



American Dervish

Ayad Akhtar

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American Dervish is a brilliantly written, nuanced, and emotionally forceful look inside the interplay of religion and modern life.

Hayat Shah is a young American in love for the first time. His normal life of school, baseball, and video games had previously been distinguished only by his Pakistani heritage and by the frequent chill between his parents, who fight over things he is too young to understand. Then Mina arrives, and everything changes.

Mina is Hayat's mother's oldest friend from Pakistan. She is independent, beautiful and intelligent, and arrives on the Shah's doorstep when her disastrous marriage in Pakistan disintegrates. Even Hayat's skeptical father can't deny the liveliness and happiness that accompanies Mina into their home. Her deep spirituality brings the family's Muslim faith to life in a way that resonates with Hayat as nothing has before. Studying the Quran by Mina's side and basking in the glow of her attention, he feels an entirely new purpose mingled with a growing infatuation for his teacher.

When Mina meets and begins dating a man, Hayat is confused by his feelings of betrayal. His growing passions, both spiritual and romantic, force him to question all that he has come to believe is true. Just as Mina finds happiness, Hayat is compelled to act -- with devastating consequences for all those he loves most.

American Dervish is a brilliantly written, nuanced, and emotionally forceful look inside the interplay of religion and modern life. Ayad Akhtar was raised in the Midwest himself, and through Hayat Shah he shows readers vividly the powerful forces at work on young men and women growing up Muslim in America. This is an intimate, personal first novel that will stay with readers long after they turn the last page.

American Dervish Details

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Author : Ayad Akhtar

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From Reader Review American Dervish for online ebook

Kate Z says

Before I started this book I saw an interview with Ayad Akhtar on the Tavis Smiley Show which framed my reading and enjoyment of the novel:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/i...>

I was charmed and intrigued by Akhtar and especially interested when he talked about this being a novel about faith in America. He said that he thought that faith was an essential element in this country and this novel uses the Muslim faith as a way to explore that. It's not so much a book about being Muslim in America as it is a story about growing up and what it means to believe in God, understand the afterlife and also what it means to follow the practices of the faith into which you are born, either by following or rejecting the teaching(s) of your parents and one boy's journey through that.

The main character, the ten year old boy Hayat, is first really introduced to the Muslim faith when his "aunt" Mina comes to live with his family from Pakistan. Mina is what we might refer to as a "spiritual" Muslim - she is quite devout but she places greater importance on the intention of faith than the actual practice (example, Hayat studies and memorizes the Quaran ... but in English. He is later told that "doesn't count", it has to be in Arabic. Mina tells him that it's not the language that counts, it's the intention of memorizing it to be closer to God). Hayat's Mother is a Muslim in name and appearance but not in real practice and Hayat's father is essentially an atheist. Hayat has to figure out what he believes and what is important to him.

The characters in Hayat's immediate family are complex; loving but flawed and that was definitely one of the strengths of the book for me. I had a harder time accepting the more stereo-typical characters in the greater Muslim community. I saw them as archetypes and I suppose that those profiles exist for a reason but those characters, and therefore their interplay into the novel didn't ring quite as true for me.

The writing felt like most of the "literary fiction" I've been reading lately ... easy enough to read but not transporting. This was a novel of character and plot, not writing or transcendental ideas (despite the inclusion of Quaran passages and many excerpts from and references to R.W. Emerson).

Good story which will make for a good book club discussion. I recommend it but it's not an "all-time great"

Tea Jovanović says

Crnogorsko izdanje, dobar srpski prevodilac

Jill says

Hayat Shah – the only son of Pakistani Muslim parents living on the outskirts of Milwaukee – is very likeable, the type of person you can imagine sitting down and talking to way into the night. In the first few pages of the novel, he is getting ready to share his life story to a young Jewish woman with these words:

“You may not like me very much if I tell you what happened...”

But we do. As readers we do like Hayat as he reveals the good, the bad, and the ugly of his story, which begins when his mother’s best friend Mina departs from Pakistan and her controlling ex-husband with her small son. Hayat – at the cusp of adolescence – develops a serious crush on Mina, who encourages him to immerse himself in the Qur’an. Pretty soon, Mina falls for a Jewish doctor – the partner of Hayat’s father and his new sense of purpose merges with his growing sense of “love” and confused feelings of betrayal.

