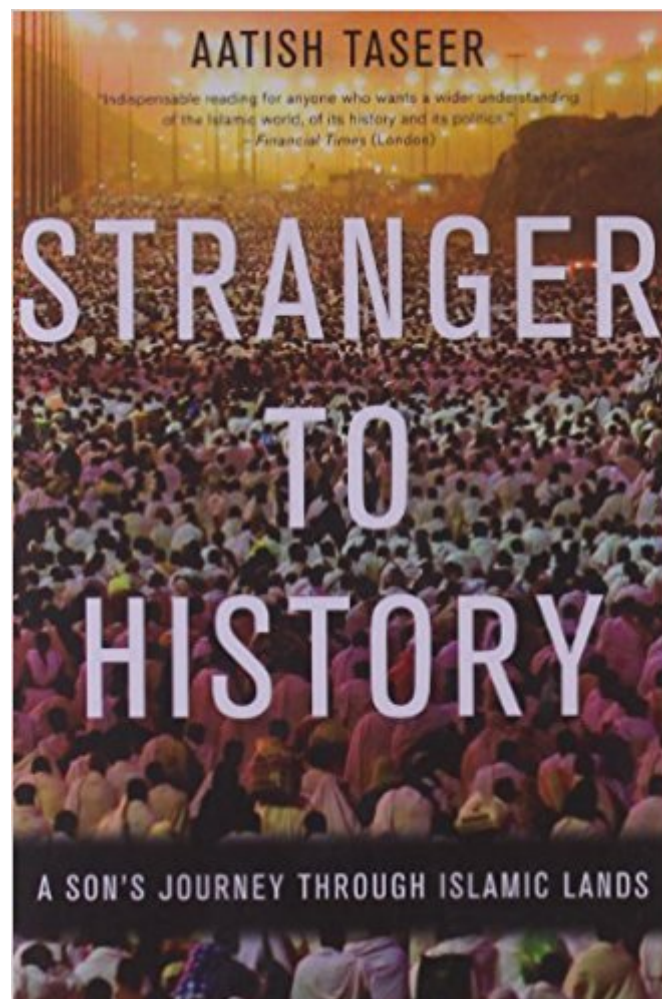




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Stranger To History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands



Synopsis

"Indispensable reading for anyone who wants a wider understanding of the Islamic world, of its history and its politics." —Financial Times

Aatish Taseer's fractured upbringing left him with many questions about his own identity. Raised by his Sikh mother in Delhi, his father, a Pakistani Muslim, remained a distant figure. *Stranger to History* is the story of the journey he made to try to understand what it means to be Muslim in the twenty-first century. Starting from Istanbul, Islam's once greatest city, he travels to Mecca, its most holy, and then home through Iran and Pakistan. Ending in Lahore, at his estranged father's home, on the night Benazir Bhutto was killed, it is also the story of Taseer's divided family over the past fifty years. Recent events have added a coda to *Stranger to History*, as his father was murdered by a political assassin. A new introduction by the author reflects on how this event changes the impact of the book, and why its message is more relevant than ever.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Graywolf Press; Reprint edition (November 13, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 155597628X

ISBN-13: 978-1555976286

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 18 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #474,474 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #153 in Books > Travel > Middle East > General #154 in Books > Travel > Specialty Travel > Literary & Religious #326 in Books > History > World > Religious > Islam

Customer Reviews

There are so many layers to this touching book. At its most basic level, it is about the relationship between a father and a son, but it is also about the complex political situation unraveling in Pakistan, and, subsequently, about the irrevocable rift between the same father and son. It is also about the idea of Pakistan, which inevitably means, Taseer explains, its opposition to India. He chronicles a poignant pilgrimage because his account is also about the loss of his father. Salman Taseer, the governor of the province of Punjab, was assassinated by his bodyguard for being an enemy of the Muslim faith. His crime was defending a Christian woman accused of blasphemy. In

addition, *Stranger to History* is a prophetic book. As Taseer recalls his eight-month journey in Pakistan, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, he witnesses intimations of turmoil to come: the anger leading up to the Arab Spring, the faces of the now suppressed Green Revolution following the disputed election of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the atrocities of the Assad regime. Moving and exceedingly relevant. --June Sawyers

