

Istanbul: Memories and the City Study Guide

Istanbul: Memories and the City by Orhan Pamuk

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Plot Summary

"Istanbul: Memories and the City" is the personal memoir of Orhan Pamuk, recounting his childhood and early years as well as a portrait of the city of Istanbul, Turkey. Pamuk spent his entire life in Istanbul. The book ties Pamuk's family's gradual decline to the similar decline of Istanbul since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and it describes at length the melancholy that pervades both the city and its residents.

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952 and has never left the city. He grew up in a close but dysfunctional family headed by a father who engaged in affairs with other women and a mother who also had a volatile personality, surrounded by other members of his large extended family. The gloomy home in which he was raised felt like a dark museum and reflected the gloom that settled over the entire city and its residents. As a child and young adult, Pamuk watched his city struggle with becoming more westernized while clinging to its eastern heritage, simultaneously resenting and embracing both sides of its evolving culture.

The book includes extensive discussion of other writers who spent time in Istanbul and described it in books and newspaper stories, including a few French authors and several Turkish writers. Pamuk reveals how these other writers have influenced him and his view of Istanbul both as a child and an adult.

Pamuk also traces the history of his love for painting and his desire to forge a career as an artist, the effect of gaining and losing his first love, the connection he and others feel to the Bosphorus River and its importance to the city, and memories of his school experiences. The book's pervasive theme, however, is the melancholy that continues to affect both the author and the city of Istanbul.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

"Istanbul: Memories and the City" by Orhan Pamuk, is part autobiography, part memoir, and part intimate portrait of his native Istanbul. Pamuk takes the reader through his childhood in a family that had once been wealthy, but squandered most of its money through poor choices. In young adulthood he finally turns away from his dream of being a painter and decides to become a writer instead. While his personal story is woven throughout the book, most of the pages are devoted to descriptions of Istanbul and the melancholy that has enveloped the city and its people since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the author's own conflicted feelings about the city where he has spent his life.

Chapter 1, "Another Orhan," begins with the author stating that from the time he was very young, he suspected that another boy named Orhan, so similar that they could pass for twins, lived in another house in Istanbul. The reason for this suspicion is that when he was 5 years old, his parents separated — one of many separations — and he was sent to live with an aunt in another part of the city. In the aunt's house was a picture of a child and his relatives would point to the photo and say "That's you!" This caused much confusion for Pamuk, who only wanted to be at home with his parents and brother. Even when his family was reunited, the idea of another Orhan continued to haunt his thoughts, becoming both a fantasy and a nightmare. Although he has lived in different parts of the city, Pamuk has never left Istanbul and now lives back in the apartment building where he grew up. While other writers travel, he has remained in the same city and it has made him what he is. Once prosperous, the city is now poor, shabby and isolated. Pamuk was born in 1952 to an affluent family. At the time he was born, his father had grown bored with the labor process and left the hospital to be with his friends.

Chapter 2, "The Photographs in the Dark Museum House," describes how Pamuk and his extended family lived in a five-story apartment house with various parts of the family occupying different floors. The doors were always left open so family members entered each other's homes at will. The apartments were museum-like and filled with unplayed pianos, as well as locked glass cabinets with glassware and knick knacks. Much of the decor was designed to demonstrate how westernized its occupants were. Each home also had photographs of family members on every surface and wall, and the photos were never moved or rearranged. Pamuk came to dread the long family dinners and holiday celebrations because his family often argued, yet he never missed one. At these events, family members would laugh, eat and joke, but they were unforgiving when they quarrelled with each other, and even the maids took sides. As he grew up, his family was slowly falling apart, being rattled by multiple bankruptcies. Pamuk's father was vain about his good looks. He loved jokes, games and travel and was often absent. His mother was more strict, but loving and gave her time to the two boys. Pamuk often went to the apartment of his aunt or grandmother and dreamed of being somewhere else. He



felt that the gloom that had descended on the city since the fall of the Ottoman Empire was also claiming his family.

