the PARIS REVIEW

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Interviewed by Ángel Gurría-Quintana

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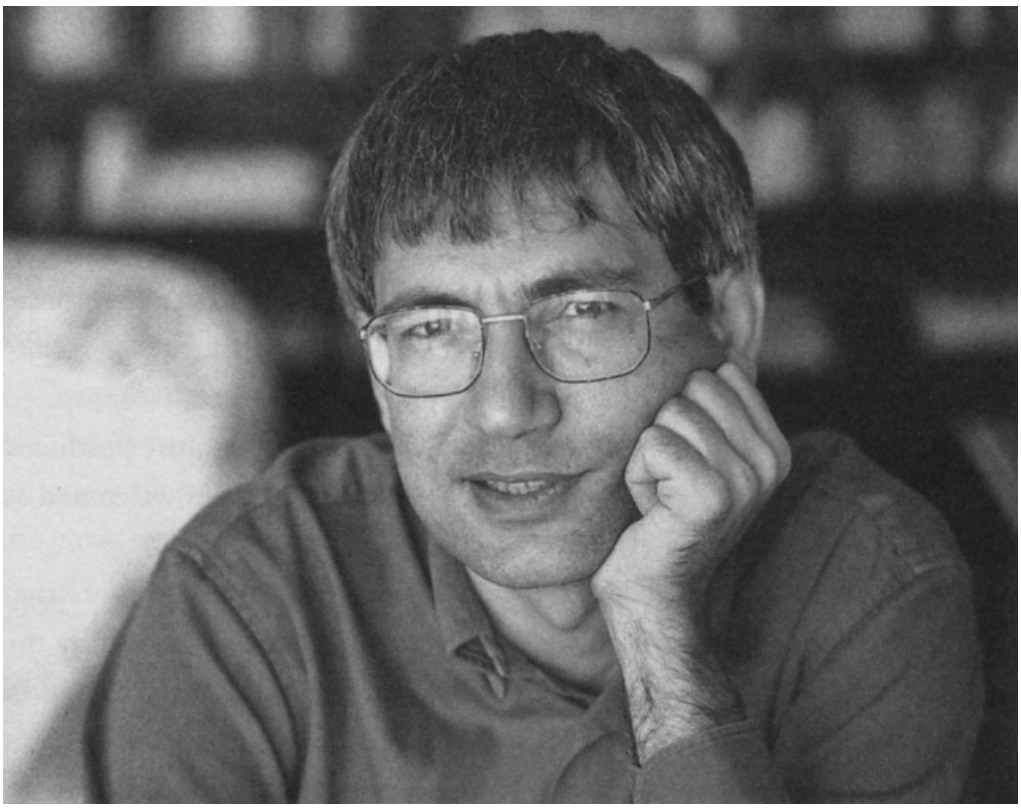

Orhan Pamuk was born in 1952 in Istanbul, where he continues to live. His family had made a fortune in railroad construction during the early days of the Turkish Republic and Pamuk attended Robert College, where the children of the city's privileged elite received a secular, Western-style education. Early in life he developed a passion for the visual arts, but after enrolling in college to study architecture he decided he wanted to write. He is now Turkey's most widely read author.

His first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, was published in 1982 and was followed by *The Silent House* (1983), *The White Castle* (1985/1991 in English translation), *The Black Book* (1990/1994), and *The New Life* (1994/1997). In 2003 Pamuk received the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *My*

Name Is Red (1998/2001), a murder mystery set in sixteenth-century Istanbul and narrated by multiple voices. The novel explores themes central to his fiction: the intricacies of identity in a country that straddles East and West, sibling rivalry, the existence of doubles, the value of beauty and originality, and the anxiety of cultural influence. *Snow* (2002/2004), which focuses on religious and political radicalism, was the first of his novels to confront political extremism in contemporary Turkey and it confirmed his standing abroad even as it divided opinion at home. Pamuk's most recent book is *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003/2005), a double portrait of himself—in childhood and youth—and of the place he comes from.

This interview with Orhan Pamuk was conducted in two sustained sessions in London and by correspondence. The first conversation occurred in May of 2004 at the time of the British publication of *Snow*. A special room had been booked for the meeting—a fluorescent-lit, noisily air-conditioned corporate space in the hotel basement. Pamuk arrived, wearing a black corduroy jacket over a light-blue shirt and dark slacks, and observed, "We could die here and nobody would ever find us." We retreated to a plush, quiet corner of the hotel lobby where we spoke for three hours, pausing only for coffee and a chicken sandwich.

