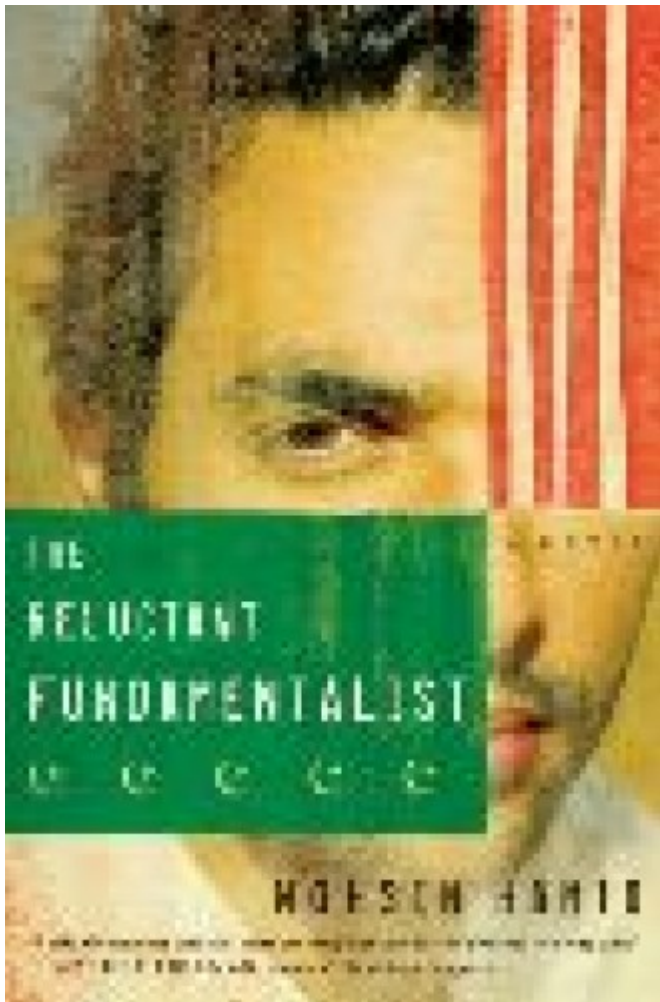


# The Reluctant Fundamentalist

reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## The Reluctant Fundamentalist

Mohsin Hamid

Harcourt

An ambitious young man leaves the provinces, hoping to make his fortune in the city. He first is infatuated with the glittering world he finds there, then gradually

becomes disillusioned by the anxiety and corruption beneath the bright surface. What moral choices will the young man make? What will he become if he remains in the city? This, one of the classic plots of 19th- and 20th-century European and American literature, becomes globalized in Mohsin Hamid's thriller.

Changez, the reluctant fundamentalist of the title, is a Pakistani who comes to Princeton on a full scholarship and graduates summa cum laude. He lands a coveted job in New York, working for the prestigious valuation firm of Underwood Samson. A natural at the job, he seems destined to advance quickly. His business card and his relationship with Erica, a wealthy and well-connected young woman, give him access to the highest levels of New York society, where he feels quite comfortable. After all, though his family is now poor, they were once rich, and they still retain a high social status in Lahore, the city of his birth. Economically and socially, Changez thinks, he's just regaining his rightful place. But his boss and mentor, Jim, has a habit of reminding him that he is an outsider. And he can't win Erica because she remains fixated on a boyfriend who has died.

When he is on assignment in the Philippines, Changez turns on the TV and sees the 9/11 attacks. He is surprised by his reaction. "I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased," he recalls.

This reaction, which he doesn't at first understand, is the turning point that gradually leads him to exchange one fundamentalism for another. He had been attending to the fundamentals of becoming an upper-class American and excelling at a job that required subordinating all else to the fundamentals of finance. Now he becomes a poorly paid professor in Pakistan, a man who claims to love America but leads student protests against American influence in the Middle East. In both roles he is a man on the margins, a man between two worlds—a reluctant fundamentalist.

Changez is a Muslim, but religion plays no role in his change of allegiance. The America that welcomed him is devoted not to Christianity but to the secular religion of wealth and power. Though he grows the beard associated with Islamic fundamentalism, his concerns remain secular.

To Changez, America's great sin is hubris—a profound conviction of its superiority and of its right to control the rest of the world for its own advantage. But much of his

own motivation comes from his pride in the past glory and power of Pakistani civilization. Changez comes to see that his acceptance into the world of high finance, the world of global power, is a modern version of a ploy once practiced by the Ottoman Empire. He is like the janissaries, Christian boys captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in the Muslim army, who became complicit in the destruction of their own civilizations.

Hamid has attempted a difficult thing: to write a gripping thriller that is also a novel of ideas. To keep the tension high, he uses an unusual method of narration, the dramatic monologue. Changez tells his story to an unnamed American whom he has met in an old section of Lahore and invited to dinner. The American might be an assassin hired to kill him, or it may be that the American is the one being threatened.

Hamid relies too much on heavy-handed symbolism as he packs his ideas into one evening's conversation. (The characters' names, for example, are charged with meaning: Erica, like post-9/11 America, is lost in a dangerous nostalgia for a past with a man named Chris.) But the novel is a gripping read and a stimulus to thought.