

Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*

(originally published 1998, English translation 2001)

Nobel Prize–winning Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk offers a murder mystery set in sixteenth-century Istanbul. When a sultan commissions a group of talented artists to create a book celebrating his life and times, one of the artists disappears. Are there clues hidden in the images he created?

How to Use this Discussion Guide

All art arises from the context of its time. The MFAH Book Club uses works of art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and from collections around the world, as the hub for a series of questions directly related to a specific book. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts—this is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique.

Discuss the questions with your book club or a friend, or just think about them if reading on your own, then bring your book and take a guided tour of select works at the MFAH on a Book Club Tour!

MFAH Book Club Tours

To complement your reading and discussion of Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, tours are available October 23, 2011, through January 16, 2012. These discussion-based tours will feature works of art, selected from the exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts* and from the MFAH collections, that evoke life in antiquity and timeless human themes.

To book a tour at a time of your own choosing:

Read and discuss the book in your own book club, then [book your group for a guided tour](#) led by a gallery educator. A minimum of 8 people is required.

Not in a book club? Reading on your own or with a friend? The MFAH has scheduled walk-in tours for each book selection on specific dates and times throughout the season. Visit www.mfah.org/bookclub for the walk-in tour schedule, and to register for a specific tour.

COLOR: *Dramatis Personae*

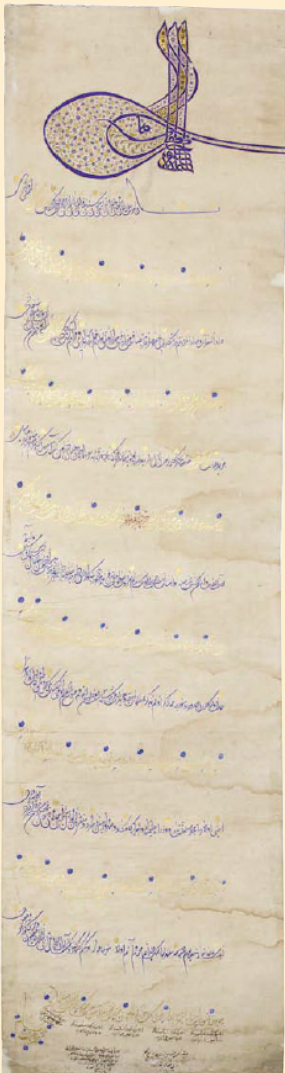
Pamuk uses multiple narrators to tell the story. Each narrator is given the space to articulate a unique position and philosophy. Some personal accounts overlap; others offer interesting clues; still others fail to provide crucial details. Which narrator appeals to you most or least? Why?

In chapter 12, Master Osman says there are three questions one should ask to determine “how genuine a painter is.” Why do you think the question of an individual style is so important to the Master?

What quality determines the best painters? (Refer to chapters 12, 13, and 19.)

What do you think the murderer means when he says in chapter 18 that evil is “indispensable to an artist”?

ART OF POWER



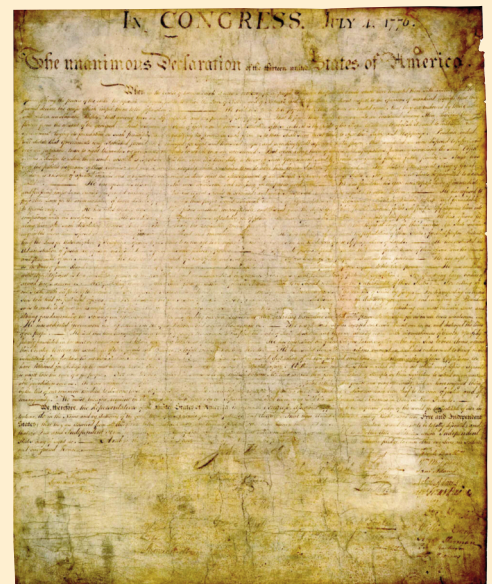
After discussing the novel using the questions above, consider the connections between art and literature.