In April of 2005 Pamuk returned to London for the publication of *Istanbul* and we settled into the same corner of the hotel lobby to speak for two hours. At first he seemed quite strained, and with reason. Two months earlier, in an interview with the Swiss newspaper *Der Tages-Anzeiger*, he had said of Turkey, "thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it." This remark set off a relentless campaign against Pamuk in the Turkish nationalist press. After all, the Turkish government persists in denying the 1915 genocidal slaughter of Armenians in Turkey and has imposed laws severely restricting discussion of the ongoing Kurdish conflict. Pamuk declined to discuss the controversy for the public record in the hope that it would soon fade. In August, however, Pamuk's remarks in the Swiss paper resulted in his being charged under Article 301/1 of the Turkish Penal Code with "public denigration" of Turkish identity—a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. Despite outraged international press coverage of his case, as well as vigorous protest to the Turkish government by members of the European Parliament and by International PEN, when this magazine went to press in mid-November Pamuk was still slated to stand trial on December 16, 2005.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about giving interviews?

ORHAN PAMUK

I sometimes feel nervous because I give stupid answers to certain pointless questions. It happens in Turkish as much as in English. I speak bad Turkish and utter stupid sentences. I have been attacked in Turkey more for my interviews than for my books. Political polemicists and columnists do not read novels there.

INTERVIEWER

You've generally received a positive response to your books in Europe and the United States. What is your critical reception in Turkey?

PAMUK

The good years are over now. When I was publishing my first books, the previous generation of authors was fading away, so I was welcomed because I was a new author.

INTERVIEWER

When you say the previous generation, whom do you have in mind?

PAMUK

The authors who felt a social responsibility, authors who felt that literature serves morality and politics. They were flat realists, not experimental. Like authors in so many poor countries, they wasted their talent on trying to serve their nation. I did not want to be like them, because even in my youth I had enjoyed Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Proust—I had never aspired to the social-realist model of Steinbeck and Gorky. The literature produced in the sixties and seventies was becoming outmoded, so I was welcomed as an author of the new generation.

After the mid-nineties, when my books began to sell in amounts that no one in Turkey had ever dreamed of, my honeymoon years with the Turkish press and intellectuals were over. From then on, critical reception was mostly a reaction to the publicity and sales, rather than the content of my books. Now, unfortunately, I am notorious for my political comments—most of which are

picked up from international interviews and shamelessly manipulated by some Turkish nationalist journalists to make me look more radical and politically foolish than I really am.

INTERVIEWER

So there is a hostile reaction to your popularity?

PAMUK

My strong opinion is that it's a sort of punishment for my sales figures and political comments. But I don't want to continue saying this, because I sound defensive. I may be misrepresenting the whole picture.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you write?

PAMUK

I have always thought that the place where you sleep or the place you share with your partner should be separate from the place where you write. The domestic rituals and details somehow kill the imagination. They kill the demon in me. The domestic, tame daily routine makes the longing for the other world, which the imagination needs to operate, fade away. So for years I always had an office or a little place outside the house to work in. I always had different flats.

But once I spent half a semester in the U.S. while my ex-wife was taking her Ph.D. at Columbia University. We were living in an apartment for married students and didn't have any space, so I had to sleep and write in the same place. Reminders of family life were all around. This upset me. In the mornings I used to say goodbye to my wife like someone going to work. I'd leave the house, walk around a few blocks, and come back like a person arriving at the office.

Ten years ago I found a flat overlooking the Bosphorus with a view of the old city. It has, perhaps, one of the best views of Istanbul. It is a twenty-five-minute walk from where I live. It is full of books and my desk looks out onto the view. Every day I spend, on average, some ten hours there.

INTERVIEWER

Ten hours a day?

PAMUK

Yes, I'm a hard worker. I enjoy it. People say I'm ambitious, and maybe there's truth in that too. But I'm in love with what I do. I enjoy sitting at my desk like a child playing with his toys. It's work, essentially, but it's fun and games also.

INTERVIEWER

Orhan, your namesake and the narrator of *Snow*, describes himself as a clerk who sits down at the same time every day. Do you have the same discipline for writing?

PAMUK

I was underlining the clerical nature of the novelist as opposed to that of the poet, who has an immensely prestigious tradition in Turkey. To be a poet is a popular and respected thing. Most of the Ottoman sultans and statesmen were poets. But not in the way we understand poets now. For hundreds of years it was a way of establishing yourself as an intellectual. Most of these people used to collect their poems in manuscripts called divans. In fact, Ottoman court poetry is called divan poetry. Half of the Ottoman statesmen produced divans. It was a sophisticated and educated way of writing things, with many rules and rituals. Very conventional and very repetitive. After Western ideas came to Turkey, this legacy was combined with the romantic and modern idea of the poet as a person who burns for truth. It added extra weight to the prestige of the poet. On the other hand, a novelist is essentially a person who covers distance through his patience, slowly, like an ant. A novelist impresses us not by his demonic and romantic vision, but by his patience.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written poetry?

PAMUK

I am often asked that. I did when I was eighteen and I published some poems in Turkey, but then I quit. My explanation is that I realized that a poet is someone through whom God is speaking. You have to be possessed by poetry.

