

# Exit West and the Edge of Dystopia

 [theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/exit-west/518802](http://theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/exit-west/518802)

March 8, 2017

A Syrian refugee pushes a bicycle at a camp in Ritsona, Greece *Muhammed Muheisen / AP*

Saeed and Nadia, the two central characters in Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel, *Exit West*, meet at the beginning of the book, at a night class on "corporate identity and product branding." He invites her for coffee in the cafeteria. They trade instant messages at work, and go for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. That the banality of their courtship plays out as their country is lurching toward civil war is deliberate: *Exit West* is a story about how familiar and persistent human existence is, even at the edge of dystopia. But it's also a warning against the assumption that the end of the world will leave rich, western countries unscathed.

In that, Hamid's novel is both timely—a tale about refugees playing out against a global migrant crisis—and impossibly prescient. When it comes to the future, he posits, we will all be migrants, whether we hop from country to country or stay in one place until the day we die. Either way, the world can become unrecognizable in the blink of an eye. What makes *Exit West* so striking is the ways in which it maps the breakdown of a society, and how effortlessly the cycle begins to repeat itself even when Saeed and Nadia think they've made it to safety.

At the novel's opening, the two live in "a city swollen by refugees, but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war," in a country left deliberately ambiguous—it could be Pakistan, Hamid's home country, but also Syria, or Libya or any number of others. Saeed works for a company that places outdoor advertisements; Nadia sells insurance. They're both attached to their smartphones. As is normal for educated, unmarried men in his country, Saeed lives with his parents. Less typical is that Nadia lives alone and rides a motorcycle, and though she isn't remotely devout, she wears long black robes as a measure of protection. "So," as she tells Saeed, "men don't fuck with me."

As their relationship develops, their city experiences a series of incremental changes, each one manageable individually, but catastrophic in total. One night, gazing through the telescope on their balcony, Saeed's family hears gunshots in the distance. Then helicopters and drones begin to swarm in the sky. Militants take over the stock exchange, but are gunned down by the government, with considerable collateral loss of life. Then the militants begin arriving in the city in unexpected numbers, taking over territory. There are air strikes and bombs. Cellphones suddenly lose their signal, and all internet is shut off. Municipal services shut down, meaning there's no electricity or running water. There are purges of people with certain surnames and denominations. One day, Saeed's father nostalgically watches a group of young men playing soccer, until he realizes they're not playing with a ball, but with a human head.

Meticulously but casually, Hamid charts a society's descent, and how innate the human impulse is to endure. ("The end of the world can be cozy at times," Saeed says, as he and Nadia huddle under a blanket when the lights no longer function.) Fleeing your homeland, he emphasizes, isn't something people take lightly. It isn't until things become entirely untenable that Nadia and Saeed decide to leave, seeking out one of the mysterious "doors" they've heard about that transport people to faraway countries. The doors are both a stylistic device for Hamid and a practical one: These otherworldly portals add a sense of magical realism to the book, while also freeing him from considering the arduous nature of the act of fleeing. While this might seem paradoxical—the physical journey from one land to another is, for most refugees, the most dangerous and traumatic part—it lets Hamid focus instead on a different part of the refugee experience: how his characters adapt to being interlopers in unfamiliar places.

Although the country Saeed and Nadia flee from is vague, the locations they flee to are specific, which allows Hamid to elucidate some of the more grimly absurd realities of migration. First they arrive on the Greek island of Mykonos, where thousands of refugees share space with wealthy tourists. Another "door" takes them to London, where migrants begin moving into the countless empty houses purchased by foreign nationals in the center of town. "It was now said between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were a minority, and native-born ones vanishingly few, with local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation," Hamid writes. And since the doors work in both directions, he hints that extremists are flocking from wealthy countries to the same place Nadia and Saeed made such efforts to escape.

It's in the London scenes that Hamid is at his most artful, signaling subtly how a new environment can come to resemble an old one, and exploring the familiar prejudices and foibles of human nature. After this, the book loses some of its momentum, shuffling toward a conclusion. But *Exit West* is a remarkable accomplishment nevertheless, not putting a human face on refugees so much as putting a refugee face on all of humankind. Saeed and Nadia seem thinly sketched as characters by design, standing in as an everyman and everywoman who can communicate the ordinariness of the apocalypse. Their love affair is complicated, as most love affairs are, and is challenged to an unthinkable degree by the conditions they find themselves in. But together, they represent the instinct to find communion with other people, and to love even amid circumstances that mean loving another makes you twice as vulnerable.

Hamid's writing—elegant and fluid, with long sentences that encapsulate the myriad contradictions of his characters' lives—makes *Exit West* an absorbing read, but the ideas he expresses and the future he's bold enough to imagine define it as an unmissable one. When Saeed and Nadia first hear about the magical exits popping up throughout the city, they learn that normal doors can become special doors, and it can happen "without warning, to any

door at all.” The same, Hamid points out gently, is true of humans. Assuming catastrophe will never strike is as myopic and ill-advised as ignoring until the very last minute how dangerous reality has already become.

Sophie Gilbert is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, where she covers culture.

Connect [!\[\]\(c507f772dba2b921f86777f01218e570\_img.jpg\) Twitter](#)

