



The Reluctant Mullah

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In a moment of idle curiosity, Musa tries on the modest garb of a Muslim woman to experience for himself what it's like to be veiled. While this cause much mirth among his fellow students at the Madrasah, the elders are not amused, viewing Musa's experimentation as a prank too far.

Back at home he must conform to family life and face the prospect of an arranged marriage. Cleverly, the family patriarch, Dadaji, offers him a deal: a month of days to find himself a bride or else Musa must accept Dadaji's own choice.

And so the race is on for Musa, a devout Muslim and gentle idealist, who dreams of a perfect companion but despairs of ever finding her. When his siblings and friends step in to help, their efforts lead both to hilarity and outrage but soon the dark side of tradition rears its ugly head...

The Reluctant Mullah Details

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Author : Sagheer Afzal

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From Reader Review The Reluctant Mullah for online ebook

Martin Clark says

This is a rather curious book because of a mix of styles. The main thread is the story of Musa and his mixed bag of unconventional pals (troubled siblings, lady-killing guys, audacious women) and their wacky, episodic adventures to find Musa a beautiful, intelligent bride in 30 days, before his gnomish grandfather marries him off to a cousin. It's like a Pakistani version of Friends and even feels like it's written specifically to be adapted as a screenplay.

Wrapped around this story is an examination of some of the issues with being a Muslim in Britain, which tries to dispel some stereotypes, whilst reinforcing others. There's also a kind of beginner's guide to some of the Quran and the way it can be interpreted, with particular reference to the wearing of the veil and burqa, which I actually found quite interesting.

Nevertheless, I felt the author didn't quite get the mix of serious and silly right, and there's a twist in the end of Musa's story which I didn't find entirely satisfactory.

Calzean says

I was a reluctant reader of the Reluctant Mullah. Reluctant to keep going, I mean. The idea of the book is great - a young man gets thrown out of Mullah school so he decides to find a bride - before his family finds him one first. Forced humour abounds in this book which really underwhelmed me.

Bilqis says

the 4th star is only because this is the first book I read that actually made laugh out loud.

Don't get me wrong this impression does not last long, you might even shed a few tears at the end.

(I laughed at some of the dialogues at the beginning, I would have rather enjoyed if the whole book was about these silly adventures of the three friends)

Somewhere along the middle I lost interest because the characters were just plain annoying with their sob stories. The Pakistani family depicted in the book seems to be somewhere out of 70 Or 80's Britain and so are the 'young British Muslims'.

That's it I'm not complaining anymore.

The ending was quite a shock for me, I never saw it coming a great twist in the story and it left me feeling nostalgic and sad may be the same way the main character felt.

I guess it's not a bad read if IT can stir your emotions. But I hated the writers perspective OF how "troubled" young Muslims are these days, and from experience I would say it was not quite true at times, the characters just did not fit in with the current British Muslim community though it was intended to be.

Paul Forbes says

Caroline (my wife) and I met Sagheer Afzal doing book signings of his novel 'The Reluctant Mullah' in our local Waterstones. He told us he'd met my work colleague, the award-winning novelist Mushin Hamid and writer of the similar-titled 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' and so as I had some credits on my Waterstones card I bought a copy of his debut novel. Here's the blurb from cover:

"The clock is ticking for Musa: he has 30 days to escape from an arranged marriage..."

So the premise sounds simple enough – Musa has 30 days to find himself a wife, otherwise he has to marry his cousin (and she 'aint pretty), and the story (in part) is about him trying to find his perfect wife. So it's a Muslim comedy romance!

Now this sounds pretty cheesy, but bear with me. The novel is not just about Musa but also about his parents, his sister Shabnam who is so beautiful that men's jaws drop whenever they see her, and his brother Suleiman who... okay, I won't tell you what he does as it's a spoiler. There are other characters too and each one is well written and you'll end up caring about them. A couple of the cast members are hilarious but still very believable in their behavior and motivations.

The writing style is the epitome of bittersweet; one moment you're laughing out and the next moment you're close to tears. And whenever the sage-like grandfather of the family "Dadaji" speaks, it's like you're listening to Ghandi. This makes the novel an interesting read and a page turner.

Me being a Christian I wasn't sure on how I should read this novel. Also I wasn't sure who the book was aimed at. The novel contains many quotes from the Quran but it's also liberally sprinkled a fair bit of bad language (I guess Sagheer is just keeping it realistic). Sagheer Afzal is not trying to convert people to Islam. In fact, in one scene someone visits a Catholic priest for help and gets some good advice. If anything, Sagheer just illustrates the realities of Muslim life and the lives of Pakistanis living in Britain whether good or bad. He just tells it as he sees it and it seems to me that he's telling it as it really is.

So, how is it?