I tried my hand at poetry, but I realized after some time that God was not speaking to me. I was sorry about this and then I tried to imagine—if God were speaking through me, what would he be saying? I began to write very meticulously, slowly, trying to figure this out. That is prose writing, fiction writing. So I worked like a clerk. Some other writers consider this expression to be a bit of an insult. But I accept it; I work like a clerk.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that writing prose has become easier for you over time?

PAMUK

Unfortunately not. Sometimes I feel my character should enter a room and I still don't know how to make him enter. I may have more self-confidence, which sometimes can be unhelpful because then you're not experimenting, you just write what comes to the tip of your pen. I've been writing fiction for the last thirty years, so I should think that I've improved a bit. And yet I still sometimes come to a dead end where I thought there never would be one. A character cannot enter a room, and I don't know what to do. Still! After thirty years.

The division of a book into chapters is very important for my way of thinking. When writing a novel, if I know the whole story line in advance—and most of the time I do—I divide it into chapters and think up the details of what I'd like to happen in each. I don't necessarily start with the first chapter and write all the others in order. When I'm blocked, which is not a grave thing for me, I continue with whatever takes my fancy. I may write from the first to the fifth chapter, then if I'm not enjoying it I skip to number fifteen and continue from there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean that you map out the entire book in advance?

PAMUK

Everything. *My Name Is Red*, for instance, has many characters, and to each character I assigned a certain number of chapters. When I was writing, sometimes I wanted to continue "being" one of the characters. So when I finished writing one of Shekure's chapters, perhaps chapter seven, I skipped to chapter eleven, which is her again. I liked being Shekure. Skipping from one character or persona to another can be depressing.

But the final chapter I always write at the end. That is definite. I like to tease myself, ask myself what the ending should be. I can only execute the ending once. Towards the end, before finishing, I stop and rewrite most of the early chapters.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever have a reader while you are working?

PAMUK

I always read my work to the person I share my life with. I'm always grateful if that person says, Show me more, or, Show me what you have done today. Not only does that provide a bit of necessary pressure, but it's like having a mother or father pat you on the back and say, Well done. Occasionally, the person will say, Sorry, I don't buy this. Which is good. I like that ritual.

I'm always reminded of Thomas Mann, one of my role models. He used to bring the whole family together, his six children and his wife. He used to read to all his gathered family. I like that. Daddy telling a story.

INTERVIEWER

When you were young you wanted to be a painter. When did your love of painting give way to your love of writing?

PAMUK

At the age of twenty-two. Since I was seven I had wanted to be a painter, and my family had accepted this. They all thought that I would be a famous painter. But then something happened in my head—I realized that a screw was loose—and I stopped painting and immediately began writing my first novel.

INTERVIEWER

A screw was loose?

PAMUK

I can't say what my reasons were for doing this. I recently published a book called *Istanbul*. Half of it is my autobiography until that moment and the other half is an essay about Istanbul, or more precisely, a child's vision of Istanbul.

It's a combination of thinking about images and landscapes and the chemistry of a city, and a child's perception of that city, and that child's autobiography. The last sentence of the book reads, "'I don't want to be an artist,' I said. 'I'm going to be a writer.'" And it's not explained. Although reading the whole book may explain something.

INTERVIEWER

Was your family happy about this decision?

PAMUK

My mother was upset. My father was somewhat more understanding because in his youth he wanted to be a poet and translated Valéry into Turkish, but gave up when he was mocked by the upper-class circle to which he belonged.

INTERVIEWER

Your family accepted you being a painter, but not a novelist?

PAMUK

Yes, because they didn't think I would be a full-time painter. The family tradition was in civil engineering. My grandfather was a civil engineer who made lots of money building railroads. My uncles and my father lost the money, but they all went to the same engineering school, Istanbul Technical University. I was expected to go there and I said, All right, I will go there. But since I was the artist in the family, the notion was that I should become an architect. It seemed to be a satisfying solution for everyone. So I went to that university, but in the middle of architectural school I suddenly quit painting and began writing novels.

INTERVIEWER

Did you already have your first novel in mind when you decided to quit? Is that why you did it?

PAMUK

As far as I remember, I wanted to be a novelist before I knew what to write. In fact, when I did start writing I had two or three false starts. I still have the notebooks. But after about six months I started a major novel project that ultimately got published as *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*.

INTERVIEWER

That hasn't been translated into English.

PAMUK

It is essentially a family saga, like the *Forsyte Saga* or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. Not long after I finished it I began to regret having written something so outmoded, a very nineteenth-century novel. I regretted writing it because, around the age of twenty-five or twenty-six, I began to impose on myself the idea that I should be a modern author. By the time the novel was finally published, when I was thirty, my writing had become much more experimental.

INTERVIEWER

When you say you wanted to be more modern, experimental, did you have a model in mind?

PAMUK

At that time, the great writers for me were no longer Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, or Thomas Mann. My heroes were Virginia Woolf and Faulkner. Now I would add Proust and Nabokov to that list.

INTERVIEWER

The opening line of *The New Life* is, "I read a book one day and my whole life was changed." Has any book had that effect on you?