It’s not only an intriguing but also a timely premise, as thoughtful Americans strive to gain greater understanding of “what it means to be Muslim.” And I believe the book has much to offer a young adult or mass market audience who likes a linear story with an educational twist. The story has an interesting protagonist, a story arc, and has much to say about the push and pull of secular, mystical, and religious Islam, the evolving role of women, and the confusion that accompanies growing up Muslim in America.

However, like many plot-driven made-for-TV movies, American Dervish doesn’t dig nearly enough, not providing its characters with enough of an inner life, and sacrificing depth for a fluid story line. The result is often platitudes and melodrama, with messages strongly telegraphed.

Here is Hayat’s mother, speaking to him: “Listen to me and never forget what I’m telling you. If you give yourself to filth and garbage, you will become filth and garbage. You will become the sum of what you desire...Promise me behta. Promise me you won’t end up like him. That you won’t live your life like him.” And here is Mina’s Jewish suitor, Nathan: “The way he has those people beholden to him. It’s revolting and immortal. And it has nothing to do with real Islam. Nothing at all.” Or mother talking about her friend Mina: “I keep telling her the fact that Nathan’s Jewish is a good thing. They understand how to respect women, behta. They understand how to let a woman be a woman, to let her take care of them.”

Ayad Akhtar – an actor, playwright and novelist – is obviously striving to contribute to Muslim-Jewish (and Muslim-American) understanding, which is a very worthy goal and a good thing. But by leading the reader to conclusions and by simplifying premises, the book just doesn’t rise to high literary standards. In a world where “unhappiness hovers” and “nerve ends teem”, the novel is ultimately lacking. (2.5)

metaphor says

This is what life does to us,[...] It grinds us. Grinds us to dust.

*

Low against the horizon, billows of slow-moving dark blue clouds drifted, pregnant with rain. It was a picture of power and grace, and it filled me with quiet wonder.

All at once, I felt a swell of gratitude.

Gratitude for what? I wondered.

I remembered the afternoon of the ice cream social when Mina first taught me to listen to a still, small voice inside, hidden between and beneath the breath.

I breathed in deeply and exhaled. And into the silence at the end of my breath I quietly intoned my question.

Gratitude for what?

I listened for a reply.

I heard a passing car’s wet tires on the road. And then a jogger’s rubber soles lightly squeaking on the pavement.

I breathed again and listened more deeply.

The branches lightly creaked and swayed in the breeze. The river softly coursed at the bank's edge.

I kept listening. Another breath. And then another. And then again. And finally I started to hear it. It was only this:

My heart, silently murmuring its steady beat.

Illyse says

It is a rare book that captures my attention without needing to read 100 pages before finding my groove. This book held my interest from page one. It's a story about a Muslim-American family during the 80's and particularly the young boy, Hayat. I'm not going to summarize the plot. I will say the refreshing perspective Mr. Akhtar focuses on is that while they are Eastern in ethnicity and Muslim, their issues, inner conflicts and questioning of society within the Muslim community as well as their local community is universal. I've read books with Jewish and Christian characters torn between their religious upbringing and society's expectations. I'm guessing some people won't like it because it focuses on the hypocrisy and dogma that religion has. But whether you are a "believer" or not, it is a thoughtful, beautifully written story.

Elyse Walters says

Audiobook....read by the author: Ayad Akhtar.....

Ayad Akhtar was a natural as narrator for his own novel. He was Excellent!

I was quickly drawn into this story when at the beginning Hayat Shah, the son of Pakistani Muslim parents living on the outskirts of Milwaukee, orders a beef hot dog at a baseball game. By mistake it's a pork hot dog. It's Hayat's first time ever eating pork. He experiences an euphoric high: religious freedom!

I knew just how he felt. I had never eaten a cheeseburger in my life until college.

As a Jew... we didn't keep Kosher in our home... but there were a few rules we did live by. We didn't eat dairy products with meat products. Nor did we eat shellfish. Later as an adult when I did eat shellfish — turned out I was allergic.

Back to this story:

.....very quickly....we learn about Hayat's college dating experience. NONE!

