



Author



Hisham Matar

BIO

Hisham Matar was born in 1970 in New York City to Libyan parents and spent his childhood in Tripoli and Cairo. He lives in London and is currently at work on his second novel.

[Back to top.](#)

Interviews

[February 2, 2007](#)

Books by Hisham Matar

[IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN](#)



INTERVIEW

February 2, 2007

In this interview with Bookreporter.com's Alexis Burling, Hisham Matar --- author of [IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN](#) --- describes the significance of his debut novel's title in relation to his protagonist and explains why, rather than writing an autobiography, he chose to fictionalize events of his childhood. He also likens the process of creating characters to "dancing with a stranger in the dark," discusses his personal attachment to the book's setting and shares his thoughts on what is --- or isn't --- missing in the world today.



Bookreporter.com: IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN loosely mirrors some of the events that have taken place in your life. Given this fact, when and how did the idea of writing it begin to take shape?

Hisham Matar: When I first began writing IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN, all I had was the voice of the protagonist. He intrigued me, and my desire to want to know him and his world became almost compulsive. It is by far much more interesting and entertaining to write and read work that is a product of the imagination rather than a list of remembered events. Some works of fiction read like

lists, events that have happened and therefore hold little surprise for the author, who ought to be constantly on his toes for the next possibility. This is why I had no interest in writing an autobiographical account of my childhood.

BRC: Most of the main characters are men, aside from perhaps the novel's most luminous figure, Suleiman's mother. Explain the significance behind the book's title and how you came to choose it.

HM: The book revolves around the complex and intense relationship between the protagonist and his young mother. The two often seem guests in a world decided and shaped by men.

BRC: Despite her "illness" and supposed inferiority, Suleiman's mother is actually the rock of the family and the one who must keep it afloat while her husband is detained. What inspired you to create such a complex character? Can we as readers learn something from her actions?

HM: She is certainly a paradox. I haven't met two people who agree on her. Some say she is a heroic and courageous figure, others claim she is a less-than-capable mother. A character happens through the writing. The process is not too unlike dancing with a stranger in the dark: you take your chances. You follow their lead. And when the moment is right, when you have gathered enough courage and audacity, you attempt to whisper a name into their ear. Sometimes they respond. Nothing in my work is written with the intention to instruct or teach.

BRC: Despite the fact that he cares deeply for them, Suleiman's father risks the lives of his wife and son by becoming active in the political underground --- essentially putting politics above his family. Suleiman's mother does quite the opposite. At one point, she appeals to her neighbor (a government official) in order to secure her husband's freedom and her son's safety. Might you elaborate on this contrast?

HM: I don't know to what degree I ought to engage in judging the actions of my characters, let alone elaborating on them. I am interested in their existence, in their being --- what we call life --- and so see no need to measure their actions morally or otherwise.

BRC: Part of what makes IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN so fascinating is that it's written from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy, the age you were when you left Libya. How does Suleiman's naiveté and struggle to understand what's going on around him shape the flow and impact of his story?

HM: Making Suleiman the same age as I was when I had left Libya helped me remember that time in Libya. Children live with

an intensity most adults take for granted. The present to them is all. It makes perfect sense, for instance, why a child ought to be devastated when his toy breaks. The lack of hindsight makes them both reckless and wary. In some ways, childhood is a sort of mystical experience; perhaps the most refined one we are likely to ever experience.

BRC: After winning three games in a row against Kareem in front of the other neighborhood kids, Suleiman turns against his friend and betrays his confidence, despite his respect and love for Kareem and the fact that Kareem had always treated him as an equal. Is this not representative of something deeply distressing about human nature --- the ability to turn against each other, despite past loyalties?

HM: I am not sure about that. The way Suleiman behaved toward his friend Kareem seemed credible; it did not seem acceptable that he ought to suffer all the pressures he suffers without being corrupted in some way.

BRC: One of the most intense and powerful scenes in your novel is, of course, the one where Ustath Rashid is executed in the National Basketball Stadium in front of a frenzied, animal-like mob, all screaming for his execution as a traitor. You write, "Something was absent in the stadium, something that could no longer be relied on." What was that "something," and what do you see is the reason for its absence? Isn't this "something" absent in much of today's world as well?

HM: I am often mistaken for my protagonist. Those were Suleiman's words. As for what I think is missing in our world today, I would say --- nothing. We have everything, but in the wrong quantities: too much pain and suffering, and not enough of those most noble of intellectual faculties --- compassion and tolerance.

BRC: In the last few chapters, Suleiman looks back on his life and attempts to make sense of what happened to him and how it shaped who he is as a person. Why did you choose to include this section, and what does his change in perspective say about his character and his feelings for his country?

HM: Suleiman's motivation for telling his story is rather unclear in the beginning. It is only toward the end that his reason for "recalling" the past is gradually unveiled. He has become so far removed from the past, exiled from the time and the place of his early beginnings, and so in his telling there is the hope that he could "return" if even in his mind.

BRC: Toward the end of IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN, you write, "Nationalism is as thin as a thread --- perhaps that's

why it's so anxiously guarded." You were born in New York City and spent your childhood in Tripoli and Cairo. Now, you live in London. Do you feel a particular affinity toward any of these places over the others? Would you ever consider moving back to Tripoli or Cairo? How does this quote relate to your choices in life?

HM: I remember reading Dr. Johnson's famous words that went something like this: "Nationalism is the last hiding place for a scoundrel." So I decided to have Suleiman agree with Dr. Johnson. I am attached in different ways to all the countries I lived in, but my attachment to Libya is much more urgent. Sometimes I wake up with it in my head. And in my writing this book I was trying to wean myself of the country I had left and haven't been able to return to for over 28 years now. You can say I was trying to cure myself of my Libya. I failed, of course.

BRC: In what ways did your childhood lend itself to writing this novel and creating Suleiman's voice?

HM: A book is never written only in the time that it actually takes to write it. So, indeed, I have been thinking about these ideas, not necessarily for a work of fiction, for some time. Not so much "thinking" in the hard and stern way, as I find that sort of thinking mostly unhelpful when it comes to writing, but carrying: carrying it as faithfully as one knows how.

BRC: In the end, what made you choose to write a work of fiction rather than an autobiography?

HM: I enjoy the pleasure of inventing characters and their circumstances on the page. They remain mysterious even after the work is complete; in some ways even more mysterious. It's magic.

BRC: In 1990, your father, a dissident living in Cairo, was kidnapped and taken back to Tripoli where he was subsequently tortured and imprisoned. Other members of your family and friends have been tortured or killed as well. Is it true that you have not heard from your father since 1995? How did these events and this uncertainty help shape **IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN?**

HM: Yes, it is true that I haven't heard from or about Father since 1995. I don't know to what extent this has influenced my novel. The State is forever intruding in the lives of Suleiman and his family. One of the most difficult passages to write was the return of the father after he had been tortured.

BRC: What would you like your readers to take away from their experience with **IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN?**

HM: Libya is a silent and silenced country. Somewhere between

the covers of my book is a Libya that speaks. But, most of all, I hope anyone who reads my novel is entertained and perhaps even nudged a little.

BRC: Do you prefer to read a specific genre of books? Might you have a few favorite books to recommend to your readers?

HM: I am currently reading Javier Marias's YOUR FACE TOMORROW, his novel in three parts.

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[Back to top.](#)

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