PAMUK

The Sound and the Fury was very important to me when I was twenty-one or twenty-two. I bought a copy of the Penguin edition. It was hard to understand, especially with my poor English. But there was a wonderful translation of the book into Turkish, so I would to put the Turkish and the English together on the table and read half a paragraph from one and then go back to the other. That book left a mark on me. The residue was the voice that I developed. I soon began to write in the first person singular. Most of the time I feel better when I'm impersonating someone else rather than writing in the third person.

INTERVIEWER

You say it took years to get your first novel published?

PAMUK

In my twenties I did not have any literary friendships; I didn't belong to any literary group in Istanbul. The only way to get my first book published was to submit it to a literary competition for unpublished manuscripts in Turkey. I did that and won the prize, which was to be published by a big, good publisher. At the time, Turkey's economy was in a bad state. They said, Yes, we'll give you a contract, but they delayed the novel's publication.

INTERVIEWER

Did your second novel go more easily—more quickly?

PAMUK

The second book was a political book. Not propaganda. I was already writing it while I waited for the first book to appear. I had given that book some two and a half years. Suddenly, one night there was a military coup. This was in 1980. The next day the would-be publisher of the first book, the *Cevdet Bey* book, said he wasn't going to publish it, even though we had a contract. I realized that even if I finished my second book—the political book—that day, I would not be able to publish it for five or six years because the military would not allow it. So my thoughts ran as follows: At the age of twenty-two I said I was going to be a novelist and wrote for seven years hoping to get something published in Turkey . . . and nothing. Now I'm almost thirty and there's no possibility of publishing anything. I still have the two hundred and fifty pages of that unfinished political novel in one of my drawers.

Immediately after the military coup, because I didn't want to get depressed, I started a third book—the book to which you referred, *The Silent House*. That's what I was working on in 1982 when the first book was finally published. *Cevdet* was well received, which meant that I could publish the book I was then writing. So the third book I wrote was the second to be published.

INTERVIEWER

What made your novel unpublishable under the military regime?

PAMUK

The characters were young upper-class Marxists. Their fathers and mothers would go to summer resorts, and they had big spacious rich houses and enjoyed being Marxists. They would fight and be jealous of each other and plot to blow up the prime minister.

INTERVIEWER

Gilded revolutionary circles?

PAMUK

Upper-class youngsters with rich people's habits, pretending to be ultraradical. But I was not making a moral judgment about that. Rather, I was romanticizing my youth, in a way. The idea of throwing a bomb at the prime minister would have been enough to get the book banned.

So I didn't finish it. And you change as you write books. You cannot assume the same persona again. You cannot continue as before. Each book an author writes represents a period in his development. One's novels can be seen as the milestones in the development of one's spirit. So you cannot go back. Once the elasticity of fiction is dead, you cannot move it again.

INTERVIEWER

When you're experimenting with ideas, how do you choose the form of your novels? Do you start with an image, with a first sentence?

PAMUK

There is no constant formula. But I make it my business not to write two novels in the same mode. I try to change everything. This is why so many of my readers tell me, I liked this novel of yours, it's a shame you didn't write other novels like that, or, I never enjoyed one of your novels until you wrote that one—I've heard that especially about *The Black Book*. In fact I hate to hear this. It's fun, and a challenge, to experiment with form and style, and language and mood and persona, and to think about each book differently.

The subject matter of a book may come to me from various sources. With *My Name Is Red*, I wanted to write about my ambition to become a painter. I had a false start; I began to write a monographic book focused on one painter. Then I turned the painter into various painters working together in an atelier. The

point of view changed, because now there were other painters talking. At first I was thinking of writing about a contemporary painter, but then I thought this Turkish painter might be too derivative, too influenced by the West, so I went back in time to write about miniaturists. That was how I found my subject.

Some subjects also necessitate certain formal innovations or storytelling strategies. Sometimes, for example, you've just seen something, or read something, or been to a movie, or read a newspaper article, and then you think, I'll make a potato speak, or a dog, or a tree. Once you get the idea you start thinking about symmetry and continuity in the novel. And you feel, Wonderful, no one's done this before.

Finally, I think of things for years. I may have ideas and then I tell them to my close friends. I keep lots of notebooks for possible novels I may write. Sometimes I don't write them, but if I open a notebook and begin taking notes for it, it is likely that I will write that novel. So when I'm finishing one novel my heart may be set on one of these projects; and two months after finishing one I start writing the other.

INTERVIEWER

Many novelists will never discuss a work in progress. Do you also keep that a secret?

PAMUK

I never discuss the story. On formal occasions, when people ask what I'm writing, I have a one-sentence stock reply: A novel that takes place in contemporary Turkey. I open up to very few people and only when I know they won't hurt me. What I do is talk about the gimmicks—I'm going to make a cloud speak, for instance. I like to see how people react to them. It is a childish thing. I did this a lot when writing *Istanbul*. My mind is like that of a little playful child, trying to show his daddy how clever he is.