In Chapter 3, "Me," Pamuk says that he was happier when his brother, who was two years older, began school because there was less rivalry for their mother's attention. He loved reading his brother's adventure comics and role-playing the various characters. It was at this time that Orhan began to discover his penis, which sometimes got hard when he was reading the comics or playing with his stuffed bear. One day his father came into the room and found Orhan with his pants down. He closed the door more softly than usual and stopped coming in at lunchtime to give him a kiss. This, along with other events, caused Orhan to feel guilty that he could not control his body's responses and it was years before he discovered that he was not unique in this situation. He spent a great deal of time fantasizing and pretending to be someone else. Many of his fantasies were violent, and until age 45, he often daydreamed about killing people as he fell asleep at night. Sometimes his father would ask what he was thinking, but Orhan evaded his questions and kept his second world secret. His daydreams did not reflect unhappiness, as he felt very loved, but rather frustration at having such a narrow view of the world outside since he was too small to look out the windows or over the heads of adults at soccer matches.

Chapter 4, "The Destruction of the Pashas' Mansions: A Sad Tour of the Streets," describes the location of Orhan's apartment building, which is at the site formerly occupied by mansions belonging to officials of the old Ottoman Empire. Now the mansions, most of which were made of wood, have been burned or destroyed to make room for apartment buildings. His family watched this decline stoically, with a dual desire to embrace westernization and to be rid of reminders of the fallen empire. This cast a sense of gloom over Orhan's childhood. His only escape from the gloom was going out with his mother, escaping the dark house into fresh air and light. This is how he learned that there were other people in the world with similar habits and possessions to those of his own family. However, he was afraid of many things in the streets and again used fantasy to escape his fears.



Chapters 5 through 8

Chapters 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5, *Black and White*, the author notes that despite the gloominess of his home, he preferred being indoors because the streets seemed dangerous. Likewise, he preferred winter to summer, and loved the days when it snowed because it made the city seem new. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were film crews throughout the city, but the Turkish film industry no longer exists. Films from those times now make him feel like he's watching his own past. Although the city was once colorful, now it seems black and white. People dress in drab colors and even the packs of dogs that roam the streets are a nameless color between gray and charcoal. The author also notes that his fears and fantasies were fed by stories of gruesome crimes and murders, including one that took place on the river, causing his mother to stop letting Pamuk and his brother go out to play, even in their own garden.

In Chapter 6, *Exploring the Bosphorus*, Pamuk reveals that after he and his brother contracted whooping cough, his mother took them out on the Bosphorus River each day to improve their health. The Bosphorus is the opposite of the city — full of life and color. Originally there were Greek fishing villages along the river, then later the large summer homes of Ottoman dignitaries. For many years, the family went to the river each Sunday, but in time the trips became depressing because of quarrels and family tensions, yet Pamuk never stopped going. Like many residents of Istanbul, the river was a solace.

In Chapter 7, *Melling's Bosphorus Landscapes*, the author talks about artist Antoine Ignace Melling's depictions of the Bosphorus. He thinks they are more nuanced and convincing than the work of other Western artists, but what they depict no longer exists. Of French and German ancestry, Melling came to Istanbul at age 19 and stayed 18 years. During that time, he designed buildings and gardens, and he painted landscapes that he eventually turned into a book of engravings. Melling doesn't place humans at the center of his pictures, and the author also thinks of Istanbul as centerless and infinite. The paintings show a darkness that comes from within, something only someone who lived in the city for at least a decade would understand.

Chapter 8, *My Mother, My Father, and Various Disappearances*, reveals that Pamuk's father was often away for months at a time, but his absences frequently went virtually unnoticed except that various family members and servants behaved differently toward him and his brother, as if trying to make up for their father's absence. He loved getting extra time with his mother, but sometimes she disappeared too, staying at an aunt's house for long periods. The boys visited her there, and they considered it an adventure. His parents fought often, and sometimes his mother would threaten to leave or jump from the window, telling the boys that if she did that, his father "would marry that other woman."



