You Are Not a Stranger Here
by Adam Haslett

About the Book

The publication of "Notes to My Biographer," in Zoetrope: All-Story magazine introduced readers to the remarkable voice of Adam Haslett. Nominated as part of a National Magazine Award, broadcast on National Public Radio, performed at venues across the country, the story brought the author widespread recognition.

Now, in his first book, Adam Haslett gives us nine richly varied stories, each suffused with intense emotion and written in a lyric prose alternatively lush and spare. You Are Not a Stranger Here carries its readers into the hearts and minds of people facing life’s most profound dilemmas. We meet an aging inventor still burning with ideas as he makes a final visit to his gay son. A psychiatrist’s encounter with a reluctant patient reveals a young doctor’s own needs and fears. An orphaned boy finds solace in a classmate’s violence. The return of an old lover disturbs the peace between a brother and sister who have lived together for decades.

In settings that range from New England to Great Britain, from Los Angeles to the American West, the stories in this book treat what Faulkner called the old verities and truths of the heart: love and honor, pity and pride, compassion and sacrifice. They do so with heartbreaking precision and an often generous humor, drawing us past the surface of characters’ lives into the moments of decision and recognition that shape them irrevocably. Together these stories constitute a significant achievement by a powerful new writer.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways are the nine stories in YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE unified? What kinds of characters, situations, and thematic concerns recur throughout the book?
2. Why does Adam Haslett begin the collection with a story told from the point of view of someone suffering from mental illness? How does this story affect the reader’s perceptions of the stories that follow it? What does “Notes to My Biographer” reveal about being in a manic state?

3. In “The Good Doctor,” Frank experiences “a familiar comfort being in the presence of another person’s unknowable pain. More than any landscape, this place felt like home” [p. 41]. Why would Frank feel this way? Does such a feeling make him a more empathetic therapist, or does it indicate a kind of narcissistic relationship to his patients? In what ways are readers of YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE in a position similar to Frank’s?

4. At the end of “The Beginnings of Grief,” why does the narrator cry, “for the first time in a long while,” when his shop teacher, Mr. Raffello, delivers the “dark amber chest” [p. 64], he has made? Why would seeing this particular object make him weep? What might his crying signify?

5. In “Devotion,” Owen observes that reading OTHELLO in school did not help him to deal with his own jealousy. “What paltry aid literature turned out to be when the feelings were yours and not others’” [p. 78]. Should literature be an aid to understanding and controlling one’s own feelings? In what ways might YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE make readers more fully aware of their own and others’ emotional states?

6. Why does Hillary, at the end of “Devotion,” feel herself “there again in the woods, covering her brother’s eyes as she gazed up into the giant oak” [p. 88]? In what ways does the story reenact this earlier moment of protection?

7. In “Reunion,” as James enters the final stages of AIDS, he writes a series of letters to his dead father. “I find you now and again here on the common, bits and pieces of you scattered in the woods, but as the days go by, so the need lessens. I’ll be coming home soon” [p. 131]. In what sense does he “find” his father on the common?

8. In “Divination,” after Samuel voices his premonitions, his father tells him: “You’re twelve years old and you have a lot of ideas in your head, but nothing will wreck you quicker than if you let yourself confuse what’s real and what isn’t…. I don’t know what it is you’re dreaming, or what you dreamt about that teacher, but that’s all it is --- dreams. Your life’s got nothing to do with those shadows, nothing at all” [p. 157]. In what ways does “Divination,” and indeed the entire book, question the distinction between what’s real and what isn’t? In what ways do the “dreams” and “shadows” referred to above have everything to do with the characters’ lives in YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE?

9. In “My Father’s Business,” the narrator’s father wants to inoculate himself against the present: “So much easier if you can see people as though they were characters from a book. You can still spend time with them. But you have nothing to do with their fate” [p. 185]. How might such an attitude have affected the narrator’s own fate? How does this statement relate to the narrator’s desire to “figure out the relationship between the desire for theoretical knowledge and certain kinds of despair” [p. 177]?

10. When Paul asks Mrs. McLaggen in “War’s End” if she often invites strangers into her home, she replies: “You’re not a stranger here” [p. 106]. Why might Adam Haslett have chosen this line as the title for the collection?

11. In “Volunteer,” Ted at first resists the idea of visiting the Plymouth Brewster Structured Living Facility: “Enough already with the fucking mentally ill, for Christ’s sakes, enough, but something made him come” [p. 213]. What is it
that draws him there? What role does his own family life play in his decision to volunteer there? What kind of relationship does he establish with Elizabeth? What do he and Elizabeth give each other?

12. What do the stories of YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE, taken as a whole, say about mental illness, about madness and love, and about the relationships between parents and children? In what ways do these stories give us a new look at the age-old subject of family life?

Author Bio

Adam Haslett is the author of three works of fiction: the short story collection YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER HERE, which was a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist; the novel UNION ATLANTIC, winner of the Lambda Literary Award and shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize; and his most recent, the novel IMAGINE ME GONE. His books have been translated into 18 languages, and his journalism and fiction have appeared in The Financial Times, Esquire, New York Magazine, The New Yorker, The Guardian, Der Spiegel, The Nation, The Atlantic Monthly and Best American Short Stories.

He has been awarded the Berlin Prize by the American Academy in Berlin, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the PEN/Malamud and PEN/Winship Awards. In 2016, he received the Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts & Letters.

A graduate of Swarthmore College, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and Yale Law School, he has been a visiting professor at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and Columbia University. He lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"Adam Haslett possesses the rare ability to combine powerful narrative with sensitive and perceptive observation of people and places. You Are Not A Stranger Here is a brilliant beginning to a literary career."

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