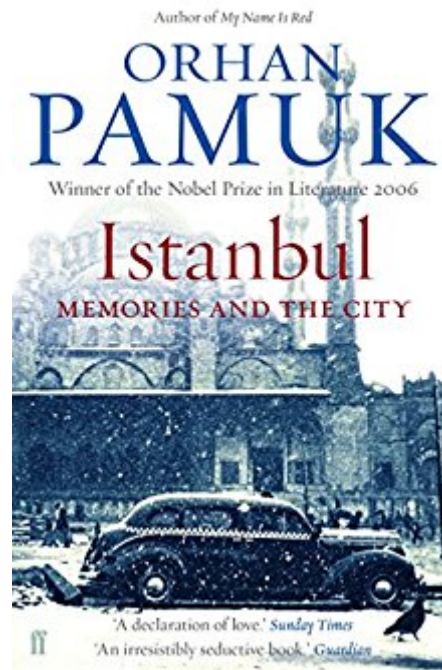


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Istanbul



Synopsis

Istanbul is a shimmering evocation, by turns intimate and panoramic, of one of the world's great cities, by its foremost writer. Orhan Pamuk, winner of the Nobel Prize in 2006, was born in Istanbul, in the family apartment building where his mother first held him in her arms. His portrait of his city is thus also a self-portrait, refracted by memory and the melancholy-or *hüzün*- that all Istanbulis share: the sadness that comes of living amid the ruins of a lost Ottoman Empire. As he companionably guides us across the Bosphorus, through Istanbul's historical monuments and lost paradises, its dilapidated Ottoman villas, back streets and waterways, he also introduces us to the city's writers, artists and murderers. Like the Dublin of Joyce and Jan Morris' Venice, Pamuk's Istanbul is a triumphant encounter of place and sensibility, beautifully written and immensely moving.

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Customer Reviews

Istanbul has been the designated intersection between East and West for centuries, and as a past tourist there, I have felt the resulting richness in culture and history as I visited the city's landmarks. However, author Orhan Pamuk takes a different view as a native of the city - a pervasive confusion over identity in reconciling the often conflicting sympathies of different cultures. In fact, he feels that

there is an overwhelming sense of melancholy. As a Turk, Pamuk knows of which he speaks in this intriguing memoir as he grew up during the Atatürk revolution. He is not caught up in the inherent exoticism of the city but rather what he sees as a critical juncture between past and present. The past is represented by the Ottoman Empire, a multilingual dynasty whose heart once beat in Istanbul, its once dazzling capital. But the empire no longer exists, except in the surviving imperial mansions and memorials, the marble fountains and clapboard waterside villas. Yet, all the remnants are deteriorating as developers take hold of the real estate. In Pamuk's view, the Ottoman past is a foreign country for the Turks. The present is the Turkish Republic, Atatürk's secular, Western-oriented, homogenizing nation state now centered in Ankara, an outgrown Anatolian village. Pamuk spends much of the book understandably mourning the replacement of the Empire with the nondescript country that is Turkey now. Sometimes his disappointed tone can be wearing, but Pamuk's honesty is bracing. Politically and economically, Istanbul is no longer a city of consequence, let alone a world capital. It is an insular little place sinking in its own ruins, "so poor and confused that it can never again dream of rising to its former heights of wealth, power and culture".

In 1923 when Turkey became a republic, Muslim Turks made up half of Istanbul's population of about a million. The other half consisted of Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Italians and other non-Muslim ethnic groups. The city was truly cosmopolitan and highly fashionable in the 1960s when Pamuk was growing up in upscale Nisantasi district: Non-Muslim religious temples outnumbered mosques even then, although the population has unevenly grown to 1.5 million in favor of Muslim Turks. One could order ham or pork sausages for breakfast in most restaurants or drink lemon flavored vodka at Rejans, a Russian restaurant run by two emigrant White Russian ladies, in Beyoglu. In those days, Istanbul was a visibly secular, highly sophisticated, cultured and refined city. Today, Istanbul has a bustling population of about 12 million people where the non-Muslim population can hardly reach 100 thousand in total. Some churches and synagogues are closed most of the time because of lack of attendance and funds. Pera (or Beyoglu) is no longer a cosmopolitan community despite its long surviving name. The city has a much different, lackluster character now. It looks tired, burdened by heavy traffic, crowded streets and dense housing. When Orhan Pamuk reflects on his life in Istanbul, he cannot help feeling melancholic about it because the city has now been inundated by an influx of conservative migrants from rural Turkey. While walking around in working-class districts similar to Fatih or Carsamba, a secular Istanbulu (like Pamuk himself) would indeed feel depressed. Clad in clothes compliant with Islamic values, overpowering number of bearded men and headscarved

women would contrast very poorly to the secular images of the past. For me, this book is not as simple as it appears at first glance.

Ah, to understand a Turk. To comprehend a vast, neglected city like Istanbul, a once-splendid hub of empire and now the veritable locus of "East Meets West." Even better, to glimpse intimately, what makes a great author, great. If you haven't read any of Orhan Pamuk's work, reading this fine memoir is the perfect place to start, it can only whet your appetite for future readings. If like me, you lament that nothing remains unread in Pamuk's translated canon, then this book will feel like pure luxury, like a series of grace notes floating over a collection of excellent fiction. "Istanbul: Memories and the City" has many tender accounts of the author's childhood and family life along with insightful musings on the character of Istanbul and its denizens, the Istanbulis. Certainly, the book's central theme is an exploration of how relationship and birthplace make us what we are. As Mr. Pamuk makes plain, (and lucky for us) he was born in no ordinary city. In addition, the book harkens directly to the zany, dream-afflicted characters found abundantly in Mr. Pamuk's work, which the memoir makes amply clear, are so much in their parts . . . like unto himself. Once again, Pamuk has us pondering the structure and nuance of Identity, this time as a grand idea explored through the medium of childhood and birthplace. The sensitive candor with which Mr. Pamuk describes his background and relationship to the City is quite touching. The chief literary pleasure of the book has to be the chapter describing "Huzun" (which may be an aging sister to notions of "Kismet"). "Huzun," according to Pamuk, is a collective melancholy consisting of, in differing degree; longing, nostalgia and unrequited love. Mr.

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