INTERVIEWER

The word *gimmick* has a negative connotation.

PAMUK

You begin with a gimmick, but if you believe in its literary and moral seriousness, in the end it turns into serious literary invention. It becomes a literary statement.

INTERVIEWER

Critics often characterize your novels as postmodern. It seems to me, however, that you draw your narrative tricks primarily from traditional sources. You quote, for instance, from *The Thousand and One Nights* and other classic texts in the Eastern tradition.

PAMUK

That began with *The Black Book*, though I had read Borges and Calvino earlier. I went with my wife to the United States in 1985, and there I first encountered the prominence and the immense richness of American culture. As a Turk coming from the Middle East, trying to establish himself as an author, I felt intimidated. So I regressed, went back to my "roots." I realized that my generation had to invent a modern national literature.

Borges and Calvino liberated me. The connotation of traditional Islamic literature was so reactionary, so political, and used by conservatives in such old-fashioned and foolish ways, that I never thought I could do anything with that material. But once I was in the United States, I realized I could go back to that material with a Calvinoesque or Borgesian mind frame. I had to begin by making a strong distinction between the religious and literary connotations of Islamic literature, so that I could easily appropriate its wealth of games, gimmicks, and parables. Turkey had a sophisticated tradition of highly refined ornamental literature. But then the socially committed writers emptied our literature of its innovative content.

There are lots of allegories that repeat themselves in the various oral storytelling traditions—of China, India, Persia. I decided to use them and set them in contemporary Istanbul. It's an experiment—put everything together, like a Dadaist collage; *The Black Book* has this quality. Sometimes all these sources are fused together and something new emerges. So I set all these rewritten stories in Istanbul, added a detective plot, and out came *The Black Book*. But at its source was the full strength of American culture and my desire to be a serious experimental writer. I could not write a social commentary about Turkey's problems—I was intimidated by them. So I had to try something else.

INTERVIEWER

Were you ever interested in doing social commentary through literature?

PAMUK

No. I was reacting to the older generation of novelists, especially in the eighties. I say this with all due respect, but their subject matter was very narrow and parochial.

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to before *The Black Book*. What inspired you to write *The White Castle*? It's the first book where you employ a theme that recurs throughout the rest of your novels—impersonation. Why do you think this idea of becoming somebody else crops up so often in your fiction?

PAMUK

It's a very personal thing. I have a very competitive brother who is only eighteen months older than me. In a way, he was my father—my Freudian father, so to speak. It was he who became my alter ego, the representation of authority. On the other hand, we also had a competitive and brotherly comradeship. A very complicated relationship. I wrote extensively about this in *Istanbul*. I was a typical Turkish boy, good at soccer and enthusiastic about all sorts of games and competitions. He was very successful in school, better than me. I felt jealousy towards him, and he was jealous of me too. He was the reasonable and responsible person, the one our superiors addressed. While I was paying attention to games, he paid attention to rules. We were competing all the time. And I fancied being him, that kind of thing. It set a model. Envy, jealousy—these are heartfelt themes for me. I always worry about how much my brother's strength or his success might have influenced me. This is an essential part of my spirit. I am aware of that, so I put some distance between me and those feelings. I know they are bad, so I have a civilized person's determination to fight them. I'm not saying I'm a victim of jealousy. But this is the galaxy of nerve points that I try to deal with all the time. And of course, in the end, it becomes the subject matter of all my stories. In *The White Castle*, for instance, the almost sadomasochistic relationship between the two main characters is based on my relationship with my brother.

On the other hand, this theme of impersonation is reflected in the fragility Turkey feels when faced with Western culture. After writing *The White Castle*, I realized that this jealousy—the anxiety about being influenced by someone

else—resembles Turkey's position when it looks west. You know, aspiring to become Westernized and then being accused of not being authentic enough. Trying to grab the spirit of Europe and then feeling guilty about the imitative drive. The ups and downs of this mood are reminiscent of the relationship between competitive brothers.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe the constant confrontation between Turkey's Eastern and Western impulses will ever be peacefully resolved?

PAMUK

I'm an optimist. Turkey should not worry about having two spirits, belonging to two different cultures, having two souls. Schizophrenia makes you intelligent. You may lose your relation with reality—I'm a fiction writer, so I don't think that's such a bad thing—but you shouldn't worry about your schizophrenia. If you worry too much about one part of you killing the other, you'll be left with a single spirit. That is worse than having the sickness. This is my theory. I try to propagate it in Turkish politics, among Turkish politicians who demand that the country should have one consistent soul—that it should belong to either the East or the West or be nationalistic. I'm critical of that monistic outlook.

INTERVIEWER

How does that go down in Turkey?

PAMUK

The more the idea of a democratic, liberal Turkey is established, the more my thinking is accepted. Turkey can join the European Union only with this vision. It's a way of fighting against nationalism, of fighting the rhetoric of Us against Them.

INTERVIEWER

And yet in *Istanbul*, in the way you romanticize the city, you seem to mourn the loss of the Ottoman Empire.

PAMUK

I'm not mourning the Ottoman Empire. I'm a Westernizer. I'm pleased that the Westernization process took place. I'm just criticizing the limited way in which the ruling elite—meaning both the bureaucracy and the new rich—had conceived of Westernization. They lacked the confidence necessary to create a national culture rich in its own symbols and rituals. They did not strive to create an Istanbul culture that would be an organic combination of East and West; they just put Western and Eastern things together. There was, of course, a strong local Ottoman culture, but that was fading away little by little. What they had to do, and could not possibly do enough, was invent a strong local culture, which would be a combination—not an imitation—of the Eastern past and the Western present. I try to do the same kind of thing in my books. Probably new generations will do it, and entering the European Union will not destroy Turkish identity but make it flourish and give us more freedom and self-confidence to invent a new Turkish culture. Slavishly imitating the West or slavishly imitating the old dead Ottoman culture is not the solution. You have to do something with these things and shouldn't have anxiety about belonging to one of them too much.

INTERVIEWER

In *Istanbul*, however, you do seem to identify with the foreign, Western gaze over your own city.

PAMUK

But I also explain why a Westernized Turkish intellectual can identify with the Western gaze—the making of Istanbul is a process of identification with the West. There is always this dichotomy, and you can easily identify with the Eastern anger too. Everyone is sometimes a Westerner and sometimes an Easterner—in fact a constant combination of the two. I like Edward Said's idea of Orientalism, but since Turkey was never a colony, the romanticizing of Turkey was never a problem for Turks. Western man did not humiliate the Turk in the same way he humiliated the Arab or Indian. Istanbul was invaded only for two years and the enemy boats left as they came, so this did not leave a deep scar in the spirit of the nation. What left a deep scar was the loss of the Ottoman Empire, so I don't have that anxiety, that feeling that Westerners look down on me. Though after the founding of the Republic, there was a sort of intimidation because Turks wanted to Westernize but couldn't go far enough, which left a feeling of cultural inferiority that we have to address and that I occasionally may have.

On the other hand, the scars are not as deep as other nations that were occupied for two hundred years, colonized. Turks were never suppressed by Western powers. The suppression that Turks suffered was self-inflicted; we erased our own history because it was practical. In that suppression there is a sense of fragility. But that self-imposed Westernization also brought isolation. Indians saw their oppressors face-to-face. Turks were strangely isolated from the Western world they emulated. In the 1950s and even 1960s, when a foreigner came to stay at the Istanbul Hilton it would be noted in all the newspapers.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that there is a canon or that one should even exist? We have heard of a Western canon, but what about a non-Western canon?

PAMUK

Yes, there is another canon. It should be explored, developed, shared, criticized, and then accepted. Right now the so-called Eastern canon is in ruins. The glorious texts are all around but there is no will to put them together. From the Persian classics, through to all the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese texts, these things should be assessed critically. As it is now, the canon is in the hands of Western scholars. That is the center of distribution and communication.

INTERVIEWER

The novel is a very Western cultural form. Does it have any place in the Eastern tradition?

PAMUK

The modern novel, dissociated from the epic form, is essentially a non-Oriental thing. Because the novelist is a person who does not belong to a community, who does not share the basic instincts of community, and who is thinking and judging with a different culture than the one he is experiencing. Once his consciousness is different from that of the community he belongs to, he is an outsider, a loner. And the richness of his text comes from that outsider's voyeuristic vision.

Once you develop the habit of looking at the world like that and writing about it in this fashion, you have the desire to disassociate from the community. This is the model I was thinking about in *Snow*.

INTERVIEWER

Snow is your most political book yet published. How did you conceive of it?

PAMUK

When I started becoming famous in Turkey in the mid-1990s, at a time when the war against Kurdish guerillas was strong, the old leftist authors and the new modern liberals wanted me to help them, to sign petitions—they began to ask me to do political things unrelated to my books.

Soon the establishment counterattacked with a campaign of character assassination. They began calling me names. I was very angry. After a while I wondered, What if I wrote a political novel in which I explored my own spiritual dilemmas—coming from an upper-middle-class family and feeling responsible for those who had no political representation? I believed in the art of the novel. It is a strange thing how that makes you an outsider. I told myself then, I will write a political novel. I started to write it as soon as I finished *My Name Is Red*.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you set it in the small town of Kars?

PAMUK

It is notoriously one of the coldest towns in Turkey. And one of the poorest. In the early eighties, the whole front page of one of the major newspapers was about the poverty of Kars. Someone had calculated that you could buy the entire town for around a million dollars. The political climate was difficult when I wanted to go there. The vicinity of the town is mostly populated by Kurds, but the center is a combination of Kurds, people from Azerbaijan, Turks, and all other sorts. There used to be Russians and Germans too. There are religious differences as well, Shia and Sunni. The war the Turkish government was waging against the Kurdish guerillas was so fierce that it was impossible to go as a tourist. I knew I could not simply go there as a novelist, so I asked a newspaper editor with whom I'd been in touch for a press pass to visit the area. He is influential and he personally called the mayor and the police chief to let them know I was coming.

As soon as I had arrived I visited the mayor and shook hands with the police chief so that they wouldn't pick me up on the street. Actually, some of the police who didn't know I was there did pick me up and carried me off,

probably with the intention of torturing me. Immediately I gave names—I know the mayor, I know the chief . . . I was a suspicious character. Because even though Turkey is theoretically a free country, any foreigner used to be suspect until about 1999. Hopefully things are much easier today.

Most of the people and places in the book are based on a real counterpart. For instance, the local newspaper that sells two hundred and fifty-two copies is real. I went to Kars with a camera and a video recorder. I was filming everything and then going back to Istanbul and showing it to my friends. Everyone thought I was a bit crazy. There were other things that actually occurred. Like the conversation I describe with the editor of the little newspaper who tells Ka what he did the previous day, and Ka asks how he knew, and he reveals he's been listening to the police's walkie-talkies and the police were following Ka all the time. That is real. And they were following me too.

The local anchorman put me on TV and said, Our famous author is writing an article for the national newspaper—that was a very important thing. Municipal elections were coming up so the people of Kars opened their doors to me. They all wanted to say something to the national newspaper, to let the government know how poor they were. They did not know I was going to put them in a novel. They thought I was going to put them in an article. I must confess, this was cynical and cruel of me. Though I was actually thinking of writing an article about it too.

Four years passed. I went back and forth. There was a little coffee shop where I occasionally used to write and take notes. A photographer friend of mine, whom I had invited to come along because Kars is a beautiful place when it snows, overheard a conversation in the little coffee shop. People were talking among themselves while I wrote some notes, saying, What kind of an article is he writing? It's been three years, enough time to write a novel. They'd caught on to me.

INTERVIEWER

What was the reaction to the book?

PAMUK

In Turkey, both conservatives—or political Islamists—and secularists were upset. Not to the point of banning the book or hurting me. But they were upset and wrote about it in the daily national newspapers. The secularists were upset because I wrote that the cost of being a secular radical in Turkey

is that you forget that you also have to be a democrat. The power of the secularists in Turkey comes from the army. This destroys Turkey's democracy and culture of tolerance. Once you have so much army involvement in political culture, people lose their self-confidence and rely on the army to solve all their problems. People usually say, The country and the economy are a mess, let's call in the army to clean it up. But just as they cleaned, so did they destroy the culture of tolerance. Lots of suspects were tortured; a hundred thousand people were jailed. This paves the way for new military coups. There was a new one about every ten years. So I was critical of the secularists for this. They also didn't like that I portrayed Islamists as human beings.

The political Islamists were upset because I wrote about an Islamist who had enjoyed sex before marriage. It was that kind of simplistic thing. Islamists are always suspicious of me because I don't come from their culture, and because I have the language, attitude, and even gestures of a more Westernized and privileged person. They have their own problems of representation and ask, How can he write about us anyway? He doesn't understand. This I also included in parts of the novel.

But I don't want to exaggerate. I survived. They all read the book. They may have become angry, but it is a sign of growing liberal attitudes that they accepted me and my book as they are. The reaction of the people of Kars was also divided. Some said, Yes, that is how it is. Others, usually Turkish nationalists, were nervous about my mentions of Armenians. That TV anchorman, for instance, put my book in a symbolic black bag and mailed it to me and said in a press conference that I was doing Armenian propaganda—which is, of course, preposterous. We have such a parochial, nationalistic culture.

INTERVIEWER

Did the book ever become a cause célèbre in the Rushdie sense?

PAMUK

No, not at all.

INTERVIEWER

It's a terribly bleak, pessimistic book. The only person in the whole novel who is able to listen to all sides—Ka—is, in the end, despised by everyone.

PAMUK

I may have been dramatizing my position as a novelist in Turkey. Although he knows he is despised, he enjoys being able to maintain a dialogue with everyone. He also has a very strong survival instinct. Ka is despised because they see him as a Western spy, which is something that has been said about me many times.

About the bleakness, I agree. But humor is a way out. When people say it's bleak, I ask them, Isn't it funny? I think there is a lot of humor in it. At least that was my intention.

INTERVIEWER

Your commitment to fiction has gotten you into trouble. It is likely to get you into further trouble. It has meant severing of emotional links. It's a high price to pay.

PAMUK

Yes, but it's a wonderful thing. When I'm traveling, and not alone at my desk, after a while I get depressed. I'm happy when I'm alone in a room and inventing. More than a commitment to the art or to the craft, which I am devoted to, it is a commitment to being alone in a room. I continue to have this ritual, believing that what I am doing now will one day be published, legitimizing my daydreams. I need solitary hours at a desk with good paper and a fountain pen like some people need a pill for their health. I am committed to these rituals.