He was a slow-developing young adult-sexually experienced-guy. I found his new college romance charming. He a Muslim. She Jewish.

.....This story is never stagnant. There are many complex issues to ponder.

Hayat begins sharing about his childhood with his girlfriend.

Flashback to Hayat at age 12....suburban life for he and his immigrant- financially well-off family in the Midwest.

We learn about Hayat's REAL FIRST CRUSH.... a boyish distorted love with his Aunt Mina - his mother's sister - who comes to live with them (with her son around Hayat's age). There is so much chaos in their household.

So much religious confusion. Hayat's dad wants nothing to do with traditional teachings of Islam. His mother does — but is chronically angry at her philandering husband with white woman. He is no prince of a

husband 'or' father. Hayat's mother is constantly bashing her husband to young Hayat. She's a kick of a character...oh my!!! Inappropriate at times...but one self expressive woman.

Aunt Mina - is very religious and teaches Hayat the value of Islam. She teaches him to pray and to memorize the Quran. By the time he got to collegehe 'still' he remembered his Quran teachings. Having it memorized came in handy for a college course he was taking.

There's a lot going on in this novel...DRAMA..... religious differences, inner conflict questioning of society within the Muslim community, anti-Semitism, domineering men, guilt and sabotage, humiliation, affairs, hypocrisy, family turmoil, sexual awakening, oppression of women, etc.

Lots of flaw characters....

I thought this was a very engaging book much to think about.... compelling and thought-provoking....definitely held my interest. Great audiobook!

Moin Hussaini says

The last time I experienced a book like this was after reading The Namesake. Its rare to come from this background and find literature that so accurately reflects your own personal experience.

In the case of American Dervish, it is very true to the emotional experience of a young Muslim boy's experience with religion - both alienating and comforting.

The characters as more extreme and interesting versions of people in my own life. However, with some I felt that the "juiced up" versions of these people resulted in their becoming caricatures (e.g. the orthodox Muslims are made out to be bullies and antisemitic).

In my experience, I've met orthodox Muslims without an ounce of bigotry and westernized ones that are terribly racist and antisemitic. I think Akhtar could have been critical of religion without resorting to this Hollywood canard.

Nevertheless, a beautifully told and engaging story. I had a hard time putting it down.

Jill Lapin-Zell says

Ayad Akhtar's "American Dervish" is one of the most moving books I've read in a long time. I won this book in a giveaway on Goodreads, and I'm glad I did, because I might not have picked up this book otherwise, and then would have missed out on a most enjoyable read.

This book grabbed me from the start and never let me go. Its characters are multi-dimensional and believably flawed, and the writing is exquisite. For example, the passages where the author describes Hayat's (who is actually telling his own story) spiritual awakening are particularly vivid and captivating. To be able to describe something so elusive and intangible is truly a remarkable thing. Similarly, the descriptions of Mina's preparation of tea transcends the mundane. It is one of the most magical and eloquent passages in the book. The writing is almost ethereal.

The most profound and significant message in the book is how human beings deal with pain. Every character in the book endures pain; sometimes it's physical pain, sometimes it's emotional pain, and sometimes it's both, but it's always a defining experience for that character.

One caveat: there are some scenes in the book which some readers could find disturbing due to their brutality and violence. However, these scenes are not at all gratuitous and are quite necessary to convey the message of Hayat's story.

Not only do I recommend this book most highly, I also believe that it should be required reading in every multi-cultural studies class in every American high school and college. It will teach you about faith, love, despair and pain. It will resonate with you regardless of your religious and/or spiritual beliefs.

Isabel O. says

After reading some rave reviews, I was looking forward to getting my hands on this debut novel. Having read it, what I'm reminded of is that it is the book BUSINESS.

Here's what I like about the book: it's visually provocative (the author has a film background); it's a quick and somewhat entertaining read; there are a few beautifully written passages. Basically, it's the book you take to the beach or read on a flight.

But no big loss if it gets washed away or forgotten in a seat back. It's not a book that you will want to return to again and again---mostly because it lacks depth and subtlety. The characters are not human people but plot devices. The treatment of Islam is superficial and predictable: anti-Semitism, oppression of women, sexual repression. The tone is didactic and moralistic. There is something inauthentic and promotional feeling about the book. Basically, it feels like a paint-by-numbers book written in order to be controversial and made into a movie, which I reckon is quite likely.

