

## Nadeem Aslam: 'I put my grief in my books'

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While writing his new novel, Nadeem Aslam didn't see a single person for seven months; his food was left for him when he was asleep, and he didn't even realise when it was New Year's Eve. Intense? Just a bit...

Nadeem Aslam is carefully mending a damaged book, the Collected Works of Intezar Hussein, one of 200 books he recently posted back from Pakistan to London. "It's distressing," he sighs. "The post office authorities crack the book spines to see that there are no drugs there. It's the perfect illustration of what is going on in the world at the moment. What gets hurt is the beauty of the book. It's stories that get hurt."

He has just moved to London, and his living room is filled with beautiful books, including a notebook of his recent trip to Pakistan. The pages are adorned with pressings of banyan, frangipani, tamarind and peepal leaves: trees and plants he longed to see while in England. Such attention to the minutiae of life is also evident in his stories.

His new novel, *The Wasted Vigil*, is a powerful tale set in the ruins of the classical age of Islam, which movingly explores the turmoil which has plagued Afghanistan in the last quarter of a century. "Politics isn't an abstract thing," explains Aslam, whose 2004 novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, winner of the Kiriyama Prize and Encore Prize, was written from an urgent concern that the British Muslim working-class community seemed to be turning in on itself. "When you come from Pakistan you cannot be unaware of what is happening in Afghanistan."

During a stint as writer in residence in Washington DC earlier this year he would stroll near the White House and contemplate how the decisions made within it, what seem "boring, empty words on white paper is literally the stuff of pain and meat and membrane when it arrives on the other side of the world and is capable of spilling blood. America supported Zia. Zia took my uncle to prison and tortured him. How did that process happen?"

His novels, however, are far from didactic. "I don't think the novelist's job is to pose solutions, but to find out how best to live. That is the intention in each of my books." The empathetic capacity to understand the mindset of those who have committed acts of brutality is crucial. "Sometimes I feel that if I hear the word Islam again I'm going to scream because of the rubbish that comes out about it, such as that all Muslims are terrorists."

Born to a communist father who supported the Soviet invasion of Pakistan, Aslam emigrated to England aged 14, and grew up in a northern, working-class Muslim community. He studied biochemistry at Manchester University before pursuing his writing. The territory of the 7/7 bombers is familiar ground to Aslam; the mosque they frequented in Dewsbury is where his uncle used to pray. It is crucial to recognise the difference between terrorist leaders and "the rudderless young men" they are attracting, says Aslam. "I have contempt for the leaders and sympathy for the kids who blow themselves up. I was really confident that people would care for Casa [a radicalised youngster in *The Wasted Vigil*]. This is someone who was raped as a child and raped others. That's how twisted his life has been. My rage is directed at those who put him in that situation. I wonder whether the mindset of those who kill their sisters and aunts for dishonouring them is not easily swayed towards terrorism. There has to be something in the household, upbringing, culture, that needs to be examined. What happens to these people even before they hear about the injustices the West has inflicted on them?"

The starting point of all Aslam's work is that there is nothing unique about him. "As a writer you articulate the pains of everyone. Casa feels alone in his confusion but there is no need to, because everyone is feeling that confusion." *The Wasted Vigil* compellingly explores the power of friendship to cut across cultural and religious divides and the novel form allowed him to experiment with placing people ideologically far apart in the same household and seeing how they form bonds. Marcus is an English widower living in Afghanistan, whose house is frequented by Lara, a Russian woman whose soldier brother has disappeared.

"I wanted to write about how friends become family. For people who live in a metropolis that is what has to happen. We're not always managing to find that warmth. But it's perfectly commendable to imagine such a world." There is indeed a utopian impulse in Aslam's work. "Ultimately we are all human and if I can imagine a 65-year-old Pakistani father in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, I can imagine a 40-year-old Russian woman. The way we experience grief, sorrow, love, rage, is the same; the rest is cultural difference and the political situation into which we are dropped."

The title of the novel derives from a painting by Abdur Rahman Chughtai, in which a well-dressed, smiling woman sits waiting hopefully. "The artist and God knows that it ain't gonna happen. So once you look at the title, it's quite a chilling picture."

Aslam is optimistic about multiculturalism in spite of the arguments that say it has failed. "Multiculturalism gets a bad rap these days but as recently as the 1980s we could hear the word "Paki" on the BBC. The fact that it is no longer there is the result of multiculturalism; why am I paying the license fee to be insulted? Multiculturalism gave us confidence to stand up and say no." Trying to understand where the mechanism is broken and ways to fix it is vital. "I don't understand how people who are not writers cope with the evening news. I write about it – books are a place to put my grief." He quotes the great Polish poet Milosz: "Do not feel safe. The poet remembers ... The words are written down, the deed, the date." "That is the attempt as a writer, to catalogue the crimes. *The Wasted Vigil* is a book about books."

Aslam insists that if you don't like him, you won't like his books. "The best that is in me is in my books. That is what you're trying to do as a writer or artist. It's there in music. The voice looks for the possibilities; the art is in finding the potential of everything in life, the intricacies and complexities". Throughout Aslam's writing, meaning is dispersed through multi-layered prose, rich in metaphor, symbolism and imagery; in this case; ghosts, the haunted house; the shattered body, the five senses, the ruins of classical Islam. "The tiny brushstroke which brings the whole thing alive" is what he loves about Michaelangelo, he says, flicking through a book of his paintings. It is the tiny brushstrokes that are also central to his own style, endowing his fictional worlds with the raw heat of the real.

*Maps for Lost Lovers*, which followed the Betty Trask Award-winning *Season of the Rainbirds*, was 11 years in the making, written with windows blacked out with drapes which now form ornate floor coverings. Writing absorbs all his concentration, thus he saw not a single human being during seven months writing *The Wasted Vigil*. The book is dedicated to his brother and sister-in-law, who left food for him whilst he was sleeping. After turning on his mobile phone he received an old text message and only then realised that a new year had begun. "People ask, what was it like being alone? But I wasn't alone. I was with these characters."

Far from being disengaged with the world, however, the wealth of vivid detail derives from first-hand research as well as imagination. Aslam visited Afghanistan with a historian friend, the trip providing insight into his own identity. As he journeyed through the Khyber Pass from Afghanistan to Pakistan he was surprised to be regarded as a foreigner. People often ask him if he considers himself a Pakistani writer, or a British Pakistani. I wonder, where is Nadeem Aslam's sense of home? "A writer really has no place, ultimately. The most alive you are is when you are working or thinking about your work. Whichever place gives me the opportunity to be in that state is home. At the moment it's England. At the moment it's here. As a writer, the only nationality I have is at my desk."

*This story was found at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-i-put-my-grief-in-my-books-910441.html>*