'The Reluctant Mullah' is an excellent debut novel. It's well written, beautiful in parts with realistic characters. It has drama, romance and plenty of comedy so with that I'm not reluctant to give it 4 out of 5 stars.

Babak Fakhmzadeh says

In effect, a bittersweet comedy, and a very enjoyable one.

Afzal is a Pakistani living in the UK and the book effectively deals with the trials and tribulations of second generation Pakistani immigrants. And, as with similar work, the tongue in cheek style, combined with Afzal's intimate familiarity with his subject, the story is not only gripping and funny, but also feels very natural, as well as, at times, awfully sad.

The back cover calls the book "a brilliant debut", which is a bit much. Specifically because, towards the end, two elements of the narrative (the inevitable return of the brother and the actions of Khadija's father) are not handled well, are both too much coming out of nowhere, both feeling too much out of place and put to paper without enough finesse.

Still, commendable.

Anni Dickson says

Well written and absorbing.

Funny , sad and totally memorable. I loved this book . It helped me to understand a culture I'm totally unfamiliar with.

Tom says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this novel and it was an excellent debut - I certainly will be reading more of Sagheer Afzal's future work. "The Reluctant Mullah" is a text that is funny, refreshing and insightful, and is full of extremely memorable characters. This is a complex novel and one that explores culture, religion and personality at length, but for me did not provide tangible answers to the questions it attempted to address. I was left confused as to the moral lessons of characters' decisions, and the latter-half of the novel blurred and conflated the relationship between piety and goodness. Perhaps this is the nature of the subject matter Afzal was addressing, but personally I was left unsure as to what overarching point Afzal was trying to make. Overall though I am very glad I read this one.

One of the best qualities of this text apart from its memorable characters, is that it operates outside of the 'clash of cultures' rhetoric that is discussed ad-nausium in contemporary texts. Characters are driven by personal, cultural and religious goals within their own spheres rather than external pressures from a Western/European aggressor. Of course there is an exploration of the tensions existing between theists and atheists, the State and its subjects, and elements of racism do texture the novel at times, but this exists at the periphery and does not drive characters and nor does it define them. No doubt there are problematic elements of the text but overall I found this to be extremely refreshing, humorous and insightful text that avoided typical cliches and caricatures.

The style of writing reminds me of Christos Tsiolkas' "The Slap" with characters interacting and mixing at different times, each with their own passions and desires in sometimes hostile environments. Characters within the novel were almost always complex and varied and genuinely memorable.

Overall, an excellent novel and one that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Oriyah Nitkin says

In all honesty this book deserves 2.5 stars. The writing, in terms of word choice, wasn't painful or particularly bland, though it wasn't particularly good. The storyline was ok, though too much trouble to follow adequately at times.

What bothered me most about this book, this story, is that it is a serious book with what seemed like an intentional religious message, disguised as a lighthearted and crude comedy. I felt like the author was manipulating me, rather than carrying my emotions through a process the way skilled authors will. The difference is subtle. I'm not even particularly bothered by brainwashing authorship, but in this case it made for jarring and haphazard literature. And not in a good way.

The contrast of religion and crassness I'm sure were meant to serve a literary purpose, but they were definitely a thorn in my side.

Abdul says

This was kind of boring and really disparaging of Islam. Obviously, I probably should have judged the book by its title.

Maria says

I was desperately trying not to cry at the end of this book ... It's a beautiful piece of work ...

Ida says

This book like the back flap said is indeed a brilliant debut.

It had captured me with the author's writing style infusing familiar Islamic elements and the battle of modern complexity.

I greatly enjoyed the clear line drawn between culture and religion so the book had me hooked like I've never been in a long while from a debut book.

I felt that the author tried to be honest and I totally believed in the realistic portrayal and the distinction between Muslims and Islam in its modern context from the perspectives of the elders and the young. And I was more than happy to see the characters grappled with their religion rather than trying to convert readers or convince them of its truth.

Expect great laughter and surprising twist that for me was unexpected but then I am not a Muslim familiar with that sort of custom. The book did a brilliant job in depicting how terribly human everyone was in dealing with the revelations, thus making the ending, although tragic but convincing.

I hear its to be made into a series! Will definitely keep my eyes open.

But first I fully recommend this brilliant book.

Amy says

Fact: Nobody likes an arranged marriage.

It's on this basis that the novel *The Reluctant Mullah* makes its case. In it, Musa has just thirty days to find a wife that he actually likes, or else he's stuck with the one chosen for him. He fears who will be selected for him, as it goes against every romantic bone in his body. Thus, he begins searching on his own. It's not simple, as Muslim tradition makes getting to know any woman a near impossibility. He's aided (and thwarted) by friends more bent on the humor of the situation than by real concern for his future.