Chapters 9 through 12

Chapters 9 through 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 is called Another House: Cihangir. Sometimes Pamuk's parents disappeared together, so his brother stayed with the other family members who lived in their apartment building while the author was taken to an aunt's home in another part of the city. The experience there was very different from his own home. He didn't feel that he was taken seriously and felt like he didn't belong. At one point, he mistakenly got the idea that the Turkish Prime Minister was his uncle, and this was the beginning of other wrong beliefs and assumptions that would continue into adulthood. His neighborhood was home to many actors in the Turkish film industry and because they usually played the same kinds of role over and over, those who played bad men would often be chased in the streets. Once a week, his aunt took Pamuk to visit his brother, making him realize how much he missed his family life. When it was time to go, he would hold onto the radiator, demonstrating his attachment to the house.

In Chapter 10, entitled Huzun, the author says that the word huzun means melancholy in Turkish. In Islamic tradition, the word has two meanings — something you experience if you've invested too much in worldly pleasures and material gains, and the spiritual anguish of not being close enough to Allah. The feeling of huzun is central to Turkish music and poetry. Istanbul carries its huzun by choice, as the people resign themselves to poverty and depression.

In Chapter 11, Four Lonely Melancholic Writers, the author discusses four Turkish writers who captured the city's melancholy. They are memoirist Abdülhak Sinasi Hisar, poet Yahya Kemal, novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and journalist/historian Resat Ekrem Kocu. Pamuk knew little of these writers as a child, but all lived within a half-hour walk of his home and all but one were dead by the time he turned 10. Later they were a major influence on his views of the city and he often imagined their lives and the familiar places they had visited in his neighborhood. They tried to emulate the French writers they admired, but found their voices in the topic of the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire into which they had been born.

In Chapter 12, entitled My Grandmother, Pamuk discusses his grandmother, who ruled the family after his grandfather died. She rarely left the house, spending the morning in bed eating breakfast and receiving family members who stopped by. When it was time to learn to read, young Pamuk would climb into her bed with a notebook so she could teach him. Even though she spent half the day in bed, the door was open into the long hallway so she could see and direct the family's activities. During the afternoon, she played cards and games with the other women. After he had moved away, Pamuk would visit her, still in the same bed, and she expressed the hope that he would be successful and return the family to a status of respect.

Chapters 13 through 16

Chapters 13 through 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13, *The Joy and Monotony of School*, describes the author's first impressions of school. He always raised his hand to demonstrate that he knew the answer, wanting to separate himself from children he considered stupid or lazy. He liked the fact that the teacher had authority, which was in direct contrast to the disorder he experienced at home. He identified the teacher with his mother because he wanted the approval of both of these important women in his life. Once the novelty of school wore off, the days moved slowly, so he looked out the window and fantasized much of the time. He was also fascinated by the other students, especially how different they were from him and from each other. Physical punishments, some of them rather brutal, were commonplace, and Pamuk considered them entertaining and a break from his usual boredom. He also loved the music portions of school, which seemed to transform all of the students, but even when he enjoyed school, he was always anxious to get home to his mother.

In Chapter 14, *Esaelp Gnippips On*, the author says that he always loved words, even when he was too young to know what some of them meant. He read everything, particularly signs that appeared all over the city, many of which were admonitions about the same kinds of "dos" and "don'ts" his mother tried to teach him and his brother.

Chapter 15, *Ahmet Rasim and Other City Columnists*, discusses the newspaper writer Ahmet Rasim. He was an influential columnist who wrote for the small newspaper *Happiness* between 1895 and 1903. Rasim also wrote a number of books about Istanbul. In addition to his readers, he also influenced many other columnists who later wrote about the city, including Ali Efendi, a columnist for *Insight* newspaper. Because journalists were not allowed to criticize the sultan, the state, the police, the military, religious leaders and others, they targeted the regular citizens who populated the city, leaving a chronicle of what life was like during their times.