Final thought: This is a fast food novel. Tastes alright, goes down quickly, but promises indigestion, and has little substantive value.

Jennifer says

Round up my review of 1.5 stars to 2 I guess. This was a hard book for me to get through. When I was given the galley at Book Expo I was told that it was the next "Kite Runner." I should've known better when anyone says a book is the next anything.

I really wanted to enjoy this as I feel stories from Asia in general are under represented in the U.S. and am sure that Middle Eastern stories have been on the rise in the past decade.

"American Dervish" is a coming-of-age story for a young Pakistani-American boy, Hayat. The main story is in the relationship of him between his Aunt Mina, how her residing with his family affects their life, and how Hayat's love for her grows into a dedication to the Muslim faith. His father is flawed as are his mother and

those around him and then there's the feelings of love he has for Mina that are both natural and seem to straddle the line of romantic interest.

The fact is the main drama is with the adults and as a child he is witness to them and told of them but not always a part of it, which I found to be the weakness. The fact that the whole story is told from his POV in a reflective manner and that he's not as in the drama as he should be that he doesn't confront his philandering father or his overly emotional and submissive mother or his faithful auntie in a bad relationship makes him very submissive and the story run a bit too long. I think much could've been cut and the protagonist of Hayat could have been more active especially since some of what he does is an impetus for later events. The end is rushed, but I did receive a galley so the ending and epilogue may have changed. But the ending was all told and not seen and the convenient reunion at the end seem very forced but I guess expected.

I learned a lot about characters and how to utilize narrators and such from reading "American Dervish." And am sorry I didn't enjoy it as much as I wanted to. I did appreciate being involved in the culture and the racism and prejudices but these are things as someone who is friends with people of this culture was aware of already. So perhaps for others it will be quite revealing but for those already in the know, not so much.

Sarwat says

American Dervish: Ayad Akhtar's book is a witty, humorous, educational, sensual and spiritual, insightful, captivating and riveting tale of a young child growing up in the Midwest in the early eighties. The author beautifully and painstakingly narrates the impressions of a child as he struggles to understand the complexity of Islam and thus his own identity, through the controversial messages from many well meaning people in his life. It points to the biases bred through cultural and historical lenses, which have the potential to traumatize the minds of our next generations of Muslims in America. These biases can and (inherently) do shape the very existence of the young minds, unbeknownst to the people who love them the most, their parents and families, who are so caught up in 'their own world' and its challenges. Some of the challenges in this tale are universal to all Muslims while others are very individual to the book's protagonist, Hayat Shah.

While the message of Islam is universal, the Muslims are not monolithic. Cultural influences and customary interpretations from around the world impact the way the religion of Islam is taught and practiced. With migration from around the world, Islamic Centers in America are like a 'mini United Nations', a melting pot of Muslims from around the globe, who bring in diverse customs and cultures adding to the beautiful tapestry of the Muslim fabric of America, thus adding to the complexity of understanding Muslims and Islam.

Personally, the message of Quran which resonates with me is: 'Read and Reflect', as it emphasizes the use of intellect, reason and logic and discourages from blindly following the customs and traditions of ancestors, which may be contrary to the essence of the peaceful religion of Islam.

The future of Islam and Muslims, like any faith community, depends upon our youth. With the ever increasing negative stereotyping of Muslims and Islam by parts of the media, clergy and politicians, it is our responsibility to the next generations to bring in an era of Islam, which stands for social justice, equality of all beings and peace.

After reading Ayad Akhtar's book, American Dervish, I am convinced more than ever that the time and need for 'Ijtihad' is now, for ongoing contemporary narrative with contextual interpretation of faith and the Holy

Quran, individually and collectively by scholars to help reshape and reframe the influence of religion on the mindset of next generation of Muslims, which engages them towards a peaceful coexistence in the world and peace within themselves.

Sarwat Malik MD, FACP

Murabitha says

This is definitely a fast read. It's not the kind of book you want to linger over or revisit with any eagerness.* But that's not the reason I give it such a low rating.