Musa himself is intriguing. Besides his romantic nature, he has a sense of humor not expected from a Westerner's perspective. For example, he sings Sinatra music, "My Way", but changes the words: "And now the end is near, and so I face the final cousin. My friend, I'll say it clear. I'll state my case of which I'm certain. I've been to muslimbrides, I've travelled to each fa-mi-ly. But more, much more than this, I did it my way." It's his irreverence mixed with a shocking amount of modern humor that makes him an extremely likable character.

The novel makes a fascinating read because it discusses Muslim culture without delving into political or religious polarities. Instead, it focuses on the social life and complications of people dealing with both tradition and outside influence, all in a modern world. I appreciated that the women in the story do not appear to be slavish nor repressed, but rather amusing and sassy and quite capable of taking care of themselves. In fact, what surprised me most was how close family ties were, especially with aunts and uncles all concerned and involved in each other's lives. Sure, Musa finds it a bit obnoxious as he seeks true love, but the unity and reliability on each other is inspiring.

In all, this was an amusing novel that still had a share of deeper complexities. Because, despite the humor and ridiculous situations that Musa finds himself in, a darker side of tradition will still assail him. He finds love, but he finds heartbreak as well. This is what makes the novel both timeless and appropriate for anyone: affairs of the heart know no national, political, or religious boundaries.

okyrhoe says

The Reluctant Mullah is a well-written first novel, with fully-fleshed characters and dialogue that flows naturally, especially during the comedic parts (incidentally I was reminded sometimes of the excellent film *East is East* with Jimmy Mistri & Om Puri). The tone of the story is evenly balanced between comedy, romance, and a not-boring-or-complex discourse on Islam.

I'm not a religious person, and I don't care to read books, especially fiction, where scripture is quoted throughout the work. Passages from the Koran do appear frequently in this novel; after all, the protagonist is a mullah in training. Don't allow that to turn you away from this book.

I've spent a good chunk of my life in the Middle East where political strife goes hand in hand with religious differences; the end result is that I am more familiar with what's involved in being a Druze, Copt, Alawite, Sunni, Shiite etc. than I care for. My impression is that this book covers the traditions and teachings of the faith in a clear and straightforward manner for the layperson; these passages are skillfully integrated into the narrative, without weighing down the flow of the story. I may be biased in this. In any case, I was not confused, or bored, by the discussions on Muslim dogma versus contemporary mores in Britain.

There is a sprinkling of bleepable language, and plenty of light satire and spontaneous humor, to balance it out. The author involves a Confucius-like character, a Gandhi figure, and also a Christian priest into the story, to even out the religious rhetoric, as well as to set up several funny scenes and to offer some witty dialogue.

An ever-growing number of British novels deal with the issues of being Muslim/Hindu in contemporary Britain, some of which I've read (and reviewed on GR). *The Reluctant Mullah* offers a fresh, entertaining as well as intelligent take on these conflicts and considerations.

Bulut K. says

That sudden ending, though...

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Knowledge will not always lead you to the truth.’

Musa, a mullah in training, has just been thrown out of the Madrasah of Islamic Britons for dressing up as a Muslim woman. Musa is sent home in disgrace, and it looks like an arranged marriage to his cousin Iram from his parent’s hometown in Pakistan is in his future - or is it? When Musa’s grandfather Dadaji visits from Pakistan, a pact is agreed:

‘There are thirty-three beads on this rosary. I give you one month of days in the pursuit of love. If by the end you have not found love, you will marry who I tell you to.’

Thus begins a novel which combines the best and worst of family in Musa’s search for a suitable bride. There are elements of comic romance, of the good and bad aspects of the expatriate Pakistani community, as well as of individual men and women searching for their own identity, some with guilty secrets and double lives. Many of the characters in this novel are struggling to balance what they want (or need) for themselves with their duty towards their families. Some of the best aspects of this novel involve the religious discussions in the men’s and women’s groups at the Islamic Centre. Here, members of each group debate the true meaning of passages from the Holy Quran. The debates have both light-hearted and serious elements, and give some sense of the wider themes that are part of a British Muslim identity.

‘United by faith and separated by perspective they cackled in unison.’

But how will Musa’s search for happiness end? Will he find the bride of his dreams, or will he be required to enter into an arranged marriage?

Towards the end, Musa realises that faith is no substitute for lived experience. As Dadaji tells him: ‘Reading the Holy Quran and learning the sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) does not make you wiser than anybody else’. ‘Wisdom is on the other side of pain, not on the other side of a page.’

I enjoyed this novel: the contrast between traditional and more western ways of life was well drawn, as were the major characters (and their struggles). I found some of the characters less believable, but this didn’t interfere with my overall enjoyment of the novel. There is both humour and tragedy, but what worked best for me was the depiction of the challenges faced by people seeking to combine the best (in their view) of two quite different cultural experiences.

‘In faith there is no fantasy.’

Jennifer Cameron-Smith