Chapter 16, *Don't Walk Down the Street with Your Mouth Open*, is a compilation of the most amusing pieces of advice from newspaper columnists over the past 130 years. They include a suggestion that all horse-drawn carriage drivers wear the same outfit to beautify the city, criticism of loudspeakers on potato, tomato and propane gas trucks, and the difficulties of having the sidewalks crowded with people carrying umbrellas.



Chapters 17 through 20

Chapters 17 through 20 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 17, *The Pleasures of Painting*, we learn that shortly after starting school, Pamuk discovered that he loved drawing and painting. Initially it made him happy regardless of whether he had talent, but later it was discovered that he was indeed a talented artist. He also enjoyed the praise and adoration it brought from others, especially his father. He studied the line drawings in books and reproduced them from memory.

In Chapter 18, *Resat Ekren Kocu's Collection of Facts and Curiosities: The Istanbul Encyclopedia*, the author states that he was fascinated with books from the time he could read, especially those with drawings depicting Ottoman history. It never occurred to him that the strange drawings might reflect the artist's imagination more than historical fact. Kocu, the melancholic writer discussed previously, spent many years writing *The Istanbul Encyclopedia*, but age forced him to abandon the project in 1973 after completing 11 volumes, although he was only up to the letter G. The books are a guide to the city's soul, as Kocu was drenched in *huzun*, which he regarded as innate rather than being caused by family, history or the city. Kocu witnessed the fall of the empire and later decided to study Istanbul's history. The encyclopedia is really a collection of oddities and curiosities rather than a factual reference book, but it remains popular with writers and academics who want to understand the city's past.

Chapter 19 is entitled *Conquest or Decline? The Turkification of Constantinople*. The author had little interest in Byzantium as a child because it seemed too distant, but he loved going into the city's Greek shops. His parents led him to believe that Greeks were not quite respectable. Westerners refer to the events of 1453 as the fall of Constantinople while Easterners call it the conquest of Istanbul. Turkish nationalists prompted Istanbul to begin celebrating the conquest, and continued tensions between Muslim and Greek descendants led to riots in 1955. Pamuk's family's home was being targeted, like others in his neighborhood, but his brother had fallen in love with small Turkish flags sold in a nearby shop, and Pamuk believes that the presence of one of them in the front window saved their home from the mob.

In Chapter 20, *Religion*, the author states that until age 10, he had a clear image of God as a human-appearing female who was only interested in the poor, and his family was lucky enough not to need God. However, the family's servants invoked God frequently, often stopping during the day for prayers. He resented the times when God came between servant Esmâ Hanim and himself, as she became upset when he interrupted her prayers. He received no religious instruction from his family. No one fasted or observed other rituals, leaving those things to the help. Pamuk still finds the essence of religion to be guilt. During his last year of primary school, he was influenced by a teacher on whom he had a crush. She was religious, so he secretly tried fasting once,

but never did it again, although he still feels pangs of guilt for not being more of a believer.



Chapters 21 through 24

Chapters 21 through 24 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 21, entitled *The Rich*, Pamuk says that early in life he got the idea that interest in society gossip was a sign of personal weakness. The concept that the rich should not flaunt their wealth came from fear of the state, because it was impossible to become very wealthy without entering into deals with politicians, as opposed to the Ottoman period when education was required to rise in wealth and stature. The new rich tried to appear more European than they really were, and on the rare occasions when an old Istanbul family became rich again, they typically moved to London because they feared the stigma that their wealth involved corruption. Pamuk's family was still regarded by others as being rich and his parents were often included in lavish parties.

