



In the Country of Men

Written by *Hisham Matar*

2007 Commonwealth Writers' Prize of Europe and South Asia

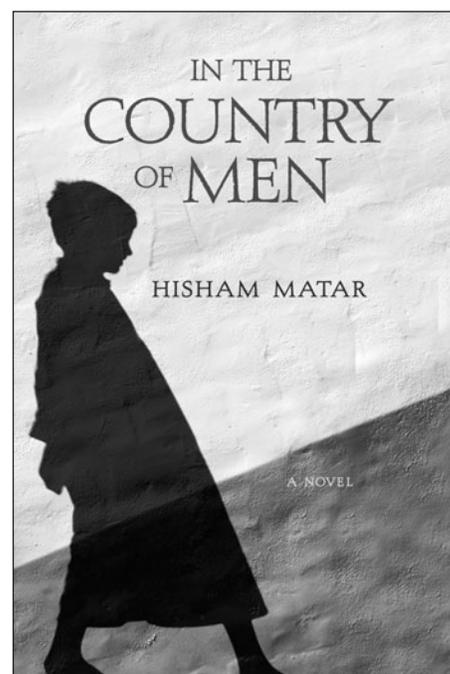
2006 Man Booker Prize Shortlist

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READING LEVEL: 9



“A poetic and powerful account... resonant with the details of a Libyan childhood.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“Graceful... Quietly, but with the insistence of a tolling bell, Matar lays bare for Suleiman both public and private worlds of overlapping male power, role models, standards and styles. At its intimate center, the novel calibrates the boy’s shifting, decreasingly innocent perspective as he himself becomes implicated by cruelty and betrayal.”

—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Matar is a careful, controlled writer. His restraint—the spaces and the light between his words—make reading his work a physical as well as an emotional experience.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

• note to teachers •

Hisham Matar’s *In the Country of Men* is a strikingly balanced novel. While set within the complicated and highly charged political landscape of Libya in the late ‘70s (the setting of the author’s own early childhood), the story’s narrator is a young boy still preoccupied with games, just beginning to open his eyes to the possibility of love, still considering—and misinterpreting—what it means to be a man. By constructing the story around this strange interplay of innocence and corruption, the author is able to open up a dialogue about duality, addressing both the light and dark elements of humanity and exploring an impressive range of themes such as freedom and identity, justice and injustice, loyalty and betrayal, exile and identity, addiction and the nature of truth.

While the following guide provides suggestions for addressing the historical and political elements of the novel, it also provides a means to examine the story from a variety of other viewpoints. In considering Matar’s work, readers of all backgrounds should quickly realize that, while they may not have been previously acquainted with facets of Libyan history such as the rule of the Qaddafi revolutionary regime, there is no need for apprehension. While politics and history do often fuel the dramatic action of the story, the universal themes, simple structure, and classic style of *In the Country of Men* make it a truly enjoyable, almost effortless read.

• about this book

In the Country of Men begins with a simple declaration: “I am recalling now that last summer before I was sent away.” It is a simple start to a story of startling depth. Through the eyes of young Suleiman, we experience a child’s often misguided attempts to make sense of the adult world. Suleiman’s mother is an alcoholic, his father is being hunted by the Libyan revolutionary regime, and neighbors may disappear at any time and appear on television for interrogation and public execution. The title of the story is particularly telling, as the novel raises questions about what it means to be a man, what is involved in humanity, and how much of one’s identity is tied to one’s country. The characters are outsiders, doing the best they can to uphold their beliefs and survive. While the setting of the novel—the turbulent Libya of 1979, ruled by the terror-inducing Qaddafi regime—certainly propels the narrative, the novel is ultimately about universal issues: human faults and triumphs, the resilience of the human spirit, the dynamic of relationships between parent and child, friend and neighbor, a country and its citizens.

One of the most striking scenes in the book occurs when Suleiman’s mother and Moosa burn Baba’s books. A defiant Suleiman, unable to comprehend the motives behind the destruction of his father’s prized books, picks up a copy of *Democracy Now* and hides it in his room. There it resides, immensely powerful and immensely dangerous. Surely one of Matar’s great achievements is his ability to illuminate the power of the written word, to reveal the adventure found in expression. It is a searing reminder of the power of education—the power of an idea, which may be overlooked by those who possess what seem like limitless and inherent freedoms.

