

Meath County Council Library Service
Book Club Kit



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MOHSIN
HAMID
THE
LAST
WHITE
MAN



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Notes To Readers



This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of *The Last White Man* and contains spoilers

Content Warnings


Please be aware that *The Last White Man* contains content that may be triggering including depictions of Racism, White supremacy, Gun violence, Terminal illness (cancer), Death of a parent, Death by overdose (off screen), Suicidal thoughts (minor)

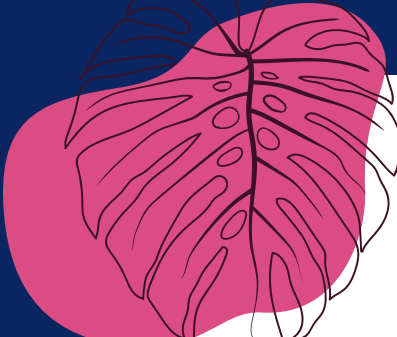
<https://deedispeaking.com/book-reviews/the-last-white-man>





Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. When Anders and Oona each change skin color, they consider the ways in which they feel like the same person and the ways in which they don't. The narrative reflects how they perceive others who change colour and how others seem to perceive them. What is the book exploring about the relationship between appearance and identity? What questions does it raise about how we conceive of identity itself?
 2. The novel uses the terms "white" and "whiteness" throughout, but never "Black" or any other vocabulary of race. Nor for that matter does it give a specific name to the location where the story takes place—in fact, it includes no proper names, other than those of Anders and Oona. What is the effect on the reader of having such familiar labels—and even the very habit of labeling—stripped away?
 3. The narrative appears to enter without judgment, even with sympathy, into the experiences and attitudes of all four principal characters—Anders, Oona, Anders's father, and Oona's mother—indeed, into their behaviors and mindsets at their most disturbing. Why do you think Hamid made such a narrative choice? What was the impact on you as you read?
 4. Much of the initial response to the changes in skin color that are sweeping the unnamed land of the novel is violent: militias form, vigilantism takes hold. Gradually the tide turns toward peace. What impulses fuel the violence? How and why do alternative responses emerge?
 5. Oona and Anders have each lost a parent, and Oona has also lost her brother to suicide. How do these past losses affect them in the present? How do the losses shape their relationships with their surviving parents, and how do the losses bring the two of them together?
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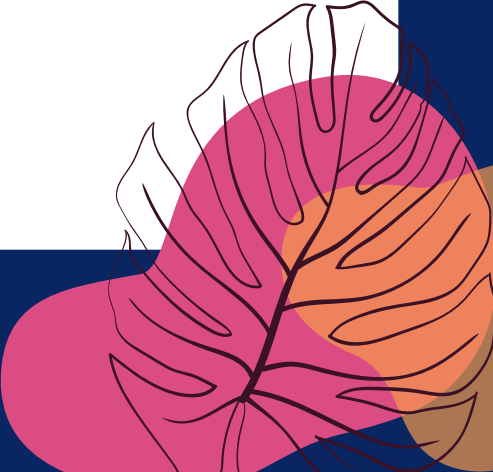
6. It's Anders's father who proves to be the "last white man" of the title. Considerable detail is devoted to his dying, Anders's care of him, and the dynamics from the past and present that this death calls in Anders. How did this aspect of the narrative strike you? How do you perceive its relationship to the theme of unstoppable change and the response to it in the broader arc of the novel?

7. Oona's mother's reaction to the changes in the people around her in general, and to those in her daughter in particular, is more overtly dramatic than that of Anders's father to the changes around him, and Oona's relationship with her mother is portrayed as more contentious than that of Anders with his father. After her mother changes, Oona is surprised to feel a positive effect, and she finds she does not know "in retrospect, if things truly had been as precarious as she had imagined them to be." What does this turn of events, perceptions, and memory suggest?

8. The characters in the book experience the events occurring in the world around them both directly and indirectly, as they are covered in the news and on the internet, and they respond to these inputs in very different ways. What is the novel observing about the role of perception, interpretation, and agency in a media-saturated, highly mediated world?

9. Oona and Anders's daughter, like all children in the generation born after the change, has no memory or concept of whiteness. How does her arrival in the story shift its course? How did you feel about the ending of the book?