Interesting, compelling books add to the story of stories. They appear fresh. Offer us something new. And, while it is true that every story tells us a tale we've already heard in one form or another, the good ones do it in a way which surprises the reader.

This book, American Dervish, rehashes the old in a connect-the-dots, predictable way. I mean, what popular culture American narrative of Muslimness has not included:

- oppressed Muslim women
- tyrannical Muslim men
- violent Muslim men
- hypocritical Muslim men
- anti-semitic Muslims
- the repressiveness of living pork-free
- Muslims screeching for rights
- Muslims plotting to bomb stuff

It's all in here and yet, we are constantly being told how fresh this book is. Huh?

It's sad because I was really excited when I first heard of American Dervish. An American Muslim growing up in the Midwest at such a pivotal moment in history? Wow. I was practically salivating at the depth and nuances such a narrative could open up in the literary world.

Reading it, I was reminded of a quote from a brilliant writer friend of mine: No one seems to want to hear that other American Muslim experience, the one that doesn't jibe with the narrative that has already been told. The narrative that has been stamped with approval is the one that is bleak, depressing and troubling. So to make it big, a book has to repeat this message.

That is exactly what this book regurgitates - Muslims are troubling people. And, disturbingly, the book world applauds.

It's like a book featuring Black people which serves you the same tired stereotypes. Or, a Jewish family drama with that mama, the guilty son etc etc. Fresh?

With this schtick though, there's more at stake than just awful stereotypes. This book is full of assumptions about Muslim men and their violent "tendencies". Some parts describing Muslim men read like caricatures devised by anti-semitic writers in pre-war Germany to fuel misconceptions of Jewish men.

I like what one goodreads reviewer said about how it would be interesting if this book gets much more publicity as it would signify just how much of a platform has been funded for it. *(i.e. The writing doesn't stand out in a way to warrant the accolades.)

Still, I am optimistic and continue to hold out for that awesome book that will give us a fresh take on the American Muslim experience. A beautiful compelling book - because American Dervish is definitely not it.

Ksab says

I enjoyed this book and read it in a day!! I found the book very interesting and especially well written in describing the multi faceted joys and challenges growing up in an immigrant community. The author's character development as to the dilemmas and issues of personal psychological and cultural identity was amazing. My family has a particular interest in the American Islamic community. My ex husband and I converted to Islam nearly 40 years- I was a Muslim for 15 years- My grown daughter has lived in Saudi Arabia. We call ourselves Muslim-friendly. As a young wife(in my 20's) and mother of 3 young children I grew into adulthood in this community. K

Maggie says

More like 1.5 stars.

I felt excited to read this book after hearing the author being interviewed on NPR's Fresh Air. On air, he sounded unsure of himself and, at the same time, very opinionated---a combination I really like for reasons I won't go into here. Akhtar's bio is intriguing...Ivy-educated, actor, playwright and student of Sufi masters (!). Sadly, his novel is disappointing compared to his punditry. I bet, though, he'd write fabulous essays.

American Dervish is a good, quick read but it lacks nuance. What should be complex issues (clash of Islam and the West, sexual awakening, family turmoil, oppression of women) and complex characters end up feeling flat and one-dimensional. None of the characters come to life with any humanness (maybe with the exception of the boy's father); none of them are particularly likeable. And it doesn't help that the plot is predictable and the writing spotty. The book does not feel primarily like a novel but more like a platform for a talking head role for Akhtar on all topics Muslim-American. The experience of reading it often left me wondering if a marketing dept wrote the book.

I'm pretty puzzled by the good reviews here and elsewhere. (For my money, the most honest editorial review of this debut novel is in Publisher's Weekly.) It may simply be that Akhtar is bright, personable and has got a good schtick and that the publisher has got deep pockets. Or if I drop the cynicism, it could be that for those readers who are new to the life of immigrants, coming of age tales and the range and contradictions of religious belief, American Dervish is a decent, if simplified, introduction. But for those more engaged with these concerns, the novel is facile and pedantic and doesn't grasp the subtlety of human relationships. Maybe the main reason this book doesn't work is that it is a commercial young-adult fable pretending to be a literary novel.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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