

# There's no escape from the war zone

Pakistani brothers find themselves captives of al-Qaida in Afghanistan after 9-11

The Blind Man's Garden, by Nadeem Aslam (Bond Street Books/Doubleday Canada, 384 pages, \$29.95)

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It's spring again, and the Taliban are on the move, renewing their attacks on Afghanistan's security forces. The annual offensive will likely be even worse in 2014, with a presidential election slated for April and the withdrawal of the last U.S., Canadian and other foreign troops expected by the end of the year. After more than a decade of war in that corner of the world, the violence continues.

The Blind Man's Garden gives an insider's view of why it does.

This grim and lyrical novel by Pakistani-British author Nadeem Aslam is set in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, as the first bombs rain down in the aftermath of the 9-11 terrorist attacks on the United States. It's the story of Jeo and Mikal, two foster brothers in their early 20s, who go to the war zone to aid wounded civilians.

Except they don't even get a chance to start. Manipulated by a corrupt Pakistani army major who has a grudge against Jeo's father (the two are feuding over a school the major wants to turn into an al-Qaida training centre for boys), Jeo and Mikal soon find themselves captives of the very people they've come to help: the Afghans.

Set upon by the Taliban, they're handed a different fate.

On the home front, their mutual love interest – Jeo's wife – awaits their return, as does Jeo's father (the "blind man" of the title) and mother, all moderates in a polarized ideological battle with Islamists radicalized by the war across the border. Jumping between the family's struggle for survival and the young men's fight for their lives, the book ratchets up the tension.



There's a lot of murder, maiming and mayhem, some kidnappings, a multiple hostage-taking, scenes of torture and, by the end, a nerve-racking escape worthy of an Ian Fleming novel. What begins as a domestic drama informed by Islam turns into an old-style thriller in which the black hats and the white hats of opposing tribes get lost in the fog of war.

The author knows his subject intimately, but as an immigrant who has spent most of his life out of the region, he has a certain distance from it, too. And that helps him communicate the story to a wider audience.

A refugee of President Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan, Aslam moved to England as a teenager with his family; English is his second language, and in a few rare instances it shows. Twice, he refers to "zip-lock" plastic handcuffs, when in fact he means zip-ties. And there's this punning howler about a Muslim student unsure how devoutly to dress: "She did try the burka again in the third year but by then she had lost the habit."

But as the 47-year-old author proved in his previous books – *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), *Maps for Lost Lovers* (long-listed for the 2004 Booker Prize) and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) – prose can trickle with remarkable fluidity off an adopted tongue. To wit, one lengthy passage midway through the book: an interrogation scene of the kind made notorious by Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*.

It takes place in an abandoned brick factory that's become a U.S. military prison, somewhere on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Mikal's interrogator, an American named David, spews a stream-of-consciousness interior monologue that's a litany of all the things he hates about the region. All Mikal hears is the man's barking laugh, which doesn't stop.

It's "a laughter tinged with contempt for him and his nation where the taps don't have water, and the shops don't have sugar or rice or flour, the sick don't have medicines and the cars don't have petrol," Aslam writes.

The "white man," as Mikal describes him, has eyes that are "full of hatred and accusation and hilarity and mirth at this citizen of a shameless beggar country full of liars, hypocrites, beaters of women and children and animals and the weak, brazen rapists and unpunished murderers, torturers who probably dissolved his father's body in a drum of acid in Lahore Fort, delusional morons and fools who wanted independence from the British and a country of their own, but who now can't wait to leave it, emigrate, emigrate, emigrate to Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, Dubai, Kuwait, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, China, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, South Korea, Norway, Germany,

Belgium, Chile, Hong Kong, Holland, Spain, Italy, France, anywhere, anywhere, anywhere, anywhere but Pakistan, they can't wait to get out of there, having reduced the country to a wasteland, their very own caliphate of rubble."

To which Mikal has a monologue of his own, a whisper growing into a shout, a howl.

" 'What about you? ... What about the part you played in it?' He wishes he knew how to say it in English. If I agree with you that what you say is true, would you agree that your country played a part in ruining mine, however small?" Read this book, and you'll understand the damage done.

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