• A subtle and poignant work by a young writer to watch. • V.S. Naipaul • This is a work that ought to be read by policy-makers in Whitehall and Washington as well as in Islamic countries--for its insights into the thinking of angry young Muslim men. • The Spectator

In a recent review for *Poetry Magazine*, the poet and journalist Austin Allen asserts that T. S. Eliot's body of work "entices all of us, even the most Prufrockian schlub, to view history as personal" and to personify it as the source of our daily temptations and frustrations (September 2015). Aatish Taseer, no schlub, Prufrockian or otherwise, in his 2011 memoir, *Stranger to History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands*, nevertheless has written a contemporary substantiation to Allen's claim. Taseer personifies the psychological world he grew up in, Punjabi, India, haunted by its pre-Partition past. A deeply serious person, tall, handsome, engaging, considerate, with an encyclopedic knowledge of Indian languages, culture and history, Taseer's eyes, even at instances of high "or low" hilarity, are shadowed not only with his own past and its disillusionments, but with disenchantment, sorrow, in what he sees as the cultural fall of a century. He is taken with the idea of the 1947 split of Pakistan from India as a symbol of himself, or perhaps it works the other way around: perhaps he is a symbol of it. His eight-month journey through strongholds of the Islamic world "with only his British passport to defend him - and he dispassionately interviews locals as he goes" begins in Turkey, where politics and faith are purposely, sometimes heedlessly, insensibly divorced, proceeds through Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where politics and religion are one, and ends at ailing Pakistan "when he crosses on foot" demonstrating an admirable lack of prudence. Henry James, in his essay "The Art of Fiction," offers this advice to writers: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" Taseer is not looking for corroboration of a position he already holds, but for understanding of the phenomena he observes, beginning with an alienated Muslim teenager in Britain, and ending with his deceptively unfettered father, the Pakistani businessman and politician who was assassinated by his own bodyguard in 2012: pretzel logic, irrationality, fanaticism, rebellion, and fear, all in relation to a history embattled

with the present, a history that is ever eroding from consciousness. Taseer asks, What is the nature and source of this faith that has become, in the modern world, so deeply politicized? What has happened, if they still exist, to cultural Muslims, whom he defines in an article for the Huffington Post, but ends *Stranger to History* with a sense of separation from, as: “Intellectuals, poets, writers [who] took great pride in the challenge that they, as men of learning, were obliged to present to men of faith. Long before dissent and irreverence came to be seen as a Western contamination, they had been an organic part of the Islam of the Indian subcontinent [and are] now most endangered of endangered creatures: the atheist Muslim. A man, who though not religious, was nonetheless steeped in the culture of Indian Islam; an unbeliever, yes; but, by no means, deracinated [who] represented a certain intellectual and cultural self-confidence this kind of man had, in our time, all but disappeared. In a world of ever sharper polarities, the cultural Muslim, around till just the other day, had been edged out; he was, in some respects, the supreme casualty of the age” (November 2012). In the end, however, Taseer feels estranged, and herein is the source for the book’s title, even from this notion of the cultural Muslim. He is caught by conjunctions between Islam and politics somehow, a phrase lobbed at him during an interrogation in Iran, a phrase that strikes him as so calculatedly disingenuous that he turns it over and over in his head throughout the center of the book. Islam’s “small and irrelevant rules,” he concludes, “were turned on the people to serve the faith’s political vision. For the faith to remain in power in a complex [modern] society, it had to beat down the bright and rebellious members of that society with its simplicities.” *Stranger to History* is studded with winning observations. The game of cricket, so popular in the subcontinent, is “a dress rehearsal for war; Iran’s police state is a tyranny of trifles; Punjab, bisected in Partition, retains unity in language, song, poetry, clan affiliation, and a funereal obsession with certain tragic romances. Ha. At times, however, Taseer loses track of his readers, his sense of audience, and although he is mostly careful to explain, he occasionally becomes mired in what is obvious to him, and will fall into sentences that are inexplicable: “In the end, the story could only be seen in its context, a vignette in Pakistan’s Hobbesian political life. The extreme shows of defiance “not signing the admission or not paying the ransom” could also come to seem like bravado rather than courage when the people who endured them saw them as training rather than injustice.” It’s these last four words I cannot unpack: training rather than injustice? However, this failure may be my own. Possibly, I just don’t get it. But if I am right, abrupt summations like this one are the book’s only flaw. And although its publication was four years ago and concerns a

world where there have been marked escalations in the troubles Taseer explores, it is important reading for those of us, West and East, who hope to better understand, and with knowledge become better able to act in ways that will help us circumvent more tragedy. Decay is real, Taseer told me in an informal interview, ruling society's current disengagement with the past. As much as he may see intersection in his own plural history, including disconnection, as an analogy for what is happening in the larger social order, it is no stretch to see ourselves similarly. Our personal memories are shaded by our search for patterns. And the days of our ancestors live inside us, whether we recognize the fact or not.

This is a fascinating book which brings out not only the best in his journalistic instincts, but in his analysis of the situation of mostly common folk in the Muslim world. Aatish Taseer saw and recorded his travels that began in Vienna and ended in Delhi. Leisurely by modern standards and covering seven or eight months, it brings into stark contrast the mores and attitudes in the different countries through which he travelled. While it is the same Sunni Islam, culture and history appears to lend a certain flavor to the Islam of Turkey, which contrasts quite starkly with the Islam of Syria a few hundred miles away, or for that matter the Islam of Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan. Iran with its largely Shia majority completes the canvas for the reader who is unable to visit these countries. It is easy to visualize the images conjured by the author's pen in one's mind's eye. The author appears to have experienced several world changing events and appears to have been at the right place at the right time. This is an intensely thought provoking book and one that anyone interested in the world of international politics ought to read. It bespeaks a restive if idealistic young society, that appears to have a problem separating church from state. It is also a touching account of a son whose father is none other than the late Governor of the Punjab. While the reader may hanker for a fairytale ending ("and they lived happily ever after") there is nothing fairytale-like when one speaks about life and death for both ruler and ruled in these countries. The book is gripping and it leaves the reader wanting to turn over the next page and see what lucidity the author's thoughts bring to the page. A personal tale intertwined with a world view that can only come from a broadening of the mind through travel and education, Taseer's book is riveting for anyone with an interest in Islam, history, and world politics. It is a terrific read.

I enjoyed this book. The author has a flair for description, so you can understand why his other books are novels. I loved his descriptions of people, how in a few short sentences he captured something peculiar and telling about appearances. It always made the book worth reading even in

those few parts where it felt a little slow. That said, there is one thing I find hard to believe. How is it that someone growing up in Delhi can know "nothing" of Islam? He makes it seem like he grew up in Fiji or some island where you simply don't come across Muslims or Islam in any meaningful way. But in Delhi, you have mosques, classmates, shopkeepers, monuments, ghazals etc. etc. --- it is a living faith in the full sense of the word, exemplified by places like the Jama Masjid, to name only one. He is not someone who until this trip made at age 25 is naïf, being an intellectual, and so this innocence regarding Islam, the faith of his father, sounds a bit contrived to me, contrived to serve a book's publisher and a plot. In other aspects, however, it is well worth reading, if a bit superficial, at least in its treatment of history, which it could only dabble in given the main thrust and interest the book holds for the reader. The parts relating to his father and extended Pakistani family were the best, and these are artfully interspersed throughout the book. A good read by an objective yet intimate observer.

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