



Pureland

Zarrar Said

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In Zarrar Said's epic novel *Pureland*, a servant turned physicist wrestles with science, faith, and love.

Salim is born a Pureland plebeian in 1950, but a levitating ascetic prophesies future greatness for him, influencing his fate. With the help of General Khan, Salim wins a scholarship to Columbia University and earns a doctorate under the tutelage of a professor with whom he is later awarded the Nobel Prize in physics. Meanwhile, a dictator, and then the caliphate, take over Pureland, declaring a *fatwa* on Salim's life.

Pureland is a study in contrasts, with Salim at its center. While born an Ahmadi, a persecuted people, he grows up amid the rich and powerful in General Khan's household. He loves his homeland—and Laila, Khan's daughter—but both are set against him.

Salim's killer narrates the book as a confession, addressing a jury that's situated somewhere between killer and the killed. On one hand, the book explains the caliphate's rise to power and its reasons to abhor Salim. On the other, it depicts Salim as a conciliatory figure whose commitment to physics leads him away from Pureland. His love for his home keeps him loyal, despite its charges against him.

Salim's speculative theories of universality introduce elements of magical realism. Divine intervention becomes a plausible and welcome counterpoint to the real and violent forces set against Salim and all of humanity, while Salim's import in politics, science, and religion elevate him to near messianic status. The effect is an urgent novel—as if reading about Salim is akin to cheering on freedom itself. Meanwhile, provocative, sing-song language and outlandish behavior from the rich and poor alike add levity to the novel's charm.

Pureland is a modern fable with a momentous moral about collective responsibility.

MARI CARLSON (July / August 2020)

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