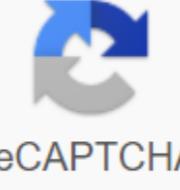


## The saint of incipient insanities

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Elif Shafak, author. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux \$25 (368p) ISBN 978-0-374-25357-8 Read more about this Author's Three alumni school roommates - Moroccan, Turkish and Spanish - strange bedfellows in a potentially inhospitable land in this painstakingly multicultural, but rather discombobulated first novel in English. Set in Somerville, Mass., in 2003, the novel shifts erratically between Emer, a Turk who was supposed to finish his poly-sci-fi PhD but prefers regular sex with his American girlfriend, Gail, a suicidal, feminist chocolate maker; Abed, a pious Moroccan who heals his nightmares while watching slasher movies; and Piu, a pure Hispanic freak who loves food but dates bulimia to Mexican-American who doesn't. Each character is lost in one sense or another, and the book is about their attempts to find out how they are ticking and for whom. There's a lot of potential out there, but the story is stretched by too-subtle extraneous characters, subplots, repetitions and tricks. Shafak seeks to explain to readers what it means to be an outsider in America - So wonderful was his ozone emptiness, a substance so translucent almost invisible under the veneer of anonymity; such an consummate stranger he became in a world of suffocating dating, but her linguistic acrobatics distracted rather than enlightened. It's a brave attempt after the 9/11 story about immigrants in America, but Shafak flails in a 21st century melting pot. Agent, Marley Rusoff. (October) It's an exhilarating rollercoaster ride of the novel - a breathless and vivid journey into a life of a motley assortment of brilliant, obsessive and often troubled young immigrants, and an American whom one of them marries. With his travel themes, his Boston-area setting, and its ease with academic themes, Shafak's novel offers Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake with an amplifier curved all the way up to eleven. The work is replete with dazzling word games, a fascination with pop culture, and fearless intelligence, the Holy Nascent Insanities of Elif Shafak as a convincingly original voice in 21st-century fiction. - Adam Langer, author of Crossing California. Elif Shafak offers us an indelibly haunting portrait of modern America, in all its sexual/ethno/religious contortions. Goofy, sad, wise, and heartbreakingly funny, her novel is a bitter delight to read. - Fernanda Eberstadt. ★★★★☆ 3.5 stars (rounded to 4 only for beats) Lovers are pathetically adorable, and extremely full of themselves, most accurately, for one of the many troubles with couples in love is that in a minute two autonomous self develop into a duo rather than two (as in one plus one), they somehow become zero (as one minus one). Similarly, before anyone could follow, Omar and Gail sprouted together. Established fans of Elif Shafak should be wary of Sa ★★★★☆ 3.5 stars (rounded to 4 pathetically adorable, and extremely full of self, in itself more accurately, for one of the many troubles with in love couples is that in a minute two standalone self turn into a duet rather than two (as in one plus one), they somehow become zero (as in one minus one)). Similarly, before anyone could follow, Omar and Gail sprouted together. Established admirers of Elif Shafak should be wary of the Holy Nascent Inclemoan. This novel is completely non-Shafak-like. Maybe because she wrote it directly in English, or maybe because she wanted to try something different, but the tone and structure of this novel is very unique and different from other works by Shafak. I think Shafak must have had a lot of fun writing this book. She experiments with her style, how the language sounds and works, checking the limits of what a novel should be. Her wide vocabulary makes every page pretty much to take in. Most of the time, however, I was entertained by her playful and discursive prose, amused by long passages about the importance of the character's surname and or the title of an English textbook. The novel does not present us with a cohesive storyline, each chapter has a whimsical title and what follows is usually related to it. For example, in the first chapter of Started Drinking Again, former housemates Omar and Abed hang out in a bar called Laughing Magpie and talk about how their names were mispronounced and changed by Americans; their different attitude to their common faith (Abed does not drink, Omar has just started again); and about Gail, Amar's wife. The rest of the novel focuses on the time when Omar, who came from Turkey to get his doctorate in Boston, lived with Abed, from Morocco, and Pius from Spain, two other students. Living under the same roof, they can share a sense of foreignness, but they have quite conflicting personalities. Shafak pays special attention to the struggles of Omar, Abed, girlfriend Pius Alegre and Gail, the future wife of Omar. There are many strange conversations, strange behavior, and outlandish monologues. Each character seems to be going through some kind of personal crisis, each of them too wrapped up in their individual situation to notice that their friends are going through similar situations. Despite the seriousness of some of their difficulties, such as Alegre's eating disorder, Shafak portrays their plight in a rather humorous manner. Which brings me to the tone of this novel. As mentioned earlier, the narrative is playful. Shafak easily moves from city to city, intertwining different conversations and places in the same sentence, and cities and objects have their personalities and their point of view. At the same instant that clack! in Istanbul, the sigh was heavy in Boston, like Alegre door first place she found open at this hour. While the narrative tells us about the innermost thoughts and fears of the characters, it also makes them fun. A lot of the time they do and/or discuss them seems ridiculous. They have these fancy habits, or behave peculiarly (Gail initially eats only chocolate and bananas... I swear she rivals Samuel Beckett in Krapp's Last Tape and Ambers and Debra Ellen Thompson insists they can take themselves seriously, but the narrative makes light of their troubles and/or obsessions. The ironic content also reinforces the novel's humorous tone. At times, especially when the narrative is focused on Alegre and Gail, there is only dark humor. In fact, I would almost call this novel a black comedy. It wasn't the cold that made them frown like this. It was something else. Something less windy and jealous, more complex and disgusting... what, if you ask, they could identify as a sudden feeling of grinning loneliness, thoughts probably not in those words, and certainly not in that particular order. I don't think this book will appeal to many readers... it's just so strangely unique. I loved the vivid discussions of the characters, the songs (from Stooges to Nick Cave) and the cultural references (this novel is set in the early 2000s), plus they mention Slavoj Žižek, whom I adore so much... characters may seem satiric to certain types of people, but Shafak manages to make me believe in them and take care of them. I'm far from squirming, but I found a graphic image of Alegre's eating disorder almost... Vast... so approach with caution. Finally, the ending was overwhelming. I was completely except for another chapter and then ... No problem! However, I might one day reread it just so I can rate shafak once again in a collection of words. Urban legends are the free citizens of the world. They don't need a passport to travel, no visas to stay. They are verbal chameleons, absorbing the color of the culture with which they come into contact. Whichever shore they reach, they can instantly become a native of it. Urban legends are free souls who do not belong to anyone, and yet are the property of all. Read more reviews on my blog... More Holy nascent unsuited Elif Shafak ★★★★☆ 3.5 stars (rounded to 4 only for strokes) Lovers pathetically adorable, and extremely full of themselves, in itself, for one of the abundant troubles with infatuated couples is that the minute two-contained develop into a duet rather than two (as in one plus one), they somehow become zero (as in one minus one). Similarly, before anyone could follow, Omar and Gail sprouted together. Established admirers of Elif Shafak should be wary of the Holy Nascent Inclemoan. This novel is completely non-Shafak-like. Could be that she wrote it directly in English, or maybe because she wanted to try something different but tone and and this novel is very unique and different from Shafak's other works. I think Shafak must have had a lot of fun writing this book. 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