

WEB REVIEW

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Review of *Anatomy of a Disappearance* by Hisham Matar

Matar Brings Poetry and Heart to a Mysterious Kidnapping

By JOSEPH PESCHEL

Raised early on in Libya and Egypt, novelist Hisham Matar is an American-born Libyan writer who now lives in London. In 1979, Matar's father was kidnapped and imprisoned by the Gadhafi regime and hasn't been seen since. Matar's first novel, *In the Country of Men*, (2006) dealt with a nine-year old child's perspective on atrocities committed by the Libyan government: kidnappings, torture, public executions. The book, semi-autobiographical, was short-listed for the Mann Booker prize and was a fiction finalist for the National Book Critic's Circle's award.

Matar's second and newest novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* also parallels the authors' life; it speaks, again, of loss and longing in a story that is at once poetic and mysterious.

Nuri el Alfi (age fourteen through his mid-twenties) narrates this tale of his father's disappearance at the hands of a tyrannical unnamed Arab regime. Father, Kamal Pasha el-Alfi, was a former minister in the overthrown

government and the executed king's closest advisor. The current regime sees him as a "backward traitor," though he's "done nothing but call for the freedom of his people."



It's 1972, around the Christmas holidays. Nuri and his twenty-eight-year-old paramour of a stepmother, Mona, are in a restaurant in Montreux, Switzerland, when she reads the news that Nuri's father has been abducted in Geneva. Soon, Mona, young Nuri, the family lawyer Hass, and the police begin a search for Father. The search is fruitless, but Nuri tries to remain hopeful, even

while he's away in boarding school.

Nuri was raised primarily by the maid Naima, who loves him like a son. Nuri returns that love. His love for Father is more complicated. He not only loves Father, a confident and elegant man who followed his own law, he wants to be him. His need for his father is intense: Nuri's whole capacity for hope and longing are directed at his missing father. Sometimes, though, Nuri isn't occupied by discovering what happened to Father; he's obsessed by the physical need to be near him. He imagines detecting a whiff of Father from the man's watch; he smells Father's "musky warm skin," though the man is absent. Nuri's sexual relationship with Mona complicates but doesn't diminish his love for Father.

Culpability, failure, and regret consume Nuri. "I felt guilty too, as I continue to feel today, at having lost him, at not knowing how to find him or take his place. Every day I let my father down."



Later, at twenty-four and out of graduate school, Nuri tries again to track down Father. He pursues old leads, tracks down Hass, witnesses, and household servants, especially Naima. Some of those leads reveal an astonishing view of

Father's private life; others manifest insights into Nuri's own. A heartfelt mystery of a novel, trenchant and poetic at just the right times, *Anatomy* is a topical and excellent follow-up to *In the Country of Men*.

***Anatomy of a Disappearance* by Hisham Matar; Dial Press; Aug. 9; 240 pp. \$22**

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