The document on the left is included in the MFAH exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan*. It is a *berat*, a document that bestows an imperial title, privilege, or property. At the top is the *tuğra*, a sumptuous illumination of the calligraphic monogram of the sovereign, Sultan Süleyman I—called Süleyman the Magnificent, grandfather of the sultan under whose reign *My Name is Red* is set. The script (generally *celi divani*) is stylized, and the inks are rare: blue and lapis lazuli with gold.

What about this scroll lets us know that it is official and important? How does it compare, in appearance, to other important political decrees, such as the *Declaration of Independence* (pictured at right)?

Berat of Sultan Süleyman I; Turkey, Istanbul, AH 963/1556; ink, color, and gold on paper; Millet Manuscript Library, Istanbul (AE Document 1).

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776 (signed), U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, on view in the Rotunda of the National Archives Building, Washington D.C.



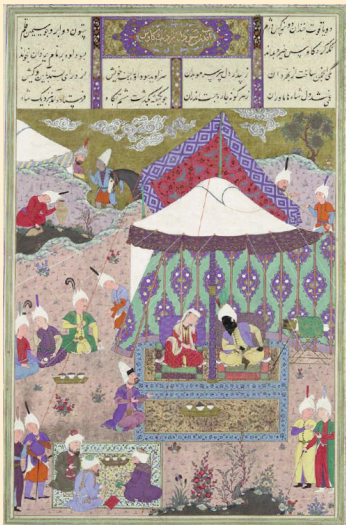
The story of Ibn Shakir inventing Islamic painting is referred to at least three times in the book (chapters 13, 52, and 58). What do you think is the point of telling or alluding to the story in each instance? Why do you think Pamuk repeats or elaborates this and other stories and motifs?

Why do you think “the notion of an endless time” (p. 70) is so valued by miniaturists? In what ways might an individual or Western style of painting threaten this ideal of timelessness? In what ways might a Western style be more timeless? (See chapters 13, 20 and 21.)

One important debate among the artists in *My Name is Red* is whether an image can survive independent of the text it is intended to illuminate. In chapter 10, “I Am a Tree,” the embodied tree from one illustration explains this debate based on its own experiences. The tree concludes: “I don’t want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning” (p. 51). Can a single (painted) tree have meaning?

Why do you think that Master Osman believes that “magnificent works of art cannot be made as they once were” (p. 233) and that “all of it’ll be forgotten” (p. 261)? (See also chapter 51.) In what ways are his reasons like/unlike the Enishte’s reasons for saying “our methods will die out, our colors will fade” (p. 171)?

ART OF LOVE



After discussing the novel using the questions above, consider the connections between art and literature.

The MFAH exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan* includes five folios from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp.* The illustration shown here depicts Sudaba, the only daughter of the Yemenite King, being married off to Kay Kavus, a mythological Shah of Iran, against her father’s will. When Sudaba’s father lures Kay Kavus into a trap, Sudaba stands fast in support of her husband—tending to him during captivity in a heavily guarded and snow-covered fortress.

* The *Shahnama* is an epic poem, a classic in the Persian-speaking world. It is comprised of 50,000 rhyming couplets composed by the Persian poet Firdawsi that narrate the history of the ancient kings of Iran from the mythical beginnings to the Arab Conquest of 651 A.D.

The Marriage of Sudaba and Kay Kavus (detail) from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp; Iran, Tabriz, 1525-35; ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1970.301.20, fol. 130a).

Is blood thicker than water? Is the bond between a father and his daughter stronger than the bond between a husband and his wife?

In what ways can you explain Shekure’s relationship with Black and with Hasan? For example, she says Black has attained “a kind of perfection” (p. 138), yet she also admits to loving Hasan (pp. 140, 214). (See also chapters 9 and 34.)

In *My Name is Red*, what are some similarities between love and painting? (See chapters 8, 9, 10, and 22.)

Pamuk includes detailed descriptions of several historical miniatures that are preserved at the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul. For more about them, visit <http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/pamuk/desktopnew.html>.

BLINDNESS: *Intrigue, Action, & Dénouement*

Early on the murderer says that he is “completely divided” (p. 97). In what ways does he reveal his duality? How can you relate the divisions between East and West, between Venetian and Ottoman styles, to the murderer’s internal conflict? (For examples of East versus West, see pp. 161, 230, 287, 354, 400.)

