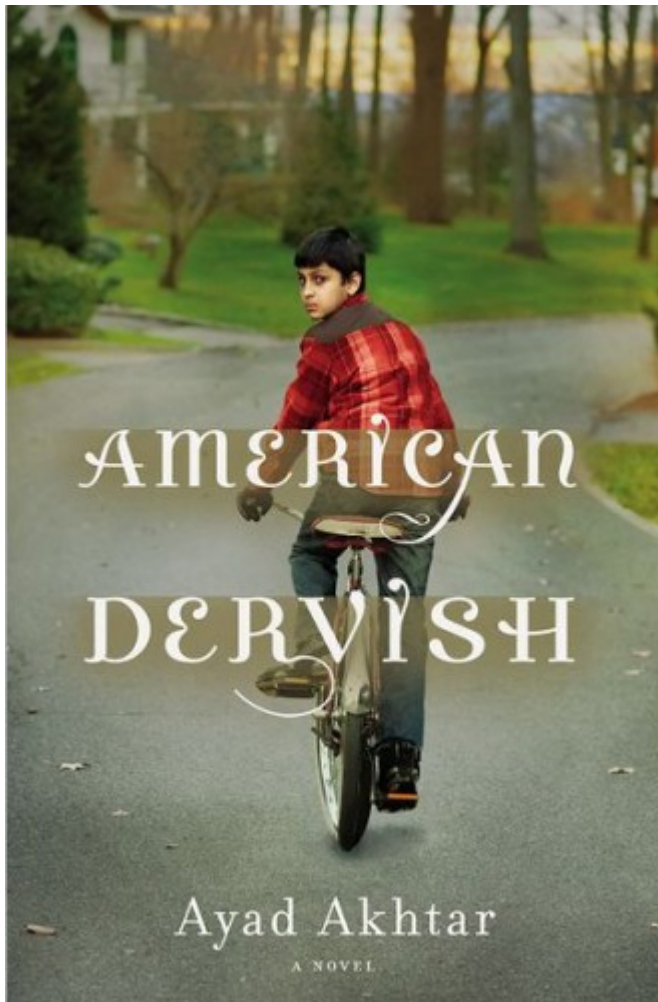


American Dervish, by Ayad Akhtar

reviewed by [Janet Potter](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue

In Review



American Dervish

By Ayad Akhtar

Little, Brown

This debut novel features ten-year-old Hayat Shah, a first-generation Pakistani American, who is attempting to find his identity as a Muslim.

In 1980s Milwaukee, he sees many different versions of that identity. The Pakistani community there centers on two men—a corrupt imam and Ghaleb Chatha, the businessman who funds the imam’s mosque. Both men are outwardly devoted to their faith and associate very little with anyone outside it. But they use their public piety and personal interpretations of the Qur’an to justify anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and other views that insulate their community.

Hayat’s father, disgusted with their hypocrisy, distances his family from Chatha’s sphere—and from the faith altogether. Hayat’s mother, largely derided or ignored by his father, maintains a nostalgic link to Islam for the simple reason that her life in America has disappointed her. Hayat feels separate from his classmates at school, who see his Muslim heritage as strange, but he is also kept from embodying that heritage by his parents, who neither embrace nor fully renounce it.

“We were formed and informed (to various degrees) by an Eastern mythos profoundly at odds with the American notion of happily-ever-after,” writes Akhtar. “For though we longed for happiness, we did not expect it. . . . Like the odor of *masala* lingering along our hallways, the expectation of unhappiness hovered in the air we breathed.”

It is no wonder, then, that when Hayat meets a kind and brilliant woman who believes deeply in Islam and finds joy in it, he is captivated. Mina is his mother’s best friend; she has escaped an abusive life in Pakistan to come live with Hayat’s family. She is beautiful, vivacious and warm, and her presence in the Shah household is a balm. She smooths the rough edges between Hayat’s parents and gives Hayat the nurturing attention that his own mother, who tends to use him as emotional collateral against his father, rarely does.

To strengthen his bond with Mina, Hayat begins to study the Qur’an. They spend time each evening reading it together and discussing the meaning of its stories. Mina tells Hayat about the Sufi dervish who gives up all his possessions and becomes homeless so there is nothing left in the world between him and Allah. His “whole life is devoted to Allah. It was his choice to give everything up.”

This brand of all-encompassing belief, poured into the mind of a ten-year-old boy who has never before seriously contemplated God, has myriad effects. Hayat takes to Islam with a passion, spending hours each night reading and studying in the hope of becoming a *hafiz*, someone who has memorized the Qur’an entirely, and thus

securing a place in paradise for himself and his parents. Hayat starts seeing the world infused with Allah's light. He is giddy to feel the sun on his face and is baffled that his classmates don't find the same delight and magic in the world.

He is also baffled by the chasm his zeal opens between himself and his parents. As an aspiring *hafiz*, he wants to spend time with other Muslims and attend the mosque, activities his father shuns. When Mina starts dating, Hayat is left to himself, and his intense study of the Qur'an isolates him and leads him to acts of naive cruelty. He disapproves of Mina's Jewish boyfriend and takes drastic measures to tear them apart.

Watching this conversion process move unchecked from enthusiasm to rigidity is painful. One wants to step in and offer the young believer guidance or shake his parents into noticing what's going on. But Hayat, surrounded by adults who hold and compromise their beliefs in varying degrees, considers single-mindedness the better path. He sees their efforts to temper his belief as proof of their apostasy.

Akhtar has said that he wrote this novel to give readers a "felt sense" of what it is like to grow up Muslim in America, the facet of his own childhood that so few people understand. He succeeds in this, but the book's larger achievement is its examination of how strong faith, especially when first encountered, can have sufficient force to draw people together or drive them apart. At times it's difficult to tell whether Mina and Hayat, the true believers, are living with their faith or are subject to it.

Mina is pulled farther and farther from happiness as she submits to what she believes is Allah's will. "This is what life does to us," she says. "It grinds us. Grinds us to dust. The Sufi is just someone who doesn't fight it. He knows that being ground to nothing is not bad. It's the way to God."

While Hayat's conversion causes turmoil, the book offers at least the hope that seeing its effects on his family and Mina while he is still so young will lead him to a more balanced view of his faith—that Mina's burning zeal, which swept so quickly in and out of his life, will be refining.