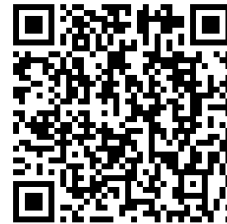
10. Hamid has written that the novel was inspired by his post-9/11 "profound sense of loss" of his own "partial whiteness"—hitherto unquestioned access to a good education, well-paying jobs, freedom of movement, and other privileges. What do you think about this concept of race as contingent? How does it play out in the novel? How do you see it at work in your own life, your community, your country?





Who Else Writes Like...?

A readers' guide to fiction authors



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About Mohsin Hamid



Mohsin Hamid is the author of four novels, *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and *Exit West*, and a book of essays, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*.

His writing has been featured on bestseller lists, adapted for the cinema, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, selected as winner or finalist of twenty awards, and translated into thirty-five languages.

Born in Lahore, he has spent about half his life there and much of the rest in London, New York, and California



Interview with Mohsin Hamid

What books are on your night stand?


“The Story of a Brief Marriage,” by Anuk Arudpragasam, “The Bad Guys in They’re Bee-hind You!” (Bad Guys No. 14), by Aaron Blabey, “Principles for Dealing With the Changing World Order,” by Ray Dalio, and “The Last Children of Tokyo,” by Yoko Tawada. There are many more books on my wife’s night stand. Although it is precisely the same size as mine, mysteriously it also seems to be larger. She reads much more quickly than I do. We often share books, and I consider some of those on her side as also being, in a sense, on mine, but it is uncertain if she entirely feels the same, so I have not ventured to list them here.

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

About five years ago, alongside my more contemporary reading, I decided to read from back to front, historically speaking. I started with the oldest surviving texts deemed by the sages of Wikipedia and other such online sources to be of the highest value and worked my way forward, intentionally reading chronologically rather than by language or “civilization” or genre. I began with the Sumerian “Instructions of Shuruppak,” first written in cuneiform on clay tablets around 4,600 years ago (it opens: “In those days, in those far remote days, in those nights, in those faraway nights...”), made my way through Egypt’s “The Maxims of Ptahhotep” and various of the Pyramid Texts, including the “Cannibal Hymn,” reached the Sumerian poems referred to as “Enheduanna’s Hymns” (I was struck by the fact that the first named author in human history was a woman, Enheduanna, and that I did not know this, and indeed that I had never heard of her or her poems before, which raised all sorts of questions in my mind, as it is perhaps now doing in yours), and eventually read “Gilgamesh,” written over 4,000 years ago, and while “Gilgamesh” is not exactly a novel (it is an epic told in verse), it certainly has much to teach us about narrative fiction, and I wish I had read it before and alongside the “Odyssey,” which I read in my first semester of college. They make for quite a pairing.

Your new novel is an allegory of racial politics and identity. What writers do you especially admire on the subject of race?

There are far too many to list here. I will just mention five who got me thinking as a young man: Toni Morrison and Cornel West (both of whom I was fortunate enough to study with in college), and James Baldwin, Chinua Achebe and Edward Said (all of whom I read and admired around that time).





Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

After an absence of many years I found myself in San Francisco, a city I had visited often in my childhood, when I had lived an hour to the south. It was the beginning of the millennium, just before the wars. I walked into City Lights bookshop. An Italian woman suggested a slender novel by her compatriot, Antonio Tabucchi. It was set in Lisbon, a port city of rolling hills on the western edge of a continent, at a time when Europe was descending into fascism. I read it in a moving rectangle of sunlight on a hotel room bed. I felt time and place blurring. I had no idea then that this blurring would not stop, that it was not merely the product of a similarity of geography, of Lisbon eliding into San Francisco, but of impending history as well.

It was a beautiful moment, like youth, soon gone, and forever with me.

What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

If you have not read "Pereira Maintains," by Antonio Tabucchi, you should.

Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?


Yes. When I have fallen in love, an exchange of books was always involved.

