

tance to convention. And I wonder whether the poem finally spells out spaces where the perfume of crushed fir can be sensed or if it rather turns away from all that in a renunciation that prefers the engine sublime.



*Maps For Lost Lovers.*

Nadeem Aslam.

Knopf, 2005.

384 pages, \$25 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Hemant Sareen

The 2004 Man Booker longlisted *Maps for Lost Lovers* release was accompanied by quaint, almost embarrassing, stories of the author's self-confinement—complete with blacked-out windows—during the eleven years it took to write a book that had come to possess him. Even the more fetching prospect of a Muslim, a Pakistani one at that, writing a courageous book taking on big themes of Islam and the West, Identity and Immigration—themes that evoke book-burning mobs and *fatwas* as much as jumbo jets jabbing concrete—hinted at a self-conscious earnestness bordering on the vain.

In fact, the absence of *fatwas* belies the potency of the statement on Islam and cultural conflicts of our time that Aslam's beautiful, though often self-indulgent and an obsessively crafted manifesto-like, book makes.

In an unnamed English town, a live-in Muslim couple, Jugnu and Chanda, have been missing. The novel opens with the news of the arrest of the suspected murderers. Apparently an “honor killing”—a common phenomenon in Pakistan and as recent reports suspect, the U.K. too—carried out by the girl's brothers for bringing shame on the family and Islam. The book follows a year in the life of the two families living in the shadow of the gruesome murder. The illusion of the effect having preceded the cause soon vanishes as the family, while coming to terms with grief and their own humanity, finds itself inching inexorably towards more potential tragedies, averted, if at all, only through either enlightened or timorous compromise and the more drastic and often hazardous flight from the oppressive Islam and family.

Peacocks, moths, and parakeets flit across the brooding and menacing sullenness of Dasht-e-Tanhaii—“Desert of Loneliness,” a sobriquet the immigrants give their adapted town as much to claim as to repudiate it—their natural and instinctual existence mocking Islam's unnatural repression. Moths, the creatures of light and darkness, are leitmotifs—used along with a profusion of symbols, almost to the point of contrivance—to reso-

nate the ambivalence of human desire that Islam seeks to negate.

The fatal attraction of moths for flame is a kitschy staple of popular Urdu and Persian poetry: flames of both love and religion allure and then burn the seeker. They add to the sense of tragedy that hangs over Dasht-e-Tanhaii's garden of Eden rife with whispers of love, prayers, blasphemies, rumours, and confessions.

Shamas, Jugnu's liberal brother, is drawn into adultery, as he strives to retain a humanity that, the book suggests passionately, Islam erodes. Kaukab, Shama's wife, is the perfect hostess and matriarch, feels her authority waning amongst her near-apostate and rebellious children, the westernized second generation: they instinctively place Kaukab at the centre of the forces that killed their uncle. Silencing her mind to bring her own instincts to conform to her faith in a Mobius-strip logic, Kaukab condemns her brother-in-law's murder, but can't help denouncing his “sin” also.

Aslam uses Kaukab to look unsparingly at the practise of Islam and the Koran that lends itself so easily to literal reading. She is the zealot-in-the-kitchen, who raises the bar of everyday piety to such heights that the suicide bombers' jacket is the logical and small step away in the continuum.

There is no reconciliation in the family, representing various tensions within modern Islam.

A Little Pakistan, that cohabits with an indifferent West, and in continual hostility to it, the town is populated with characters, major and minor, all fleeing from living hells from across the Islamic world, only to find them replicated here in cruel exactness: another place where a million mutinies flare up and are continually quelled in the name of Islam. The enclosing West's primary act of hostility is not its racism but its alluring permissiveness, that threatens to entice young Muslims away from their faith and families. The causes for the West's Islamophobia are sought in the unmindful indoctrination of hate against the “brothel” West, that “ordinary,” “decent” Muslims subject their children to. Around Dasht-e-Tanhaii, a common curse is to wish someone that their son marries a white woman. The huge chasm between the two cultures makes the crossover to freedom and sanity of the West an extremely hazardous journey.

