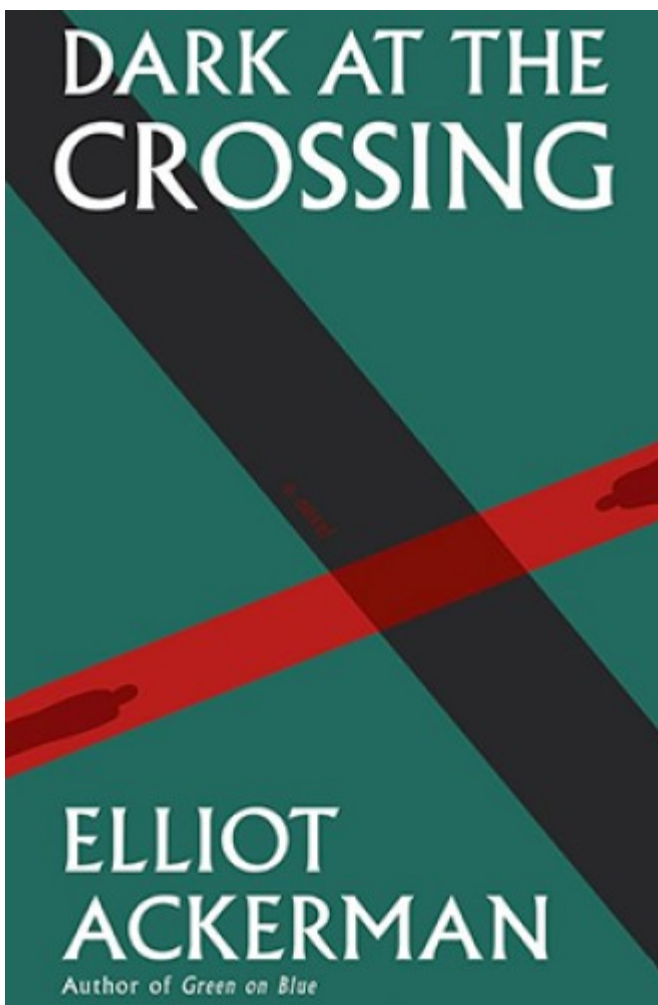


The line between here and there

## **Two novels explore what happens when wars persist and borders are permeable.**

by [Erica L. Brown](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Dark at the Crossing**

A Novel

By Elliot Ackerman

Knopf



## **Exit West**

A Novel

By Mohsin Hamid

Riverhead Books

During the best of times, borders are innocuous—mutually agreed upon boundaries that let us know where we stand. During the worst of times, they are contentious, raising questions about people’s rights to be where they are and get where they’re going, standing sentinel in a war-weary world. In either event, within borderlands lives are lived with intensity.

Elliot Ackerman currently lives in Istanbul, where since 2013 he has covered the Syrian Civil War. He is also a former marine who served five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Infused with a journalist's expository prowess and a soldier's strategic mind, his second novel deftly explores questions of purpose, identity, and the meaning of home against the backdrop of a war-torn country.

*Dark at the Crossing* tells the story of Haris Abadi's time in the Turkish city of Antep, near the Syrian border. While many frantically flee the violence and unrest, Haris is intent on crossing into Syria to join the fray and fight with the Free Army. Haris is no stranger to the horrors of war. An Iraqi who earned American citizenship by serving as a translator during a prior war, he returns to the Middle East seeking a way to make meaning out of his life. Haunted by guilt over his complicity with the U.S. military, he seeks purpose in a new war.

Recalling a particularly harsh interrogation of a woman and a young boy in their home, Haris remembers being dumbstruck when Sergeant Jim instructs him to tell the two they are free to go. "This is their house, thought Haris. Free to go where?" This question is the plight of every refugee, expelled from their home, their country, and everything familiar. Even the children understand this on some level. Jamil, who looks after a band of boys on the border, chooses to hold out hope that they might yet return home. But Haris reflects, "If home was less a place than an emotion, etched into their faces was forgetfulness. They couldn't remember what they couldn't feel."

Initially, Haris is bent on aiding the Free Army. But by the time he can attempt the crossing, the balance of power has shifted and the Daesh hold the political advantage. In many ways, his rationale no longer seems rational. As Sergeant Jim had once noted, "sometimes it just goes on so long that you lose the cause in the thing."

Haris recognizes this implicit threat and sharpens his focus, finding a more personal cause in shepherding Daphne, one of the Syrian refugees who came to his aid, from Antep to Aleppo. The politics are tangential. Or, perhaps, the politics have become personal. Daphne has lost her daughter, a casualty of a horrible accident. With her return to Aleppo, she holds out hope. "War can be a blessing, she'd said; if you're trapped, its destruction can free you."

Questions of identity run throughout the narrative. An American citizen, Haris is quick to claim Iraq as his native land, presenting his U.S. citizenship as an afterthought. While puzzling over why he offered the smuggler Athid the full sum of \$5,000, Haris wonders, “What irrational urge did he harbor to ingratiate himself to everyone, even someone as pitiless as Athid?” Then it dawns on him: “I am an American.”

While *Dark at the Crossing* is characterized by stark realism, Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* might be called curiously whimsical. The book begins, “In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war. . . .” We are never told exactly what city, so there is a universal quality to the setting. Indeed, in the current state of world affairs, many cities fit that description.

The two main characters, Nadia and Saeed, make an awkward couple of sorts—more than friends, not quite lovers. Far from being devout Muslims, they seemingly regard religion from a utilitarian point of view. For instance, Nadia chooses to wear a niqab to ward off unwanted attention from men. The two are selective and discerning about which tenets of their faith are worth observing, recognizing the need for discretion. Fervor for prayer waxes and wanes, often linked to grief and loss, hopelessness and despair. When Saeed begins to pray regularly “as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way, . . . as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope,” he finds himself unable to express these sentiments to Nadia.

I was caught off guard by the most fantastical element of the story, a series of doors that magically transport people to other places. We are given inklings in the first chapter when a presumed intruder inexplicably emerges from a woman’s bedroom closet. Nadia and Saeed have heard rumors, but they are afraid to hope. Nonetheless, doors hold some allure, “regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility.”

When Nadia encounters one of these magical doors, she is “struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end.” In this liminal space, decisions are made and costs counted. There is no guarantee that *there* will be better than *here*, or that *after* is inherently preferable to *before*.

A good bit of this story happens in the gaps. We don't have the deeper context. Some significant shift has upset the geopolitical world as we know it, but we are left to our imaginations to conjecture what that might be. It's anybody's guess whether we are to read this book as a dystopia, a utopia, an allegory, or something we haven't yet given a name.

Yet there are several very thoughtful passages to take seriously, given the state of the world. One of the men Saeed looks to for guidance calls for

a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation, for what did those divisions matter now in a world full of doors, the only divisions that mattered now were between those who sought the right of passage and those who would deny them passage, and in such a world the religion of the righteous must defend those who sought passage.

It is nothing short of an indictment. To which group do we belong? Perhaps in the final analysis we must respect the not so simple truth: "Courage is demanded not to attack when afraid."