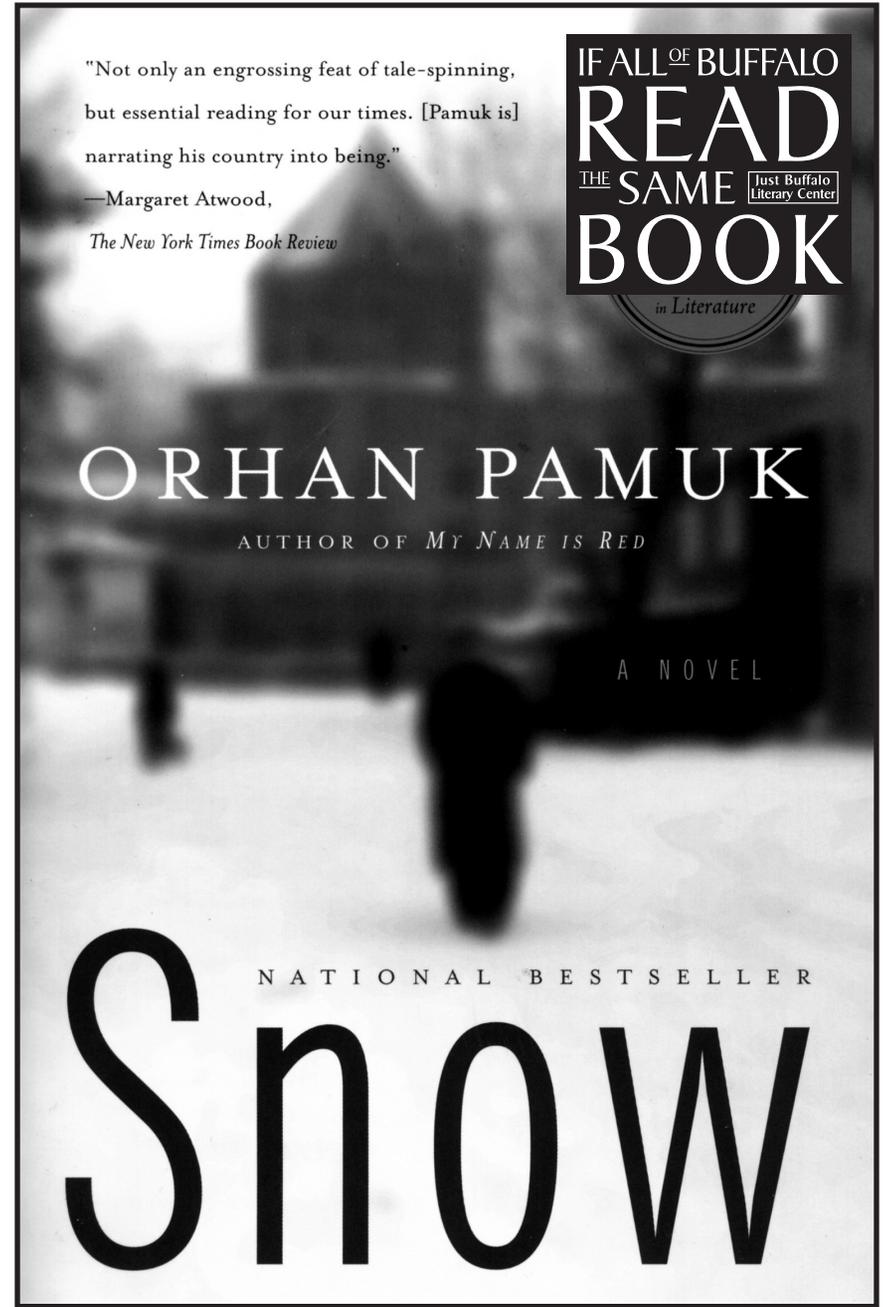
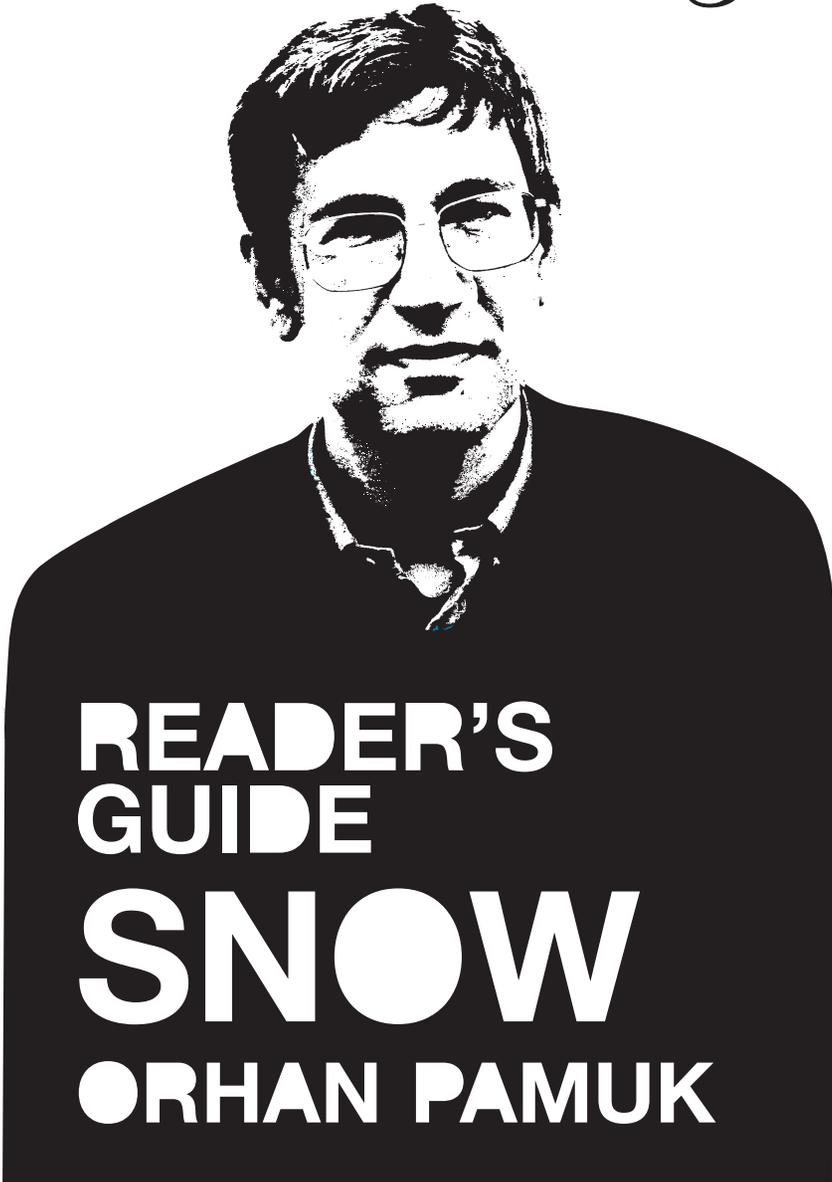


