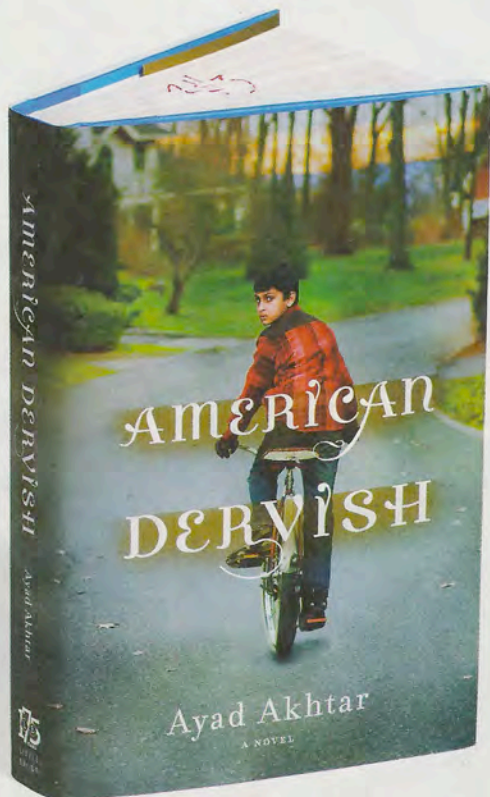


Books

Hymns from the Heartland. A debut novel of Islam in the U.S. Midwest

By William Green



AS A MUSLIM CHILD IN THE AMERICAN Midwest, Ayad Akhtar says he felt “invisible”—a member of a minority that “nobody really understood.” Even now, “people still don’t have any sense of what it feels like to be Muslim.” Akhtar’s debut novel, *American Dervish*, should set that straight. A riveting and disturbing tale of a Muslim boy grappling with the mysteries of love and religion, it is now being published in 20 languages, and the global rights have fetched some \$750,000. At 41, Akhtar—who previously co-wrote and starred in *The War Within*, a 2005 film about a Muslim terrorist—is anything but invisible.

The novel begins provocatively with an act of religious rebellion. A Pakistani-American student, Hayat Shah, chomps on a bratwurst, feeling sublimely “complete” as he savors the pork his faith has

outlawed. He then relishes an Islamic-history lecture in which he discovers that the text of the Koran mutated over centuries, persuading him that “the bedrock Muslim belief in the Quran as the direct, unchanged, eternal word of God was a fiction.” Celebrating his loss of faith, he French-kisses a Jewish student.

This is treacherous territory, given the fundamentalist fury that greeted Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Speaking by phone from New York City, where he’s lived since 1997, Akhtar insists that he hasn’t censored himself. But he isn’t gratuitously incendiary, either. In his depiction of Hayat, he says he hopes to correct the Western misperception that Muslims are “inured to doubt.” Hayat is riddled with it, veering wildly between three conflicting views of Islam: orthodox fervor, rationalist disbelief and a more

nuanced reverence for the Koran’s wisdom. Akhtar says this mirrors his own tumultuous spiritual trajectory.

The gripping plot revolves around Hayat’s recollection of his childhood in 1980s Milwaukee (where Akhtar himself grew up in a Pakistani-American community). Hayat is raised in a secular Muslim home by a philandering father who thinks religion is “for fools” and a mother whose alienation from Islam stems from her outraged conviction that “Muslim men are terrified of women.” When Hayat is 10, his mother’s best friend, Mina, moves in, escaping an abusive marriage in Pakistan. Beautiful and mystical, she mesmerizes Hayat, becoming his guru and first love. Appalled when she falls for a Jewish neuroscientist, Hayat intervenes disastrously in a section titled “Portrait of an Anti-Semite as a Boy.”

Akhtar portrays Muslim women as virtually powerless victims of discrimination. In Pakistan, Mina’s father breaks her nose; her husband abandons her and their son, yet can legally demand “undisputed” custody of the boy at age 7. In America—which most Muslims are said to regard not as “a land of abundance and opportunity, but of sin”—she’s pushed to marry a violent loser to preserve her honor.

Yet amid all this prejudice, Mina is uplifted by Islam. Eschewing the “outer forms” of religious convention, she doesn’t fast or wear a headscarf, focusing instead on the Koran’s deeper “intention.” She teaches Hayat about mercy and forgiveness, infuses him with awe at the infinity of the universe and insists that everything—even our suffering—“is always for the good.”

Akhtar says he admires this Muslim philosophy of “radical acceptance” of “what we can’t control in life.” But his ambivalence toward Islam pervades the novel. In one chilling scene, a Muslim entrepreneur explains why Jews are doomed to roast in “hellfire,” citing the Koran’s assertion: “They have earned the burden of God’s wrath.” A Muslim atheist responds with a conflicting verse, which promises that Jews “shall have their reward with the Lord.” The power of this unsettling novel lies in Akhtar’s refusal to simplify such contradictions. ■