The Rug Merchant

by Meg Mullins



About the Book

Ushman Khan is a long way from home.In New York City, he is a world apart from his beloved wife, Farak, and his ailing mother, whose spine was crushed by an earthquake that killed 35,000 Iranians and changed their lives forever.Life in New York is indeed different and lonely, yet Ushman is determined to be successful, to sell the beautiful rugs that Farak sends him and earn enough money to have his family join him to start a new and prosperous American life.
And, indeed, Ushman is a success, for not only does he prove himself to be a good businessman, but his customers find his expert knowledge of his carpets and their origins an attractive selling point.He has one especially loyal customer, Mrs. Roberts.Alone in a big Upper East Side apartment with her dying husband, she tries to fill the emptiness in her life by buying carpet after carpet, and these sales help to put Ushman on solid financial ground.
But as pervasive and unseasonably chilling as the early summer rain falling on the city, the reality of Ushman?s life and his history take hold.Farak, having suffered the pain of several miscarriages and the stigma of having come to her marriage from a lower class, confesses to Ushman that she is now pregnant with another man?s child and plans to begin a new life with him.Ushman is devastated, paralyzed by the thought that he has no idea what will now become of his life.Until he meets Stella.

Stella is nineteen, blond, and beautiful, an unlikely counterpart to this older, Middle Eastern man.Yet Stella has her own demons to contend with, including her mother?s recent suicide attempt.And she, too, being a southern girl, is a stranger to New York.

Ushman and Stella begin a relationship that is at once powerful and precarious?each gains a sense of strength and belonging from the other, yet underneath it all is the unspoken truth that a future together is unlikely if not impossible.For Stella, though, what is important is that she now has a confidant, a man who looks at her not as a child but as a woman; and for Ushman, it is also the present that matters:this young, beautiful, American girl has looked at him and seen, with clear eyes and an open heart, not an immigrant but a man.

When their relationship comes to a sudden yet somehow expected end, they are both stronger and better able to deal with what life has in store.For Stella, that means returning to her life as a student at Columbia, and reconnecting with her parents at home.For Ushman, it means forgiving Farak, and offering himself to the person who perhaps has needed him most but whom he has been avoiding emotionally:his best client, the recently widowed Mrs. Roberts.Ushman is now able to give her what she has really been after for these many months:not the perfect carpet, but the perfect company.

The Rug Merchant is a beautiful portrait of loneliness in a city with millions of people.It is also a touching meditation on finding connection in unexpected places and learning how our seemingly inconsequential lives can quite suddenly and unexpectedly take on a depth of meaning and happiness when we realize a fundamental truth: Not only do we need other people, but, no matter who we are or where we come from, we all have something precious to give.

Discussion Guide

1. When Ushman decides to keep the antique carpet from the man in Queens, the decision sets in motion, or at least Ushman believes it sets in motion, a series of life-altering events.For instance, Ushman believes the rug and the $30,000 he knew Mrs. Roberts was willing to pay for it gave him the freedom and confidence to ask Farak what she truly wants.It is then that she confesses to him that she is pregnant, ?and that stupid lucky feeling makes him a bigger fool now than ever?(p. 21).If he had not ?stolen? the rug, would anything really have turned out differently?Later, he throws out the rug.Why?

2. Our three principal characters all seem to be in search of something.What does each character in the novel gain/learn from the other? Is Stella truly devastated by Ushman?s relationship with Mrs. Roberts, or is she subconsciously looking for a way out of her relationship with Ushman, as he suspects?Why might she wish the relationship to end?

3. When Ushman tells Mrs. Roberts that her coveted carpet is no longer available, she seems oddly pleased, and ?it makes Ushman angry, that to want something she can?t have is an indulgence.?In the next moments, Ushman lies down and Mrs. Roberts lies down next to him, silently and without touching him, ?as a wife would.?Why does the author include this moment?How might it foreshadow later events?

4. ?Show me how a Muslim would approach this rug, at a time of prayer,? Mrs. Roberts requests of Ushman, when admiring the antique prayer rug(p. 71).Discuss the significance of Mrs. Roberts?s asking Ushman to pray in front of her,and what the various carpets represent throughout the novel.

5. Ushman is thrilled when Stella comes to visit him for the first time.Seeing her distress, he invites her to rest in his store and she sleeps for several hours.When she wakes up, Ushman suddenly feels angry at himself and begins to escort her out, but then seems to change his mind(p. 87). Why does he change his mind?Why does he choose this moment to blurt out that he wishes his mother would die?

6. After first wishing harm to Farak?s baby, Ushman now feels anguish and sympathy toward her after learning she is ?marked? by a purple blotch across her temple:?Only now that he has something to cherish does he want the universe to be forgiving?(p. 185), he thinks to himself, upon reflecting what he has gained from his relationship with Stella.But just a few pages later he tells the Vietnamese prostitute, ?Your sad story does not concern me.?She, like Ushman, is also an outsider, so why does his newfound compassion not spill over to her?Why did he ever allow himself to be with this

prostitute in the first place?

7. *The Rug Merchant* is, at its essence, the story of a romance between two very different people.Can you think of other examples in literature of unlikely couples or cross-cultural relationships?How do these usually work out in the end?

8. Why does Ushman finally open up to Mrs. Roberts at the end of the novel, after resisting this intimacy for so long?What change does his openness signal?

9. What makes Ushman such a compelling character?How do you see his life unfolding?Where do you see him building the rest of his life?

Author Bio

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