Aslam is more faithful to his literary roots than he might seem to his creed. His immersion in Urdu language and literary culture makes the prose redolent with “perfumed longueurs of an Urdu lyric”—full of nuanced observations, if at times epicene. Abundant references and similes mnemonically link the twin milieus of the Pakistani immigrant—the immediate, and the lost and constantly recalled—vividly recreating the ethos of a

Punjabi Muslim family and community. The book's main achievement is the near-accurate, piquant translation of an elusive subculture, that often gives rise to tawdry and comic interpretations, into an international literary idiom—the breakthrough Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* achieved.



*Black Diaries.*

Jill Hoffman.

Box Turtle Press, 2000.

90 pages, \$10 (paperback).

Reviewed by David Need

Jill Hoffman's second volume of poems, *Black Diaries*, brings together poems published in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies, including *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, and Roth's *Poetry Annual*. The editor of *Mudfish*, Hoffman has taught at Bard, Barnard, and Brooklyn College, and currently teaches out of her home.

Aptly titled, the poems in this collection have the compact, unguarded, transgressive language of a relationship diary. Most explore erotic feelings and disclose both the tangles of desire and the scouring, complicated wounds that mark us, as in the brief "Regret":

Mother, when I dress him  
as a woman I love him.  
I wish I hadn't thrown away  
some of your old girdles.

The danger of confessional poetry is that of aggrandizement and indirect ambition, and this collection is not wholly free of this. However, the expressionist lurch of Hoffman's syntax and imagery redeems what might have been lost to vanity. I found myself thinking of the hidden surfaces Rodin left buried when he worked two figures out of a stone, of the surfaces opened up between two people when they have touched, in which there is not articulation but a dense unfinished possibility. And I found myself thinking of the way honesty is often effected by the application of a tourniquet, as in the poem "2 Oct" which Hoffman begins in adumbration:

Laundry. Recipes. Mice. My daughter  
is away and my mind begins to fill  
the house. Unbelievable. I am happy.

And ends with precise, disparate description:

At dawn we swim in the pool of the college that fired me.  
I wear my hair unbraided so that he will not pull it.

This balance of clean decision and difficult feeling is, finally, thrilling.



*Daode Jing.*

Laozi.

Thomas Meyer, translator.

Flood Editions, 2005.

111 pages, \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by J. P. Seaton

Thirty-some years ago, I made an absolute rule to turn down book review requests for any book that I couldn't give an unqualified rave. Thomas Meyer's *daode jing* has made me break my rule.

Let me *try* to simply list the reasons, the pros that made me want to break the rule, and the cons I had to overcome. Oh, it's not so simple. I read Chinese (more, at least, than most folks who have dealt with this particular book), and Tom doesn't, so there are quite a few places where I could point out words and phrases that are flat impossibilities. That's a con, certainly, if only because if I should choose to take that approach I would bore almost every reader who's not a vulture by nature, and more importantly, I'd probably fatally distract many readers from the good points, both small and large, that this work of understated art possesses. Example: although the author makes the daring, but I think excellent decision to leave the uninterpretable terms *Dao* (still more commonly recognized as *Tao*) and *de* (*Te*) un"translated." On the other hand, he chooses to write them as *daode* in the title of the book, *daode jing*. Most readers of this magazine, and a good portion of America's "intelligentsia" know what the two terms are trying to mean. Readers of Chinese know that the two syllable term *daode*, means *morals*, or maybe even morals and ethics. Though the book is neither immoral nor unethical (or even amoral, or *even* morally relativistic when read deeply), neither *dao* nor *de* alone means anything having to do with morals or ethics. I think this example is irrelevant, and I haven't found, among the many, many minor misinterpretations of the dictionary, anything that significantly distorts the Tom Meyer's take on Lao Tzu's message. It is an ambiguous, paradoxical message, open to many interpretations: as a translator of classical Chinese, I find this author's interpretations most often well within the range of possible readings. As a reader and lover of Chinese poetry and Taoist and Zen (Taoist inspired) philosophical works, let me move to the pros.

Like the choice of using *dao* and *de* as counters for the