• about the author

HISHAM MATAR was born in New York in 1970 to Libyan parents. He lived in America for the first three years of his life while his father worked for the Libyan delegation to the United Nations. His family then returned to Libya, where Matar spent the early part of his childhood. When the author was nine years old, his family fled to Egypt amid accusations that his father was in opposition to the Libyan revolutionary regime. Matar completed his schooling there, and as a teenager, moved to London, where he earned a degree in architecture. In 1990, while the author was in England, his father went to answer the door at his Cairo home and never reappeared. Several years later, Matar’s family received two letters from his father, which revealed that he had been taken by the Egyptian secret police, turned over to the Libyan revolutionary regime, and jailed in Tripoli. Matar has not received any further correspondence from his father since these letters, written over a decade ago.

In 2000, Matar began writing his first novel, *In the Country of Men*. The book was published in 2006 to critical acclaim and was short-listed for the ’06 Guardian First Book Award and the ’06 Man Booker Prize. In 2007, Matar was awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize of Europe and South Asia. *In the Country of Men* continues to be printed in numerous countries worldwide and will be translated into more than twenty languages.

• teaching ideas

In the Country of Men addresses universal themes such as freedom and imprisonment, justice and injustice, exile and identity, addiction, the experience of adolescence, and the power of the written word. These themes can be discussed generally or under a variety of subject headings, including history and cultural studies, philosophy, psychology, and literature. Use the following suggestions as a jumping-off point for teaching the novel in your class.

Students of history or cultural studies might first examine the history of Libya, focusing on the revolutionary regime of the 1970s, as depicted in the novel. Compare and contrast this regime to other forms of government. How does America relate to Libya today? What has changed? How do the political events represented in the book compare to those of other cultures? Review examples of exile throughout history. Examine the treatment of women as represented in the novel.

Philosophy students should engage in discussions of ethics using examples from the novel. Look at instances of loyalty and betrayal, violence, freedom and imprisonment, exile and its effects. Examine the nature of truth, making use of the novel's point of view. Examine the characters' roles from the standpoint of existentialist philosophy.

The novel presents endless material for those studying **psychology**. Discuss issues of identity and gender as they surface in the novel. Consider the behavior of the characters, Suleiman's experience of adolescence, and addiction as experienced by Suleiman's mother. How is each character's behavior influenced by his or her past and by his or her country's political climate? How do the characters deal with issues of imprisonment, fear, and exile? The novel is very much about relationships. Be sure to examine the relationships between the characters, including parent-child relationships, those of friend and neighbor, the relationship of citizen to country, etc.

Teachers who would like to use the novel in an English class should begin by breaking the novel down into digestible components such as characters, plot, setting, themes, point of view/narrator, structure, imagery/symbolism. Examine examples of imagery and myth in the novel. Consider their significance and universal appeal. Consider the book within the history of **literature**. Consider examples of the power of the written word within the novel. How do the various characters experience literature? What influence does it have on them? How is it utilized in a political context? Be sure to discuss the book-burning scene and the history of banned books. What is that makes the written word powerful?

For younger readers, it might be useful to ask students to focus on the "common issues" in the novel—issues of humanity that transcend the boundaries of culture and time. This commonality is particularly important for teachers to emphasize as young readers approach global literature with unfamiliar settings and a foreign historical or political context.

This guide provides suggestions for further reading—fiction as well as non-fiction, books that share stylistic similarities as well as thematic similarities. Some focus on the topic of exile or imprisonment. Some books are told from a child's point of view and some simply share the historical perspective of *In the Country of Men*.

More mature students might consider the tie between the novel and contemporary politics and cultural conditions, focusing on human rights issues. For such students, you might share with them Hisham Matar's op-ed piece "Seeing What We Want to See in Qaddafi," which appeared in the *New York Times* and can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/05/opinion/05matar.html>. Students who wish to consider the novel as a semi-autobiographical work might wish to find out more about the author's real-life experiences. In the following article, located at <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGMDE198122003> Matar writes about the effect that the disappearance of his father had on him.

• terms

A dialogue about the people and places listed below is crucial in understanding the world that Suleiman is experiencing. This discussion will provide historical perspective and, therefore, some stability for readers who may not be familiar with the history of Libya. This section also includes other terms, which may not appear directly in the text, but which will be useful in fostering further discussion in looking beyond the book.

