



Portrait of Sebastian Khan

Aatif Rashid

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In Aatif Rashid's witty and dissolute *Portrait of Sebastian Khan*, a Muslim American college student is conflicted by his love for free-spirited pleasure and the more conventional realities of accomplishment, commitment, and financial success. The novel takes place in 2011, with art history major Sebastian Khan about to turn twenty-two and in his final year at University of California, Berkeley.

Bright, charming, and aesthetically inclined, Sebastian is supported for the most part by his wealthy father. His apartment is tastefully furnished, he has ample money for socializing, and he belongs to the Model United Nations, a club that travels the college circuit under the auspices of global dialogue—with plenty of partying on the sidelines.

Though his parents had an arranged Islamic marriage, Sebastian has drifted from his faith beyond a vague sense of obligation or confused yearning. His relationships with women are generally brief, heady, and linked to his love of classic paintings, yet he also finds himself involved with an economics student named Fatima. Fatima is a practicing Muslim who is focused, ambitious, and has an itinerary for her future—all quite the opposite of Sebastian's purposeful aimlessness.

Sebastian is a flawed but compelling character, and his romances are detailed with rushes of color and sensation. This sensuality alternates with undertones of humor and even subtle splendor, so that Trader Joe's vodka becomes a vessel of magical spirits, or the “mermaid's song” scent of a beachy shampoo transports him from the “dull pop music of the Walgreen's.”

In the end, Sebastian's Berkeley days may be the last strokes on a canvas of pageantry and excess, but despite the somber palette of post-graduate life, his newer, self-determined portrait seems to be more complex and changing for the better.

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