

The Wasted Vigil

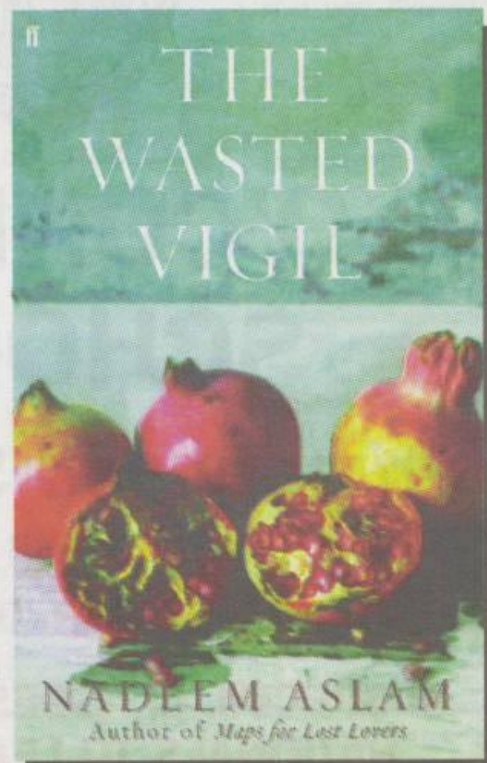
By Nadeem Aslam
(Faber and Faber)

USUALLY SCEPTICAL about books on the bestseller list, picking up Nadeem Aslam's third novel, which deals with the effect of war on Afghanistan, took me time.

But *The Wasted Vigil* is an overwhelming success, a page-turner that's full of insight into cultural differences and the motivations behind religious or political actions. It's also brimming with poetic language and the imaginative settings created by the unusual group of people whose lives are at its centre.

One is Marcus, a widowed Englishman who has spent decades living in Afghanistan with his Afghan doctor wife and their daughter Zameen, both of whom become victims of the war - Zameen executed and her mother mentally ill.

A counterpoint to these horrors is Marcus' house, beautifully painted with murals - one for each of the senses - and full of old books which his wife nailed to the ceiling to save them from Taliban raids. Located beside an old perfume factory, surrounded by bucolic orchards, it



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seems a refuge belonging to another time.

Soon Marcus is joined by David - an American spy still mourning the loss of Marcus' daughter - who works undercover as a dealer in gemstones, and the Russian art dealer whose soldier brother had abducted Zameen. They slowly start to develop a relationship amidst the horrors of war and their diametrically opposed pasts and political backgrounds.

Aslam creates a fine equilibrium without ever taking sides or moralising. His achievement is to show the effect of war on a country's people, juxtaposing the sometimes limited perspective of the commonly vilified radicals to the seemingly equally limited American, western, or Russian perspectives.

Never didactic and beautifully written, at the novel's core is a deep sense of humanity, emphasising the utter pointlessness of war and the absence of any moral victory, where everybody involved loses at the end.



Isabel Roleff has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information about her work can be found at irishwritersexchange.com