- Qaddafi (Colonel Qadaffi, The Guide)
- Septimius Severus
- Lepcis Magni
- The Koran/The Q'Uran
- Tripoli
- Cairo
- coup d'etat
- Revolutionary Committee
- propaganda
- freedom of speech
- El-Fateh

• discussion and writing

1. Why do you think that the author chose the title *In the Country of Men* for this book? What questions are raised about the concepts of country, manhood and humanity? How does the title tie in with the themes of the novel and the position of the characters as they struggle to get along in their environment?
2. How does the author use contrasting imagery in the opening passage to set the tone of the book? How does the image of people seeking mercy from the heat reflect the broader condition of the characters?
3. How does Suleiman react to his exile? Is he better off? What do you think he has lost and gained as a result?
4. What forms of imprisonment are depicted in the novel? How do the various characters experience and react to a lack of freedom?
5. What can we infer about the lives of women in Libya during the time period represented in this story?
6. Why does the tale of Scheherazade anger Suleiman's mother? How does Suleiman's view of the story differ? Why do you think this is?
7. The author describes a statue of Septimius Severus which points to Rome. Why do you think the author included this statue? What does it symbolize? What about Lepcis Magna? What does it symbolize and why is it important?
8. The novel addresses the issue of loyalty. How do the various characters experience loyalty and betrayal? Discuss some examples. What do you think is the main cause of some of the betrayals that occur?
9. Why do Suleiman's mother and Moosa burn Baba's books? Why do you think that Suleiman keeps the book *Democracy Now*? Why is this dangerous?
10. How does the point of view of the story affect the way that we see the injustices represented in the story? How might this be different if the narrator were an adult?
11. How does Suleiman's relationship with Kareem change throughout the story?
12. Throughout the novel, Suleiman refers to his mother's alcoholism as her "illness." How accurate is this observation? Do you feel it is a reflection of Suleiman's naivety in youth or a kind of wisdom about her actual condition?

13. Why does Suleiman's mother refer to the day she married Suleiman's father as a "black day"?
14. When the students visit Lepcis Magna, Kareem states, "Children are useless in a war." Do you think this is true? What might the author's point of view be, based on clues in the novel?
15. In Chapter 3, after Ustah Rashid is taken, there is an exchange between Um Masoud and Baba. The author tells us that "Um Masoud continued to study her fingers, smiling knowingly now as if some old suspicion had finally been confirmed." What has been confirmed for Um Masoud?
16. In Chapter 5, Moosa says, "It's our obligation to call injustice by its name." Suleiman's mother replies, "Go call it by its name in your country. Here it's either silence or exile, walk by the wall or leave. Go be a hero elsewhere." What does she mean? Who is right? How do the different characters in the novel face injustice and what are the consequences?
17. How does the author use color within the novel? What do some colors represent? How do descriptions of color help to develop the mood of the story?
18. In Chapter 9, Kareem tells Suleiman that he is not a man because he has "no word." What does he mean by this?
19. In Chapter 10, Suleiman is having an inner dialogue. He says, "One's nature is like a mountain, you can't change it." Do you think that he is right? Discuss.
20. Why do you think that Suleiman is violent towards Bahloul?
21. Throughout the novel, Suleiman is constantly revealing his thoughts on what a hero is and what a man is. Discuss some of these descriptions. How realistic is his idea of a hero and a man? Why do you think he has these conceptions? Where do they come from?
22. Moosa says that Libya is his country, although he has lived in Egypt for half of his life. Suleiman's mother disagrees. She feels that Libya is not his country. Who do you feel is right? Discuss.
23. What profession does Suleiman ultimately choose? Why do you think the author decided to have Suleiman choose this profession?
24. The novel raises questions about identity, citizenship, and what it means to belong. Many of the characters in the novel are outsiders in some way. Who do you feel is an outsider and what makes them seem like an outsider?
25. There are various references to literature and the written word through the story. How do the various characters experience literature? What effect does it have on them? What is it that makes literature powerful?
26. In Chapter 23, Suleiman says, "Nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that's why many feel that it needs to be anxiously guarded." What does he mean by this? Do you agree?

