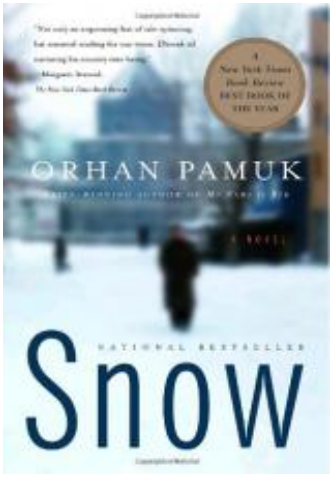
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Snow

by Orhan Pamuk



About the Book

Dread, yearning, identity, intrigue, the lethal chemistry between secular doubt and Islamic fanaticism?these are the elements that Orhan Pamuk anneals in this masterful, disquieting novel. An exiled poet named Ka returns to Turkey and travels to the forlorn city of Kars. His ostensible purpose is to report on a wave of suicides among religious girls forbidden to wear their head-scarves. But Ka is also drawn by his memories of the radiant Ipek, now recently divorced.

Amid blanketing snowfall and universal suspicion, Ka finds himself pursued by figures ranging from Ipek's ex-husband to a charismatic terrorist. A lost gift returns with ecstatic suddenness. A theatrical evening climaxes in a massacre. And finding god may be the prelude to losing everything else. Touching, slyly comic, and humming with cerebral suspense, **Snow** is of immense relevance to our present moment.

Discussion Guide

1. Almost immediately after the novel opens, the narrator speaks in first person directly to the reader and concludes his interjection of Ka's "biographical details" with the statement: "I don't wish to deceive you. I'm an old friend of Ka's, and I begin this story knowing everything that will happen to him during his time in Kars" [p. 5]. Later, during his report of Ka's conversation with Necip, the narrator says of Necip, "With a childishness that amazed Ka, he opened his large green eyes, one of which would be shattered in fifty-one minutes" [p. 134]. With these direct statements of the narrator's foreknowledge, what happens to the fictional conventions of plot and suspense? How does learning that the narrator's name is Orhan, and that he's written something called **The Black Book** [p. 425], affect the reader's reception of the story?

2. Ka's mood at the beginning of the story is dreamlike and nostalgic: "As slowly and silently as the snow in a dream, the traveler fell into a long-desired, long-awaited reverie; cleansed by memories of innocence and childhood, he succumbed to optimism and dared to believe himself at home in this world" [p. 4]. Does Ka remain in this state of optimism and seeming innocence throughout his stay in Kars? As an exile, he is moved by a sense of returning home; does he make a

mistake by believing himself at home enough to become involved in the affairs of Kars?

3. While Ka and Ipek are having coffee in the New Life Pastry Shop, they witness the murder of the director of the Institute of Education. Discuss the conversation between the Institute director and the young man who has been sent to assassinate him [pp. 38?48]. What are the elements that make the scene so effective?

4. The brief history of Kars on pages 19?21 describes a place at the crossroads of "two empires now defunct," which has seen "endless wars, rebellions, massacres, and atrocity." Despite Kemal Atatürk's westernizing ideology (reinforced brutally by the military), Kars is sunk in poverty and hopelessness; its bourgeoisie has fled. Muhtar says, "The city of Kars and the people in it --- it was as if they weren't real. Everyone wanted to die or to leave. . . . It was as if I'd been erased from history, banished from civilization" [p. 53]. How has the town's history shaped its inhabitants' ideas about themselves and their future?

5. Ka's conversations with Muhtar, Blue, the boys from the religious high school, Sheikh Efendi, and Kadife [chapters 6, 8, 9, 11,13] explore the gap between traditional Islam and Western secularism. How do these conversations affect Ka's sense of his spiritual condition? How strongly does he need to identify himself as a secular intellectual, and why is the possibility of his own belief in God, which he admits to, so unsettling to him?

6. Karl Marx said, "Hegel remarks somewhere that history tends to repeat itself. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" [**The Eighteenth Brumiare of Louis Bonaparte**]. In the novel's most farcical and tragic moments, theatrical impresario Sunay Zaim and his allies the military police stage their own intervention in the history of Kars. Does Pamuk, in these episodes so central to the story, seem to share Marx's pessimism?

7. Blue tells a story from the ancient epic **Shehname**: "Once upon a time, millions of people knew it by heart. . . . But now, because we've fallen under the spell of the West, we've forgotten our own stories" [p. 78]. What does he imply when he asks Ka, "Is this story so beautiful that a man could kill for it?" [p. 79]

8. At least three different perspectives are given on the suicide girls. The deputy governor tells Ka, "What is certain is that these girls were driven to suicide because they were extremely unhappy. . . . But if unhappiness were a genuine reason for suicide, half the women in Turkey would be killing themselves" [p. 14]; Ipek says, "The men give themselves to religion, and the women kill themselves" [p. 35]. Kadife argues that women commit suicide to save their pride [p. 112]. Does the novel provide an answer to the mystery of why women are killing themselves?

9. Speaking with Muhtar, Ka says, "If I were an author and Ka were a character in a book, I'd say, ?Snow reminds Ka of God!' But I'm not sure it would be accurate. What brings me close to God is the silence of snow" [p. 60]. Why does the snow make Ka think of God? How do Ka's thoughts about his own religious beliefs change throughout the novel?

10. In getting involved with the various factions in Kars, does Ka act on his own behalf, or as the pawn of others? Is he actually, and knowingly, a double agent? As the plot progresses and Ka is moving back and forth between rival groups, what becomes most confusing? Does the reader's experience mirror Ka's spiritual and moral bewilderment?

11. When he travels to Kars, Ka enters another world: "Raised in Istanbul amid the middle-class comforts of Nisantas . . . Ka knew nothing of poverty; it was something beyond the house, in another world" [p. 18]. In the meeting at the Hotel Asia, a Kurdish boy says, "I've always dreamed of the day when I'd have a chance to share my ideas with the world. . . .

All I'd want them to print in that Frankfurt paper is this: We're not stupid, we're just poor! And we have a right to want to insist on this distinction" [p. 275]. Later, Orhan asks, "How much can we ever know about love and pain in another's heart? How much can we hope to understand those who have suffered deeper anguish, greater deprivation, and more crushing disappointments than we ourselves have known?" [p. 259] Why are these statements so central to the problems of empathy and ethics presented in the novel?

12. Does the epigraph from Dostoevsky --- "Well then, eliminate the people, curtail them, force them to be silent. Because the European enlightenment is more important than people" --- sum up the West's arrogant approach to fundamentalist political movements? How is it relevant to the events in Kars?

13. Everyone in Kars watches television constantly; they even use the television to watch the coup as it takes place just outside their doors. Given the deliberately theatrical nature of the coup, the uncertainty as to whether the soldiers' bullets are real, and Sunay's death onstage during the second performance, what does Pamuk suggest about the relationship between history and fiction, reality and illusion?

14. Does Ipek love Ka, or does she still love Blue? Does she betray Ka by not going to Frankfurt with him [pp. 388?90]? In an unsent letter, Ka wrote to Ipek, "I carry the scars of my unbearable suffering on every inch of my body. Sometimes I think it's not just you I've lost, but that I've lost everything in the world" [p. 260]. Was it foolish of Ka to think that he would be able to have the happiness that love provides? Why does Ipek decide not to go to Germany with him?

15. "Once a six-pronged snowflake crystallizes, it takes between eight and ten minutes for it to fall through the sky, lose its original shape, and vanish. . . . Ka decided that snowflakes have much in common with people. It was a snowflake that inspired ?I, Ka'" [pp. 375?76]. The poems that Ka writes in his green notebook while in Kars (kar means "snow") align with the points on a snowflake. These poems, however, are never recorded in the novel. How seriously should a reader take Ka's efforts as a poet? What is the significance of the fact that the poems are not available to the reader, but instead we have a novel called **Snow**?

16. In several of his novels, Pamuk has created characters who are doubles or alter egos. Here he gives us Ka and the narrator as well as Necip and Fazil. Late in the story, the narrator follows Ka's trail on a reading tour through various German cities; he wished "to do exactly as Ka had done on his own tour seven weeks earlier. . . . I would wander through the cold empty city and pretend I was Ka walking the same streets to escape the painful memories of Ipek " [p. 378?379]. Upon following Ka's trail to Kars, he notes, "I shouldn't want my readers to imagine that I was trying to become his posthumous shadow" [p. 380]. What do these statements imply?

17. How is Kadife different from her sister Ipek ? What motivates her to go onstage and bare her head in Sunay's play? Is she a devout Muslim, or is wearing the headscarf simply a costume necessary for her love affair with Blue?

18. Reexamine Necip's story [pp. 104?7] once you've reached the end of the novel. Has Necip's tale foreseen the revelations about the narrator and his love for Ipek, as well as Fazil's marriage to Kadife? How does Necip live on after his death? How does Ka?

Author Bio

Orhan Pamuk won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. His novel MY NAME IS RED won the 2003 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His work has been translated into more than 60 languages. He lives in Istanbul.

Critical Praise

"From the Golden Horn, with a wicked grin, the political novel makes a triumphant return."

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