



Exit West, by Mohsin Hamid
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, July 2018

The *New York Times* deemed Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as "one of the ten best books of 2017." Additionally, the powerful novel was awarded or shortlisted for several prizes including the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize,

Exit West is set in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or not openly at war." From the characters' names and religious practices, it can be assumed that this city is in a predominately Muslim country in the Middle East.

Two young professionals, Saeed and Nadia, meet in an evening business school. At first glance, Nadia, who works for an insurance company, would seem to be more conservative. She wears a flowing black robe not for religious reasons but for self-protection so that she can live as an independent woman. When Nadia had finished university, she decided to live on her own, much to her family's dismay.

Saeed has a good position with an advertising agency. He lives at home with his parents who once were teachers, but now they have menial jobs due to the hard and restrictive times. Saeed gets up the courage to ask the intriguing Nadia for a date. Their relationship quickly blossoms into a romance.

However, chaos soon begins to engulf their city. Violent episodes escalate from isolated car bombings to massive explosions in the market place. There are no safe places, it would seem. Saeed and Nadia want to escape to the West. They hear rumors about wondrous "doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places faraway." One man promises to bring Saeed and Nadia to such a passage. Soon, the pair walks through one door to a Greek Island. From there, through several doors, Saeed and Nadia find themselves in London and then San Francisco. Everywhere they go, they encounter other desperate refugees.

The author, Mohsin Hamid, appears to be well versed in ancient Greek and Roman drama. The magical doors in *Exit West* evoke a classical plot device known as *deus*

ex machina, wherein an unexpected power or supernatural event appears to solve a hopeless situation. Colson Whitehead also employed this device in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Underground Railroad*, depicting an actual (not metaphorical) train transporting escaping slaves.

Mixing fantasy and reality in a novel is always risky. Nevertheless, the addition of whimsy—magical doors—works well in *Exit West*, lightening a compelling contemporary tale.