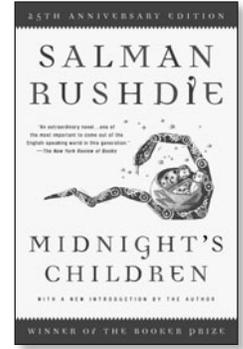
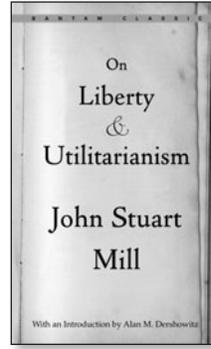
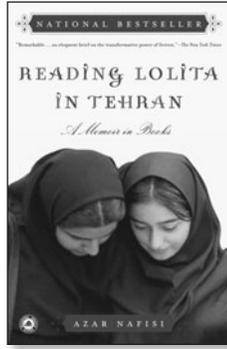
• beyond the book

1. Examine real-life accounts of exile as well as fictional accounts in world literature. Be sure to discuss the various kinds of exile, including political, self-imposed, addiction etc. What are some of the effects of exile? How does it impact identity? How do the representations of these experiences differ and what do they share in common? Stylistically, how do different people depict their accounts of exile?
2. Study the history of Libya during the 1970s. Discuss rebellion, political dissent, the price of freedom etc. How does the history of Libya relate to that of other cultures? Why is this still significant today?
3. Review the “Tale of Scheherazade” as it appears in the book. Discuss how this tale functions as a myth and an allegory set within a novel, reflecting a broader human experience. Have students write about an injustice as myth or allegory. Discuss what literary devices are utilized in myth and allegory to help readers understand and relate in a broad and timeless way.
4. Use the novel during Banned Books week (last week of September). Review the scene where Suleiman’s mother and Moosa burn Baba’s books. Examine some of the books that have been banned throughout history. Discuss why they may have been banned. How have our perceptions of these books changed today? What makes these books powerful? Open up a broader conversation about the significance of literature, and about how shifts in context (e.g. different cultural perceptions) can affect the way it is understood and valued. Introduce organizations that foster freedom of expression and a commitment to the advancement of literature internationally, such as Amnesty International (www.amnestyusa.org/bannedbooks), The American Library Association (www.ala.org/bbooks), and PEN American Center (www.pen.org), and utilize the free resources they provide.

• about this guide’s writer

This guide was produced by JENNIFER BANACH PALLADINO, a writer from Connecticut. Jennifer was the main contributor to *Bloom’s Guides: The Glass Menagerie*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc. She also recently completed a guide to Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* for DemiDec, Inc., a producer of guides and study materials for the U.S. Academic Decathlon and the World Scholar’s Cup.

• other titles of interest



Age of Iron, J.M. Coetzee.

Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life, J.M. Coetzee.

Hadji Murat, Leo Tolstoy.

Atonement, Ian McEwan.

The Feast of the Goat, Mario Vargas Llosa.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Unknown.

The Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri.

Tristia, Ovid.

The Rebel, Albert Camus.

Exile and the Kingdom, Albert Camus.

Season of the Migration to the North, Tayeb Salih.

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini.

Fugitive Pieces, Anne Michaels.

Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi.

Snow, Orhan Pamuk.

Tender is the Night, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

A Moveable Feast, Ernest Hemingway.

The Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius.

Dubliners, James Joyce.

Demian, Hermann Hesse.

The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie.

Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie.

Home and Exile, Chinua Achebe.

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe.

Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, Edward Said.

Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition, Czeslaw Milosz.

Long Day's Journey into Night, Eugene O'Neill.

Love and Exile, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson.

On Liberty & Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill.

Second Treatise of Government, John Locke.

Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville.

A History of Modern Libya, Dirk Vandewalle.

The Thousand and One Nights (a.k.a. The Arabian Nights), multiple authors.

• other available guides

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Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**
Cisneros, Sandra. **La Casa en Mango Street**
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**
Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**

Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**
Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**
Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

Nonfiction:

Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**
Blank, Carla. **Rediscovering America**
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**
Katz, Jon. **Geeks**
Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**
Lewis, Anthony. **Gideon's Trumpet**
Miller, Jennifer. **Inheriting the Holy Land**
Nafisi, Azar. **Reading Lolita in Tehran**
Nazario, Sonia. **Enrique's Journey**
Opdyke, Irene Gut. **In My Hands**
Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Almost a Woman**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Quando era puertorriqueña**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**
Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**
Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**