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# ORHAN PAMUK

Published stories about Orhan Pamuk almost always begin with him above Istanbul, looking out from the terrace of his book-filled study past busy mosques and markets, toward the Bosphorus River, the official boundary that cleaves East and West.

The view exemplifies the country where he was born in 1952 and where he has lived for all but a handful of years, in part because it gathers up its opposites—heritage and modernity, Islam and secularism, Asia and Europe. It may be a badge of his citizenship, as accurate as a passport, that everything Pamuk sees and writes seems to illustrate Turkey’s constant complexity. “This back and forth of having believed yourself to be Western, then realizing you’re different; your naive way of ignoring these differences, then eventually trying to establish your own place—this is not some metaphysical gymnastic,” he has said. “The whole country is suffering through the same dilemma.”

“Istanbul’s fate is my fate,” Pamuk wrote in his 2005 memoir of the city. “I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am.”

Pamuk’s secular family made its fortune building the new secular state Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded 20 years before Pamuk was born. His mother’s family worked in textiles, and his father’s father became wealthy building railways. Within a generation, though, the wealth was gone: Pamuk’s father and uncle, also civil engineers, made bad investment decisions and the apartment buildings the family had acquired—including the Pamuk Apartment, built for the extended family of cousins and grandmothers, where Pamuk now lives—were sold off. When Pamuk was seven, his father left for Paris to write, before his mother stopped funding his bohemian lifestyle and he was forced to take a job with IBM in Geneva.

Pamuk inherited his father’s creative impulsiveness and intended to be a painter. He and his brother went to the English-language Roberts College in Istanbul. Pamuk went on to study architecture (more practical than painting, less secure than engineering) at Istanbul Technical University but dropped out to write novels. “When I was 22, I locked myself in my bedroom for eight years,” he has said.



“Once every three years my mother opened my bedroom door and said, ‘Maybe you should apply to medical school.’”

At the end of the eight years, in 1982, Pamuk published his first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, a realist family chronicle inspired by Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers*. He has since published six novels and all but one, *Snow*, are set in past or present Istanbul, peopled by miniaturists, lawyers, murderers, servants, or Ottoman families. To write *Snow*, his only overtly political novel, Pamuk traveled to Kars to interview people and to videotape all the town’s streets. In 2006, Pamuk became the first Turkish writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

Pamuk’s reception in Turkey fits his country’s divided soul. His books have out-sold any other novels ever published there, but he has at times garnered scorn from the country’s secular nationalists, its Islamists, and, most remarkably, the government. In 2005, he was charged with “insulting” Turkey with a comment he made to a Swiss newspaper about how many Armenians were killed in the genocide there, still a taboo subject. Pamuk faced more than 3 years in prison if convicted, but the charges were eventually dropped.

He has since taken a recurring position with Columbia University, where he teaches one semester per year. For most of the year, his home is still a view of the Bosphorus and an inward attempt, with pen and paper, to etch it out. His “highest challenge,” he has said, is to “search out this civilization in broken walls, in broken faces.”

# TURKEY

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the modern Turkish republic in 1923 after the end of the first World War marked the end of the Ottoman empire. Atatürk insisted on a secular nation, divorced from the influence of Islam even though his country was and remains a majority-Muslim nation. He used authoritarian means to create this new democracy: By decree, he removed the clause from the country's constitution that named Islam the state religion, abolished religious courts, instituted the Gregorian rather than the Islamic calendar, and stripped the Turkish language of Arabic words. He also insisted on modern European dress. In 1925, he banned the traditional fez and encouraged men to wear trousers, shirts, and ties.

The result was and is the only secular Muslim nation in the world. Atatürk was a military man and he charged his country's military with policing its steady secularism, a role it still maintains: Turkey has a military coup about once every decade; the military has ousted four elected governments since 1960.

*Snow* deals directly with this history and its constant evolution in the present. "The wealthy, pro-modernist class who founded the Turkish republic reacted to resistance from the poor and backward sectors of society not by attempting to understand them, but by law-enforcement measures, interdictions, and the army," Pamuk wrote in an essay shortly after September 11. "In the end, the modernisation effort remained half-finished, and Turkey became a limited democracy in which intolerance prevailed."

Pamuk has described *Snow* as an effort to understand how a Western intellectual's worldview might come to terms with "the poorest, most forgotten and perhaps most ignored part of the country. The most angry part, too." The novel recreates the militancy of several groups that have made the country a battlefield over the past 80 years—separatists Kurds (the PKK), radical Islamists, secular nationalists, government armies and intelligence organizations—but imagines those battles coalescing around the right of Muslim girls to wear headscarves.

In 1992, the year Ka visits Kars in *Snow* (a real town, though "kar" in Turkish also means "snow"), Turkey sent 20,000 troops into a Kurdish safe-haven in Iraq



in an operation against the PKK, considered a terrorist organization. Three years later, the Turkish military led an even larger campaign against the Kurds, killing nearly thirty thousand.

In the same year, a pro-Islamist political party, the Welfare Party, won parliamentary elections. The party was stridently against Atatürk's founding ideology. Its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, promised to reverse the founding father's westernizing programs: he called for a war to win back Jerusalem and another to win Turkey from westerners who were unbelievers, infidels, and imperialists.

In a scene not unlike *Snow's* bloody political theater, the Welfare Party staged a play during an Al Quds Day celebration in January 1997 in which actors playing Hamas militants waged a mini intifada against on-stage Israeli soldiers. Four days later, army tanks rolled through the streets of the Ankara district that hosted the rally. Within months, Erbakan was forced to resign from office and to reaffirm the secular state.

Recently, a more modern Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party won control of the Parliament and, on August 28, elected the country's first Islamic President, a remarkable departure from the secular institution's 84-year hold on the most prestigious government post.

# QUESTIONS

1. What does snow symbolize in the novel? How does it change as a metaphor in different moments?
2. Serdar Bey tells Ka, “In the old days we were all brothers,” then the Communists “spread tribal pride, and they did it because they wanted to divide and destroy Turkey. Now everyone is prouder, and poorer.” Where do you see evidence of this division? How are pride and poverty affecting each of the conflicting groups in Kars?
3. Why must Ka invent the long story of Hans Hansen, the supposed editor of the Frankfurter Runshav? Why would so many people in Kars want to risk so much to send a statement to the Frankfurt paper? What consensus do they reach?
4. The narrator, “Orhan,” introduces himself early in the book as “an old friend of Ka’s” who knows “everything that will happen to him during his time in Kars.” Why did Pamuk invent a narrator that seems at times human and limited in what he can know about Ka’s experience, and at other times all-knowing?
5. Why is so much attention given to Ka’s coat? What does it symbolize?
6. Twins and doubles recur in Pamuk’s novels. In *Snow*, Necip and Fazil seem to share one consciousness. What is the relationship between these two boys and why are they paired so closely? Compare their relationship to the one between “Orhan” and Ka.
7. Ipek tells Ka that the men in Kars “give themselves to religion, and the women kill themselves.” When Ka asks why, Ipek gives him a look that tells him he’ll get nowhere by pressing for quick answers. By the end of the book, is Ka’s question answered? How would you answer it?
8. Does Ka succeed in ignoring politics and violence in favor of beauty, love, and poetry? What balance does he strike between everyday reality and art?

9. One of the epigraphs to *Snow* is a section of Robert Browning’s “Bishop Blougram’s Apology:” “Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things./The honest thief, the tender murderer,/ The superstitious atheist.” What do these complicating descriptions of “types” of people (thieves, murderers, atheists) have to do with the groups in the novel: Islamists, Kurds, nationalists, educators, politicians, journalists, actors, secret police, soldiers, shieks?
10. Discuss Ka’s inspiration to write poems. How is it connected to other revelations—about violence, beauty, poverty, religion—he and others have in the novel? Why do we never get to read the poems? Why do they take such a concrete shape in the snowflake?
11. At the end of the novel, Fazil tells “Orhan” to “tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say about any of us. No one could understand us from so far away.” Why would Fazil’s character want readers to doubt the story? What is Pamuk’s message in letting Fazil’s statement close the book?



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## Additional Resources:

“The Nobel Prize in Literature 2006” [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2006/index.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2006/index.html)

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