Chapter 22 is titled *On the Ships That Passed Through the Bosphorus, Famous Fires, Moving House, and Other Disasters*. The volatility of his family life gave Pamuk the idea that life is full of disasters. They moved often, which was unsettling but in time he became less concerned about their decline in fortunes. He coped by establishing superstitions, escaping into fantasy, and counting ships on the river. He later learned that many residents did this as a means of assessing any impending disasters, and it was particularly unsettling when huge Soviet tankers came through the strait. Their habit of counting vessels on the river was fed by fear and felt like a duty. When he was 8 years old, two tankers collided, causing a huge fire that threatened to consume the city, but there was a festive atmosphere as people came out to watch and vendors opened up their stands to sell food. Pamuk later thought that it could have been prevented if he had been counting the ships. All residents of the city regarded disasters with a mixture of pleasure and guilt, and during the 1950s and 1960s, they watched the city's wooden structures burn with a sense of guilt and loss, feeling that the last traces of their old culture were disappearing as the city became more western.

Chapter 23, *Nerval in Istanbul: Beyoglu Walks*, describes the Beyoglu section of the city, where the main street looks much the same as it did a century earlier. French poet Gerard de Nerval described the avenue as resembling Paris with its shops, hotels, and cafes. He also described the area where Pamuk grew up as a pasture, but now, more than a century after Nerval wrote about it, it is covered by apartment buildings, which the author finds unnerving. Nerval came to Istanbul in 1843 before the city's melancholy descended, and his writings about the city gave it an exotic air. He also inspired the melancholic writers Yahya Kemal and Tanpinar.

Chapter 24 is entitled *Gautier's Melancholic Strolls Through the City*. Nerval also influenced his friend and French writer Theophile Gautier. Gautier came to Istanbul in 1852 and stayed for 70 days, after which he published articles about the city in newspapers. He looked into the city's poorer sections, which many writers ignored, and he expressed the belief that huzun's roots were European.



Chapters 25 through 28

Chapters 25 through 28 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25, *Under Western Eyes*, begins with the author saying he was troubled by his interest in how the city was viewed by westerners. While many Turks are critical of certain aspects of their culture, they are also hurt when westerners, including writers, criticize these same things, and the things western observers identify as exotic are the same things residents see as obstacles to be removed as soon as possible. The city became less exotic as it became more westernized. As Pamuk was growing up, the Turkification of Istanbul led to a degree of ethnic cleansing; for example, people were essentially forced to speak Turkish in public. Until the beginning of the 20th century, Istanbul residents wrote little about the city, so impressions came only from western writers.

Chapter 26 is called *The Melancholy of the Ruins: Tanpinar and Yahya Kemal in the City's Poor Neighborhoods*. The author describes how Istanbul writers Tanpinar and Yahya Kemal followed in the footsteps of Gautier and Neval by exploring the city's poorest sections, which were quite gloomy. The poor neighborhoods are still seen as symbols of Istanbul and Turkey, which are poor neighborhoods in the view of the rest of the world. The two Turkish writers walked through poor neighborhoods in order to feel their melancholy more keenly because they were looking for signs of a new Turkish state, and signs that the Turkish people were still able to stand tall and had retained their identity.

Chapter 27, *The Picturesque and the Outlying Neighborhoods*, begins with the author noting that Istanbul's skyline owes its magnificence not to a few dominant structures, but to the large and small mosques in the heart of the city. However, in poor neighborhoods, beauty lies in the crumbling walls, the grass, the weeds and the old trees. This beauty is accidental and can only be appreciated by those who are strangers to those neighborhoods, not people who live among these ruins. The reason natives don't like seeing old mansions restored is that it breaks their connection with the past. The author grew up when the city was at its worst, and people either saw it as too eastern or too western, so they always had a fear that they didn't quite belong.

In Chapter 28, *Painting Istanbul*, the author notes that at age 15 he began obsessively painting local landscapes, beginning with scenes of the Bosphorus. He found this relaxing because the scenes were known to be beautiful, so it released him from an obligation to prove he was painting beautifully. Painting allowed him to feel as if he was actually in the scene, so it became a gateway to the world of his imagination. When he lost the ability to escape the boredom of everyday life, he switched to painting street scenes, because his ultimate goal was always to leave himself behind. Rather than developing an original style, he imitated other artists, eventually realizing he could paint well only when he thought he was someone else.