Why do you think the murderer tells Enishte Effendi (Uncle) his full name in chapter 28? Why do you think he confesses to Uncle that he’s the murderer? Why do you think the murderer wants to see the final painting? Why do you think he kills Uncle? (*Hint: Consider the discussions of style and respect in chapter 29.*)

Why do you think Shekure fears that Black is the murderer (pp. 281–94)? Why do you think that she has the urge to return to her husband’s house (p. 293), does return (pp. 339–45), and then goes back with Black (pp. 345–49)? In what ways might Shekure’s situation be like/unlike that of the storyteller who dresses up as a woman (or the woman in his story) described in chapter 54?

In chapter 51, why do you think Master Osman scrapes away the eyes in some paintings, then blinds himself? Why do you think Black and the others blind the murderer (chapter 58)?

Why do you think it’s important that style, or a “secret signature” (p. 253), is what reveals the murderer?

ART OF VICTORY



Levha, designed by Sami Efendi and inlaid by Vasif Efendi, Turkey, Istanbul, dated AH 1314/1896–97, wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, Istanbul (4086).

After discussing the novel using the questions above, consider the connections between art and literature.

This large-scale calligraphic composition, currently on display in the MFAH exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan*, is called a *levha*, meaning “tablet.” It features a poetic text in praise of Sultan Abdülhamid II (reigned 1876–1909) and the Ottoman victory at Dömeke (Domokos) in 1897, as part of the Greco-Turkish War. The panel is made of wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with the text designed in *celi ta’lik* script by Sami Efendi and the mother-of-pearl inlay by Vasif Efendi.

What does this *levha* demonstrate about power and victory? What do you see that makes you say that?

Is the sultan in *My Name is Red* all-powerful? Do other characters have power? What kinds of power are possessed by different characters in the novel?

In *My Name is Red*, is there a victor and is there a vanquished? Give some reasons why you think Elegant Effendi was murdered. Would you cast judgment on any of the characters as being either right or wrong?

General Questions

1. When Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, the official announcement praised him as someone “who in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city [Istanbul] has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures.” In Turkey, novels like *My Name is Red* are part of a genre called “East-West” novels that reflect this clash. Westerners viewed Turkish culture as interesting and romantic. Turks viewed Western culture as mundane and pragmatic. Some of these novels disparage the West; others embrace the West. In which group does *My Name is Red* belong, and why?

2. Orhan Pamuk was quoted in a 2009 interview as saying: “I don’t explain my book titles. They are not summaries, like *War and Peace*. When my readers ask, ‘Why this title?’ I always reply, “Because it provides one more opportunity to think about the meaning of the book.” Why do you think this novel is titled *My Name Is Red*?

Source: Nathan Gardels, “A Talk With Orhan Pamuk: Caressing the World With Words,” *Huffington Post*, November 11, 2009.

Conundrum: A Final Question

The last sentence of the novel is: “For the sake of a delightful and convincing story, there isn’t a lie Orhan wouldn’t deign to tell.” This Orhan is a character in the novel, and is based upon the actual writer. The conundrum: Can a novelist lie within the fictional framework of a novel?

About the Author



Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952) grew up in a middle-class family in Istanbul. He studied architecture before turning to writing. Today, Pamuk is the most prominent contemporary Turkish writer. He has achieved international recognition with the novels *The White Castle* (1991), *Snow* (2005), *The Black Book* (1994), *New Life* (1997), *The Museum of Innocence* (2009), and others. For *My Name is Red*, he won the lucrative International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, among others. In addition to novels, Pamuk has also written an autobiographical portrait of his home (*Istanbul: Memories and the City*, 2005) at the junction between East and West; two collections of nonfiction essays, *Other Colors* (2007) and *Fragments of the Landscape* (2010); and a study of the relationship between novelists and readers (*The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*, 2010). Among his numerous honors are the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (2005), the Nobel Prize in Literature (2006), and an invitation to deliver the 2009–2010 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University.

Acknowledgement

Some of the above questions about *My Name is Red* are based upon the discussion guide prepared by Dr. Michael Webster, associate professor, English, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI.