



Books in a Box

Reading Guide

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Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Early on, Changez says that his café companion’s “bearing” gives him away as an American. What does Changez mean by this? What are his deeper implications?
2. In chapter 1, Changez explains that his family belonged to the old aristocracy in Pakistan—though they are no longer wealthy, they still retain their social status. How important is it to Changez to regain what his family has lost? How does he hope to do that?
3. When he’s vacationing with his college friends in Greece, Changez makes a joke about “an Islamic republic with nuclear capability.” Erica thinks it’s a funny remark—but why doesn’t anyone else?
4. What do we learn about the American who sits across the table from Changez for most of the novel? And what do we never learn about this person? How does Hamid convey this information?
5. Who is Jim, and why does he take such a liking to Changez? What do they have in common?
6. Changez announces in chapter 3, “I was ... never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker.” Explain this. How is Changez’s sense of identity altered over the course of the novel?
7. In chapter 5, Changez is in a hotel in Manila, packing his suitcase and watching television, when he sees the World Trade Center collapse. “And then I smiled,” he confesses. Explore this scene as the turning point of the novel—in terms of plot, character, scope, and tone.
8. After visiting his family in Pakistan, why does Changez decide not to shave his beard upon returning to New York?
9. Over the course of his monologue, Changez delivers more than a few critical appraisals of American life, culture, society, values, and politics. Is it fair to say that these criticisms grow sharper—or cut deeper—as the story progresses? Why or why not? Identify a few such criticisms, explaining why you do or don’t agree with them.

10. Discuss Changez's relationship with Erica. What prevents them from having a "normal" relationship? Why are they attracted to each other? How does Erica's fate affect Changez?
11. In the book's final chapter, Changez speaks of how terrorism, according to America's post-9/11 political and military leadership, "was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers." Do you agree with this assertion? Did you agree with it in the weeks or months following September 11, 2001?
12. When Changez is in Santiago, Chile, for a project, he befriends Juan-Bautista, the head of the publishing company Underwood Samson is there to value. Why are these two men drawn to each other? Why has Changez suddenly become so disinterested in his work? Who were the janissaries? Why do they resonate so much with Changez?
13. For a novel with "fundamentalist" in its title, this work has surprisingly little to say on the subject of religion. When, if at all, does Changez speak of devout faith, divine right, or deity worship?
14. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* turns out to be quite a page-turner—a political thriller that builds to a memorable, and memorably climactic, conclusion. What exactly happens at the end of the novel? What clues or moments of foreshadowing tipped you off as to how the book would end? Why does Changez tell this stranger his story?
15. Since 9/11, there has been a growing trend in contemporary fiction to write about the tragedy of that day and its aftermath. Compare *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with some of the other "9/11 novels" you have read. What sets it apart or makes it unique?

Quirky Bio Info about Mohsin Hamid

- When I was three years old I spoke no English, but fluent Urdu. We moved from Pakistan to America for a few years. I got lost in the backyard because all the townhouses were identical. I was knocking on the door of the townhouse next to ours by mistake, and some kids gathered around, making fun of me. For a month after that I didn't say a word. When I started speaking again, it was entirely, and fluently, in English.
- I once woke up in Pakistan and found a bullet in the bonnet of my car. Someone had fired it into the air, probably to celebrate a wedding, and it had hit on the way down. That incident set in motion an entire line of the plot of my first novel, *Moth Smoke*. Without it, the protagonist would not have been an orphan.
- My wife was born four houses from the house in which I had been born in Lahore, Pakistan. But we met for the first time by chance in a bar in London, thirty-two years later. It's a small world.
- The book that most influenced his career as a writer? Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Not because it is her best book, nor because it is my favorite book, but because it was the first book of hers I read and also the book I was reading when she read me. I wrote the first draft of my first novel, *Moth Smoke*, for a creative writing class with her in my final semester at Princeton. When she read my words aloud I understood something about writing, about the power of orality, of cadence and rhythm and the spoken word, that unlocked my own potential for finding voices and shaped everything I have written since. This book opened a door that I walked through without ever, in fourteen years, looking back.

(from a Barnes & Noble interview with Hamid)

Author Bio: Mohsin Hamid



Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2007.

