

Snow

reviewed by [Charles Strohmer](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Snow

Orhan Pamuk
Knopf

As the British actress Charlie is lured from the London stage into the violence and intrigue of Middle East terrorism in John Le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*, her

Israeli handler tells her she will have a part in “the theater of the real.” Though I would not place Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* in the same category as *Drummer Girl*, the novel and its subject matter are reminiscent of Le Carré’s masterwork.

Snow as novel takes us into the play of religion and secularism in a way that the many nonfiction “issue” books about Islam and the West cannot possibly do. *Snow* as art invites readers into the world of conflicting impulses, tormented loves and farcical actions that can emerge from the bitter 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 view this compelling drama during a three-day period in the life of the poet Ka, who has just returned from 12 years of political exile in Frankfurt to the remote Turkish town of Kars, the home of his cultured, middle-class youth.

Many are the threads of *Snow*’s absorbing plot. Hoping for an anodyne to a long and depressing period in which poems have quit coming to him, Ka has accepted an assignment to go to Kars as a journalist 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 three-day snowstorm, which quickly seals off the town from the Western world that is Ka’s frame of reference.

We learn that the possibility for love is Ka’s real motivation for accepting this assignment, for in Kars lives the beautiful Ipek, a recently divorced friend from Ka’s youth. He has gone home to boldly and abruptly declare his love. The elation of romance is matched if not surpassed by the happiness Ka finds when a flurry of poems suddenly begins accumulating in his notebook. Nineteen poems in all over the three days—poems that Ka finds, upon reflection, to be organized around the “mysterious underlying structure” of a snowflake. But neither romance nor poetry can save Ka from the crisis of faith that becomes as disorienting as the city itself amid the interplay between religious radicals and secularists.

Ka’s crisis of faith touches not only his romance with Ipek but also his encounters with her sister, the police, a political Islamist and many of the town’s zany characters, poverty-stricken families and militant religious and secular groups. There’s Nicep, a religious student who wants 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. And Ka has long conversations with the mysterious, charismatic Blue (outlaw? terrorist?), who is in hiding. When 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."

In what is a central story in 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. Gun shots ring out in the packed house, and the intrigue that follows puts Ka's life in danger. It is only after the town reopens to the West that the snow finally ends, the roads are cleared, and we discover the end of Ka's bid for love and happiness.

The Western mind facing Islam is trying to understand a mystery inside an enigma. In the sympathies, cognitive dissonance and conversational insights of *Snow*, Pamuk opens Western readers to the tensions and contradictions in the lives of many Muslims. By its very nature, art is invitational. Accept this invitation into a world with which you are not familiar. You won't be disappointed. And you might find your own role in this theater of the real and the disturbing.