What's the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

I learned that if you read "The Great Gatsby" aloud to your 12-year-old daughter she might not want to stop and go to bed in the middle of a chapter, even if it is getting late.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

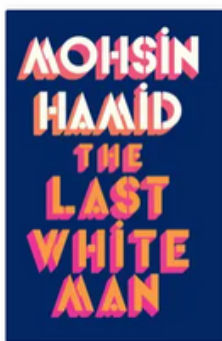
It is not for me to wish subjects on other authors, but I would like to offer an observation. The dominant modes of mass-reproduced storytelling in our historical moment are the screen storytelling modes: film and, even more, television. By their very nature, these modes tend to emphasize what things look like and how people speak. They also come to us more fully imagined: They present worlds that appear to be like the world we inhabit. This suggests to me that literature might flourish by focusing on other things, perhaps less on physical description and dialogue, and perhaps more on how what we call reality is an interior construct, but above all on the possibilities that come from being only partially imagined in its transmitted state. Written fiction looks nothing like the world it describes. The reader imagines that world from letters and spaces and punctuation marks. Literature, it seems to me, can thrive by opening up the space for co-creation on the part of the reader, by inviting the reader to imagine, by being the mode of storytelling that involves two people playing make-believe together, the reader an active shaper, a dancer in a dance, and not a viewer, seated, observing.





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The Last White Man
Mohsin Hamid
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Available on 12 June 2023



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Exit West
Mohsin Hamid
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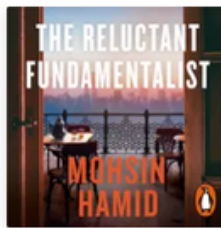
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The Last White Man
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Moth Smoke
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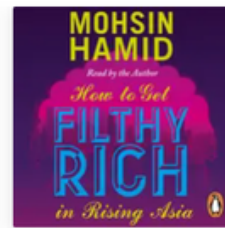
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The Reluctant Fundamentalist
Mohsin Hamid



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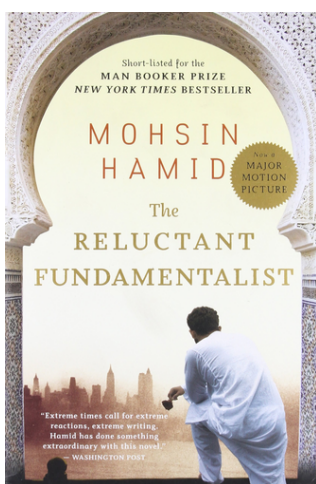
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How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising...
Mohsin Hamid

More from Mohsin Hamid

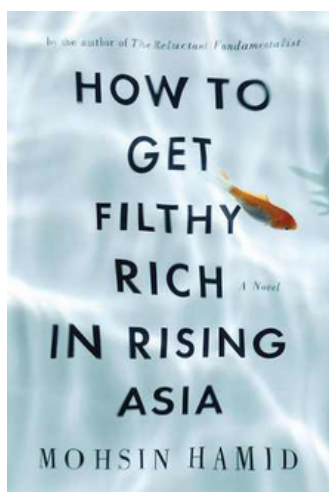


In a country teetering on the brink of civil war, two young people meet—sensual, fiercely independent Nadia and gentle, restrained Saeed. They embark on a furtive love affair and are soon cloistered in a premature intimacy by the unrest roiling their city. When it explodes, turning familiar streets into a patchwork of checkpoints and bomb blasts, they begin to hear whispers about doors—doors that can whisk people far away, if perilously and for a price. As the violence escalates, Nadia and Saeed decide that they no longer have a choice. Leaving their homeland and their old lives behind, they find a door and step through.



At a café table in Lahore, a bearded Pakistani man converses with an uneasy American stranger. As dusk deepens to night, he begins the tale that has brought them to this fateful encounter...

Changez is living an immigrant's dream of America. At the top of his class at Princeton, he is snapped up by an elite valuation firm. He thrives on the energy of New York, and his budding romance with elegant, beautiful Erica promises entry into Manhattan society at the same exalted level once occupied by his own family back in Lahore. But in the wake of September 11, Changez finds his position in his adopted city suddenly overturned, and his relationship with Erica shifting.



The astonishing and riveting tale of a man's journey from impoverished rural boy to corporate tycoon, it steals its shape from the business self-help books devoured by ambitious youths all over "rising Asia." It follows its nameless hero to the sprawling metropolis where he begins to amass an empire built on that most fluid, and increasingly scarce, of goods: water. Yet his heart remains set on something else, on the pretty girl whose star rises along with his, their paths crossing and recrossing, a lifelong affair sparked and snuffed and sparked again by the forces that careen their fates along.