Mohsin Hamid was born to a middle-class family in Pakistan but his parents sent him to the United States for his education. He was later accepted at Princeton University, where he studied international affairs, but also took a writing course taught by Toni Morrison. When he was preparing to graduate from Harvard Law School, he wrote a novel for his thesis. As

Lewis Rice wrote in the *Harvard Law Bulletin*: "Most law school papers don't get glowing reviews from the *New York Times Book Review*. But most law school papers aren't like Mohsin Hamid's."

After the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001, Hamid wrote an article for *Time*, in which he recalls a previous time, during his childhood, when Pakistan's military helped the United States in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan. As Pakistan was once again been asked to help fight a war in Afghanistan, Hamid expressed concern for his family and his home country. He ends his article with the statement: "In Pakistan, my friends and family are frightened, as they should be when the most powerful military in the world is sent to do a task best accomplished by schoolteachers, police forces, persuasion and time."

Hamid returns to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Told as a monologue between narrator and an unidentified American, the book relates the story of Changez, a bright and successful Pakistani man, and the dramatic changes that were wrought in his life following the events of September 11, 2001. A well-educated graduate of Princeton, the twenty-two-year-old Changez had been recruited by a notable financial company in New York. When the twin towers fell, however, Changez's dreamlike life changes drastically. He becomes the object of increased criticism and distrust by his coworkers, and is subjected to insults and physical threats solely because of his Middle-Eastern appearance. Soon he recognizes that he cannot stay in the United States, and must return to Pakistan to answer the "pull of his true personal identity"; observed Brad Hooper in *Booklist*.

Reviews

[Publishers Weekly](#)



Hamid, Moshin. [The Reluctant Fundamentalist](#). Orlando, FL. Harcourt, 2007.

Hamid's second book (after *Moth Smoke*) is an intelligent and absorbing 9/11 novel, written from the perspective of Changez, a young Pakistani whose sympathies, despite his fervid immigrant embrace of America, lie with the attackers. The book unfolds as a monologue that Changez delivers to a mysterious American operative over dinner at a Lahore, Pakistan, cafe. Pre-9/11, Princeton graduate Changez is on top of the world: recruited by an elite New York financial company, the 22-year-old quickly earns accolades from his hard-charging supervisor, plunges into Manhattan's hip social whirl and becomes infatuated with Erica, a fellow Princeton graduate pining for her dead boyfriend. But after the towers fall, Changez is subject to intensified scrutiny and physical threats, and his co-workers become markedly less affable as his beard grows in ("a form of protest," he says). Erica is committed to a mental institution, and Changez, upset by his adopted country's "growing and self-righteous rage," slacks off at work and is fired. Despite his off-putting commentary, the damaged Changez comes off as honest and thoughtful, and his creator handles him with a sympathetic grace.

“[An] elegant and chilling little novel ... Hamid’s novel ... is distinguished by its portrayal of Changez’s class aspirations and inner struggle ... [With] an Arabian Nights-style urgency ... The fundamentalist, and potential assassin, may be sitting on either side of the table.” (*The New York Times Book Review*)

“Slender, smart, and subversive.” (*Entertainment Weekly*)

“Changez’s voice is extraordinary. Cultivated, restrained, yet also barbed and passionate, it evokes the power of butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*.” (*The Seattle Times*)

“A searing and powerful account of a Pakistani in New York after 9/11.” **Mira Nair**, director of *The Namesake*

Suggested Related Reading

Saffron Dreams, by Shaila Abdullah.

The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads, and Modernity, by Tariq Ali.

Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy, and the West, by Benazir Bhutto.

The Afghan, by Frederick Forsyth.

Moth Smoke, by Mohsin Hamid.

Once in a Promised Land, by Laila Halaby.

A Case of Exploding Mangoes, by Mohammed Hanif.

Three Cups of Tea, by Greg Mortenson.

Home Boy, by H.M. Naqvi.

I Dream of Microwaves: Stories, by Imad Rahman.

Between Two Rivers, by Nicholas Rinaldi.

Shalimar the Clown, by Salman Rushdie.

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11, by Lawrence Wright.

Web Resources

Publisher’s website: http://www.harcourtbooks.com/reluctant_fundamentalist/

The New York Times review: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/books/review/Olsson.t.html>

Hamid interview on NPR Fresh Air: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9312695>

Barnes & Noble video interview with Hamid: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/u/The-Reluctant-Fundamentalist-Readers-Guide-Mohsin-Hamid/379001226/>