

Snow

by Orhan Pamuk (translated by Maureen Freely)

Snow – In Brief

Long exiled from his native Turkey, Ka travels to the far-flung Anatolian city of Kars on the eve of its municipal elections to investigate the wave of female suicides that has struck the town for an Istanbul newspaper. He arrives in a blizzard of such proportions that it will cut Kars off from the outside world for three momentous days. A coup is quite literally staged before elections can take place. Ka finds himself drawn into a bitter and dangerous struggle between the extreme Islamists, set to win the violently aborted elections, and the secular state. Before he leaves Kars, far way from Westernised Istanbul, and far, far away from the German city in which he lives, Ka's world will have been turned upon its head and his heart irrevocably broken.

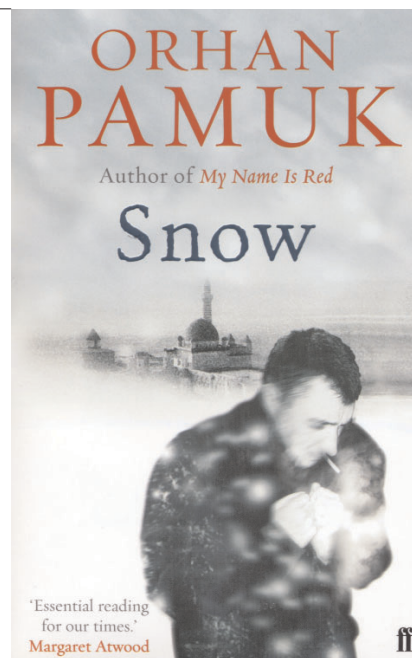
In this tense thriller, punctuated by extraordinary moments of black farce, Orhan Pamuk explores the political entanglements that bedevil modern Turkey, not least the gulf between religious fundamentalism and secularism, and the intolerance that characterises both sides of that debate.

Background

In his acceptance speech to the German Book trade for honouring him with their 2005 Peace Prize, Orhan Pamuk emphatically declared his belief in the power of fiction: 'For it is by reading novels, stories and myths that we come to understand the ideas that govern the world in which we live; it is fiction that gives us access to the truths kept veiled and hidden by our families, our schools, and our society; it is the art of the novel that allows us to ask who we really are.' **Snow** is very much the product of that belief. It takes Western readers to a place they may hardly recognise and confronts them with truths that they may find unpalatable but which will help equip them to better understand the world in which they live, humanising the demons they are so often confronted with by a media determined to portray things in black and white.

Pamuk's books have been hugely popular in Turkey but with that success has come controversy, particularly with the publication of **Snow**, a novel which overtly commented on contemporary Turkish politics. A passionate advocate for Turkey's acceptance into the EU, Pamuk has pointed out that **Snow** was set in the 1990s, and that Turkey is a very different country now.

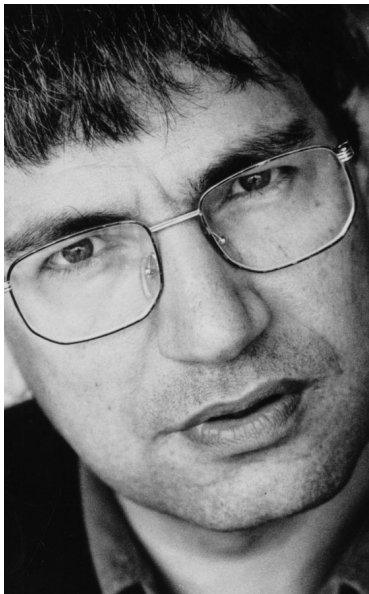
Pamuk's political activism and has made him no stranger to controversy. In 1989, he was the first writer from a Muslim country to speak out in Salman Rushdie's defence after a fatwa on his life was issued. In 1995 he was among a group of writers tried for criticising the Turkish regime's treatment of the Kurds in a book of essays. In 1998 he refused the title of 'state artist', explaining his refusal by saying that: 'For years I have been criticising the state for putting authors in jail, for only trying to solve the Kurdish problem by force, and for its narrow-minded nationalism . . . I don't know why they tried to give me the prize.' In September 2005, Pamuk's outspoken political stance led to his indictment by a district prosecutor for his comments in a Swiss newspaper interview that: 'Thirty thousand Kurds and one million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it', a statement which provoked uproar in Turkey. Pamuk was referring to the murder of thousands of Armenians in 1915-17, which Turkey admits but denies is an act of genocide,



while his reference to 'thirty thousand' Kurdish deaths refers to those killed since 1984 in the conflict between Turkish forces and Kurdish separatists. Such an indictment carries a possible sentence of between six months to three years in prison, a price that no British author will ever face for speaking out against their government, and a price that Pamuk must have been all too well aware that he might have to pay some day.

For Discussion . . .

- Ka is described as a 'political exile' but the narrator says that he 'had never been much of an activist' (page 4). Why is he in exile? What kind of man is he and what has drawn him to Kars?
- To the outside world the wave of female suicides is presented as a protest against enforced secularism. Does this seem to be the case? In her final performance Kadife declares 'A woman doesn't commit suicide because she's lost her pride; she does it to show her pride.' (page 405). What do you think she means by this?
- 'If I were an author and Ka were a character in a book, I'd say "Snow reminds Ka of God!"' (page 62). How does Ka's attitude towards religious belief change? What brings about that change?
- Who is behind the 'revolution' and what are their motives?
- 'Hande asked him to send her best to Kadife and tell her it didn't matter what she decided about baring her head on television (no, she didn't say on stage; she said television).' (page 358) What is the significance of the emphasis on television? How important is television in the novel? How does it effect the lives of the characters?
- 'If a big German newspaper gave each of you personally two lines of space, what would you say to the West?' (page 280). What response does Turgut Bey's question elicit? What does Europe symbolise for the novel's main characters? How does the Europeanised Ka compare himself to the inhabitants of Kars? How do they wish to be perceived in the West?
- The Director of Education says that 'When a woman takes off her headscarf, she occupies a more comfortable place in society and gets more respect' while his assassin counters with 'Headscarves protect women from harassment, rape and degradation'. (page 46). The wearing of the headscarf symbolises the secular versus religious fundamentalism debate in Orhan Pamuk's novel. Are there parallels to be drawn between it and the decision of the President Chirac's administration to ban headscarves in French schools?
- 'Well, then, eliminate the people, curtail them, force them to be silent. Because the European Enlightenment is more important than people.' To what extent do you think Dostoevsky's epigraph, which prefaces the novel, expresses European attitudes towards Turkey?
- Many of the novel's protagonists are writers: the coup is staged by actors, Ka is a poet, his friend Muhtar is a poet who yearns to be published and Necip aspires to be a science fiction writer. What does the novel have to say about art and politics?
- Snow is the dominant image in the novel. What does it symbolise? What does the snowflake come to mean to Ka?
- The narrator drops hints throughout the novel about future developments and tells his readers of Ka's death far in advance of the event. What effect does this achieve? Who is the narrator?



About the Author

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952. He was educated at an American school in Istanbul and began a course in architecture but dropped out to enrol at the Institute of Journalism at the Istanbul University.

He began writing in 1974 and spent three years in the USA in the 1980s, including a stint as a visiting fellow at the University of Iowa, before returning to Istanbul. **The White Castle** won the 1990 *Independent* Award for Foreign Fiction and in 2003 Pamuk was awarded the prestigious International IMPAC Award for **My Name is Red**.

Snow was translated by the novelist and freelance writer Maureen Freely. Born in the United States, Freely grew up in Istanbul and has known Pamuk since childhood.

Resources

www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/05/23/bopam23.xml
Review by Tom Payne published in the *Daily Telegraph*

www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?040830crbo_books
Review by John Updike published in *The New Yorker*

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4934263-110738,00.html>
Review by James Buchan published in the *Guardian*

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C00E0D9153CF936A2575BC0A9629C8B63>
Review by Margaret Atwood published in *The New York Times*

www.levantinecenter.org/pages/orhan_pamuk.html
Review by Michael McGaha published in the *Los Angeles Times*' Book Review

www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/c-310/nr-181/i.html
Interview by Jörg Lau originally published in *Die Zeit*

www.nrc.nl/redactie/Doc/pamuk.doc
Transcript of Pamuk's acceptance speech of the 2005 Friedenspreis, the German book trade's Peace Prize (translated by Maureen Freely)

www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,560193,00.html
'Listen to the Damned': article by Pamuk published shortly after 9/11 in the *Guardian*

www.puk.org/web/htm/news/nws/news051009.html
Article by Elif _hafak published in the *Turkish Daily News* which discusses Pamuk's indictment

www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1072-1824869,00.html
Article by Salman Rushdie published in *The Times* discussing Pamuk's indictment

www.guardian.co.uk/turkey/story/0,12700,1376944,00.html
Article by Jonny Dymond published in the *Guardian* which discusses Turkey's application to join the EU

Suggested Further Reading

Fiction

The Devils by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Amber by Stephan Collishaw

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

The Castle by Franz Kafka

The Flea Palace by Elif _hafak (translated by Muge Gocek)

Non-fiction

The Battle for God by Karen Armstrong

The New Turkey by Chris Morris

Other books by Orhan Pamuk

Fiction

The White Castle

The New Life

The Black Book

My Name is Red

Non-fiction

Istanbul