INTERVIEWER

For whom, then, are you writing?

PAMUK

As life gets shorter, you ask yourself that question more often. I've written seven novels. I would love to write another seven novels before I die. But then, life is short. What about enjoying it more? Sometimes I have to really force myself. Why am I doing it? What is the meaning of all of it? First, as I said, it's an instinct to be alone in a room. Second, there's an almost boyish competitive side in me that wants to attempt to write a nice book again. I believe less and less in eternity for authors. We are reading very few of the books written two hundred years ago. Things are changing so fast that today's

books will probably be forgotten in a hundred years. Very few will be read. In two hundred years, perhaps five books written today will be alive. Am I sure I'm writing one of those five? But is that the meaning of writing? Why should I be worrying about being read two hundred years later? Shouldn't I be worried about living more? Do I need the consolation that I will be read in the future? I think of all these things and I continue to write. I don't know why. But I never give up. This belief that your books will have an effect in the future is the only consolation you have to get pleasure in this life.

INTERVIEWER

You are a best-selling author in Turkey, but the books you sell at home are outnumbered by your sales abroad. You have been translated into forty languages. Do you now think about a wider global readership when writing? Are you now writing for a different audience?

PAMUK

I am aware that my audience is no longer an exclusively national audience. But even when I began writing, I may have been reaching for a wider group of readers. My father used to say behind the backs of some of his Turkish author friends that they were "only addressing the national audience."

There is a problem of being aware of one's readership, whether it is national or international. I cannot avoid this problem now. My last two books averaged more than half a million readers all over the world. I cannot deny that I am aware of their existence. On the other hand, I never feel that I do things to satisfy them. I also believe that my readers would sense it if I did. I've made it my business, from the very beginning, that whenever I sense a reader's expectations I run away. Even the composition of my sentences—I prepare the reader for something and then I surprise him. Perhaps that's why I love long sentences.

INTERVIEWER

To most non-Turkish readers, the originality of your writing has much to do with its Turkish setting. But how would you distinguish your work in a Turkish context?

PAMUK

There is the problem of what Harold Bloom called "the anxiety of influence." Like all authors I had it when I was young. In my early thirties I kept thinking

that I might have been too much influenced by Tolstoy or Thomas Mann—I aimed for that kind of gentle, aristocratic prose in my first novel. But it ultimately occurred to me that although I may have been derivative in my techniques, the fact that I was operating in this part of the world, so far away from Europe—or at least it seemed so at the time—and trying to attract such a different audience in such a different cultural and historical climate, it would grant me originality, even if it was cheaply earned. But it is also a tough job, since such techniques do not translate or travel so easily.

The formula for originality is very simple—put together two things that were not together before. Look at *Istanbul*, an essay about the city and about how certain foreign authors—Flaubert, Nerval, Gautier—viewed the city, and how their views influenced a certain group of Turkish writers. Combined with this essay on the invention of Istanbul's romantic landscape is an autobiography. No one had done this before. Take risks and you will come up with something new. I tried with *Istanbul* to make an original book. I don't know if it succeeds. *The Black Book* was like that too—combine a nostalgic Proustian world with Islamic allegories, stories, and tricks, then set them all in Istanbul and see what happens.

INTERVIEWER

Istanbul conveys the sense that you have always been a very lonely figure. You are certainly alone as a writer in modern Turkey today. You grew up and continue to live in a world from which you are detached.

PAMUK

Although I was raised in a crowded family and taught to cherish the community, I later acquired an impulse to break away. There is a self-destructive side to me, and in bouts of fury and moments of anger I do things that cut me off from the pleasant company of the community. Early in life I realized that the community kills my imagination. I need the pain of loneliness to make my imagination work. And then I'm happy. But being a Turk, after a while I need the consoling tenderness of the community, which I may have destroyed. Istanbul destroyed my relationship with my mother—we don't see each other anymore. And of course I hardly ever see my brother. My relationship with the Turkish public, because of my recent comments, is also difficult.

INTERVIEWER

How Turkish do you feel yourself to be, then?

PAMUK

First, I'm a born Turk. I'm happy with that. Internationally, I am perceived to be more Turkish than I actually see myself. I am known as a Turkish author. When Proust writes about love, he is seen as someone talking about universal love. Especially at the beginning, when I wrote about love, people would say that I was writing about Turkish love. When my work began to be translated, Turks were proud of it. They claimed me as their own. I was more of a Turk for them. Once you get to be internationally known, your Turkishness is underlined internationally, then your Turkishness is underlined by Turks themselves, who reclaim you. Your sense of national identity becomes something that others manipulate. It is imposed by other people. Now they are more worried about the international representation of Turkey than about my art. This causes more and more problems in my country. Through what they read in the popular press, a lot of people who don't know my books are beginning to worry about what I say to the outside world about Turkey. Literature is made of good and bad, demons and angels, and more and more they are only worried about my demons.

Author photograph by Matthias Zeininger.