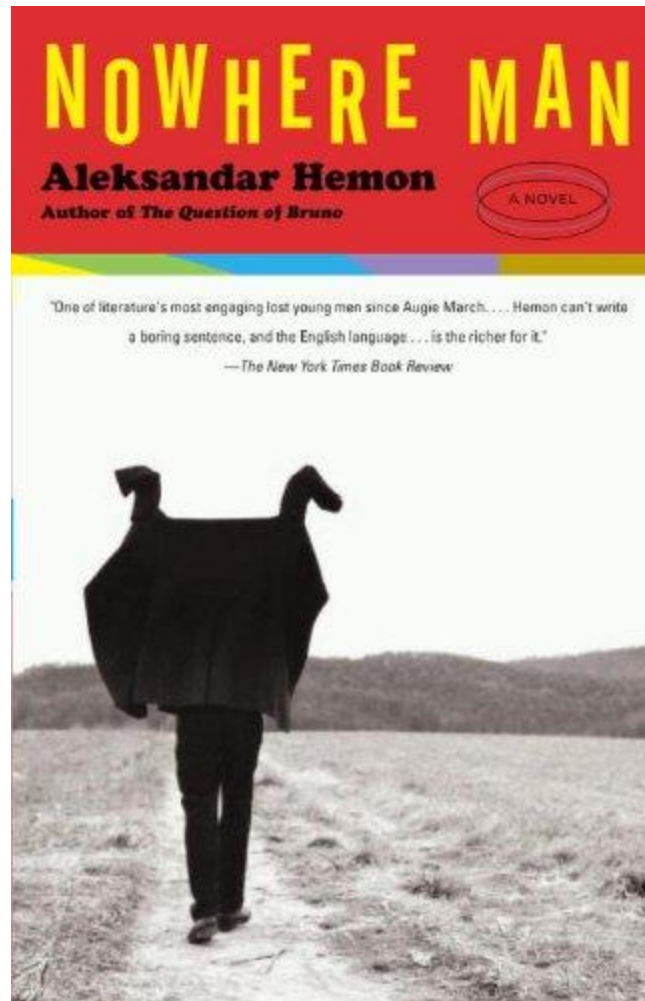


Nowhere Man by Aleksandar Hemon



[Genious Trumps Ineptitude](#)

Following his critically acclaimed short story collection, *The Question of Bruno*, Aleksandar Hemon's debut novel *Nowhere Man* confirms that an important new voice has arrived. Unlike other Eastern European coming-of-age novels, *Nowhere Man* bucks chronological order, spanning the 1990s and sometimes reading like a memoir. Jozef Pronek, who grew up dreaming of hitting it big with his Beatles cover band, wanders through his adopted Chicago while the Bosnia conflict rages on, working as a process server and for Greenpeace, where he meets his girlfriend, Rachel. Jozef spends time in Kiev with American graduate students, such as the uncannily depicted Will, blonde and suburbanly ... [as if his] family procreated by fission, and Vivian, pale and in need of a carrot or something. He rooms with Victor Plavchuk, a conflicted doctoral student in literature who develops a crush on Jozef (and who is reminiscent of a subdued Charles Kinbote from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*). Jozef is sublimely complex, embodying the listlessness and frank practicality of expatriates whose homeland is being shredded by violent conflict. Jozef

wonders, Why couldn't he be more than one person? Why was he stuck in the middle of himself, hungry and tired? while a woman [keeps] her hands in the pockets of her formerly blue jacket, as if despair were a marble in her pocket. Hemons wit is also present: The only thing that distinguished Pronek in school was that he never, ever volunteered to do anything. Nowhere Man is a somber, saddening, yet vibrant and warm debut novel. - Michael Ferch

Personal Review: Nowhere Man by Aleksandar Hemon

The writers of the old old New Europe, between The Danube and the Dardenelles, all seem to share a gift for mordant nostalgia expressed in akilter cadences and quirky metaphors. Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kos, Ivo Andric -- writers in Czech, Serbian, whatever pan-Slavic language -- give us their whacky insights in sentences that translate into oddly similar English. With Aleksandr Hemon, a Bosnian immigrant/refugee, we get the same wry sensibilities without translation. Hemon writes in an English that is both perfectly fluent and piquantly foreign:

"There was a bench nobody was sitting on, encrusted with blotches. I looked up, and on a steel beam high up above perched a jury of pigeons, cooing peevishly. They bloated and deflated, blinking down on us, effortlessly releasing feces. When I was a kid, I thought that snow came from God sh_tt_ing upon us. The Touhy bus arrived, and we lined up at the bus door. I experienced an intense sneeze of happiness, simply because I had managed not to lose my transfer."

Hemon, like the other writers named above, writes very funny prose to tell very sad stories of displacement and loss. In "Nowhere Man", one of his narrators tells about learning songs to sing at late night student parties, in hopes of creating a mood for seductions. The songs are all about "'sevdah' -- a feeling of pleasant soul pain, when you are at peace with your woeful life, which allows you to enjoy this very moment with abandon." Other cultures and other languages have a similar word -- saudade in Portuguese, for instance -- but no other literature is so permeated with "sevdah" as that of the former Eastern European socialist satellites.

Josef Prosek, the title character of Nowhere Man, is a Bosnian teenager in love with the melodies of the Beatles and the cacophonies of sex. Prosek comes to America, to Chicago, in 1992, just before the worst of the atrocities in Bosnia, without leaving behind any of the haplessness of being a teenager or an ethnic outsider in his homeland. Any reader would be excused for supposing that Prosek is Aleksandar Hemon's comically honest self-portrayal, but in fact the novel is narrated by a succession of "others" whose voices sound ineluctably alike... Hemon snapshotting himself in various profiles, in the photo booth on the amusement pier? Nowhere Man fits easily in a major genre of American literature, novels of immigration -- a genre I enjoy a lot, sharing many of its core experiences. The themes of the immigration novel tend to replicate across decades and ethnicities, but Hemon makes them freshly amusing... and freshly

poignant. The ESL class chapter of *Nowhere Man* is uproariously funny, and 100% true to life.

There are a lot of overlooked 'masterpieces' in the genre of immigration; here are some I recommend, from oldest to newest wave of arrival:

Giants in the Earth - Ove Rolvaag

The Bread Givers - Anzia Yezierska

Call It Sleep - Henry Roth

Locos - Felipe Alfau

Obasan - Joy Kogawa

Typical American - Gish Jen

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives - Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The Brief Happy Life of Oscar Wao - Junot Diaz

It's obvious that American literature is the real 'melting pot' that American society has too-often failed to be.

Aleksandar Hemon also fits easily into the amazing succession of writers who have chosen English as their literary medium, rather than being born to it. Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov are the greatest of the bunch, and I note that some critical reviewers here on ammy have faulted Hemon for not achieving the same greatness in his first novel. It's waaay premature to make such a comparison; Hemon is not yet a Nabokov. Check back when he's produced a similar body of work. What's impressive about Hemon, and the other writers in English learned as adults, is the degree to which he's acknowledged the full scope of English -- the immense vocabulary, the rugged range of syntactical variability, the cornucopia of idiomatic quizzicalities -- and melded them into a distinctive language of his own. In fact, he's shown English a good deal more respect than the majority of recent American-born writers.

I can't imagine why some reviewers have sniffed and sneered at this book. Even if you can't attest to its profundity, or empathize with the author's sardonic style of coping with heavy pain, how could you not relish the 'wild and crazy guy' humor of it? The Bosnians are "onto something," I think, with their SEVDAH. We native-borns could use more of it.

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