Chapters 29 through 33

Chapters 29 through 33 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 29, *Painting and Family Happiness*, the author states that his mother let him use a vacant family apartment as a studio. He turned it into a gallery for displaying his paintings, but no one came to see them and he realized that he needed to know his paintings would be seen and to feel the presence of those who would see them rather than working alone in a gloomy apartment. At home, he would paint scenes of family happiness, inspired by the softened tensions between his parents along with familiar, peaceful activities taking place in the household. As he would begin a painting, his parents would maintain their positions until he finished; this made it seem as if God had stopped time just for him, and in those moments, his family seemed happy.

Chapter 30, *The Smoke Rising from Ships on the Bosphorus*, discusses the steamships that arrived in the mid-19th century, giving the city a new, more European appearance. Passenger ferries became prevalent on the river and small villages grew up around the landings, eventually growing to become part of the city. Istanbul's residents became very attached to these ferries and whole books were devoted to them. Pamuk's father could distinguish each vessel from the others even though they were almost identical. Pamuk chose one as his lucky ship, and seeing it still gives him a lift. He particularly loved painting the smoke that rose from the steamships, always adding it after the rest of the painting was finished, and he also loved walking through the thick smoke after a ship had passed through.

Chapter 31 is called *Flaubert in Istanbul: East, West, and Syphilis*. In 1850, French writer Gustave Flaubert arrived in Istanbul, but he had traveled through several other countries prior to arriving and took little interest in Istanbul. The author is fascinated with Flaubert and other western writers because he has often identified with them, which helped him forge his own identity, and because very few Istanbul writers have paid attention to their own city. Seeing the city through western eyes, he feels a sense of not quite belonging to it, yet not quite being a stranger either.

In Chapter 32, *Fights with My Older Brother*, Pamuk reveals that between the ages of 6 and 10, he fought incessantly with his older brother, and the beatings he took grew increasingly violent, but his mother's main concern was having the house messed up and getting complaints from the neighbors about the noise. Later, his mother and brother claimed they had no memory of these fights, suggesting that he invented them to give himself something colorful to write about. Pamuk admits that he is prone to exaggeration and perhaps has been swayed too much by his imagination. The fights were fueled by rivalry between the brothers, made worse by the fact that their mother turned everything into a contest. Their real goal was to fend off their fear of sharing in the city's shameful fate of melancholy and desolation. Pamuk took a strange comfort in being beaten by his brother; the feeling that he deserved to be crushed gave way to bright daydreams that led to his secret fantasy world.



Chapter 33, A Foreigner in a Foreign School, tells of the author's four years at Robert Academy, a boarding school with mostly American teachers. This period brought his childhood to an end, as he discovered that he was not the center of the world, causing him to feel lonelier and weaker than ever before. He also found that he missed his brother, who had left to attend Yale University. During this time, Pamuk also indulged in sexual fantasies, leading to feelings of guilt. He often skipped class, which he had done since childhood, and explored the city's streets, leading to feelings of guilt and vows to do better. He also suffered bouts of severe anguish and depression, feeling that people in Europe and America could be happy like the characters in movies, but the residents of Istanbul were doomed to a life of gloom. He fell in with some bad friends and found that he changed his personality, voice and moral code depending on who he was with. During this time, he never thought about ever leaving the city, feeling that he was too lazy to try anything new. He was strongly influenced by his father's advice that it was important to live by one's own lights, always following your own instincts and passions.



Chapters 34 through 37

Chapters 34 through 37 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 34, *To Be Unhappy Is to Hate Oneself and One's City*, begins with the author noting that sometimes one's city can look like an alien place. He muses that the city, like his soul, is becoming empty. He doesn't like spring afternoons because the sun illuminates the poverty, disorder and failure all around him. The city is filled with unattractive apartment buildings and he feels that people are looking at him with hatred, and he says they are right to feel that way. He hates everything he sees in the streets and wants to return to his own four walls. The number of English and French words on signs says that the city is moving westward, but it also can't honor its own tradition so everything seems half formed. As he matured, he has become convinced that Istanbul is responsible for its own melancholy. Between the ages of 16 and 18, he wanted the city and himself to be entirely European, but another part of him wanted to belong to the city he'd grown to love. The chapter ends with Pamuk musing about what particular loss was causing him such misery.

Chapter 35, *First Love*, answers that question as the author describes his love affair with a girl whose name meant Black Rose in Persian. They had known each other casually for several years, but the summer he was 19, when both were staying at a summer retreat outside the city, she became attracted by his bad reputation. After they returned to Istanbul at the end of the summer, he resumed his architecture studies and she often visited him at the apartment where he painted. They spoke very little, but he painted many portraits of her reclining on a sofa. Eventually they stopped going to the apartment because they didn't want her parents to find out about their relationship, so they began traveling around the city together, particularly to a local art museum. She shared many of his interests as well as his melancholy. One day, she revealed that her father had found out about him and wanted to send her to school in Switzerland, and later she told him that her mother had engaged a matchmaker to find a more appropriate man for her because they felt that Pamuk would become nothing more than a poor artist. He realized that if they stayed together, his dream of becoming a painter would be abandoned, but they decided to be together anyway. Eventually her father sent her to a school in Switzerland and although he wrote her several letters, she never responded.

Chapter 36 is entitled *The Ship on the Golden Horn*. During his second year of architectural college, Pamuk began going to class less and less. Instead, he read a lot, and he also lost the joy he got from painting and other interests, including architecture. Each day, he escaped from school into the streets, where he wandered aimlessly, feeling the loss of his love. One day in March 1972, he impulsively boarded a ferry on the Golden Horn section of the Bosphorus and as he traveled along the river, it seemed that he had gone back 30 years "to the days when Istanbul was more isolated from the world, poorer and more nearly in harmony with its melancholy." He felt a deeper



connection with the city and "came to relax and accept the huzun that gives Istanbul its grave beauty, the huzun that is its fate."

The book's final chapter is called A Conversation with My Mother: Patience, Caution, and Art. For many years, his mother spent her evenings alone while his father was out, usually with other women, and often Pamuk would chat with her. They often argued about his uncertain future. In 1972, he had almost entirely stopped going to classes and he seemed to be lazy and aimless. His mother always asked him to be ordinary and normal like other people, and said he couldn't support himself as a painter, especially in Turkey. She was afraid this inevitable failure would cause psychological problems. Pamuk would often leave the house after one of these arguments and wander the streets, smoking and drinking. At times, he felt genuinely happy as his anger would make him want to go home and draw or write. He finally realized what he really wanted, and told his mother that he wanted to be a writer rather than an artist.



Characters

Orhan Pamuk

"Istanbul: Memories and the City" is a memoir, so the most important person in the book is the author himself. Pamuk was born in 1952 in Istanbul, and has never left the city. He grew up in a somewhat dysfunctional nuclear and extended family, living primarily with his parents and older brother, although his parents' marriage was volatile and they were often separated. Pamuk's family had once been quite wealthy, but by the time he was born, his father and other relatives had significantly reduced that wealth through poor business decisions. For many years while he was growing up, Pamuk lived in a building called Pamuk Apartments, sharing one apartment with his parents and brother while other members of his extended family lived in the building's other units. As he grew up, the author experienced the sense of melancholy that enveloped his own family, other residents of Istanbul, and the city itself, primarily as a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and a resulting decline in the city's fortunes. He portrays himself as a sad, somewhat disturbed person from an early age, given to escaping into a fantasy world and often wandering aimlessly in the streets of Istanbul. Pamuk loved painting and was a talented artist, and he dreamed of a career as a painter. He studied to be an architect, but eventually lost interest and decided to become a writer instead.

Pamuk's Family

Pamuk's family, particularly his relationship with them and their influence on him, is central to this memoir. He describes his father as fun-loving, outgoing and rather vain, while his mother was strict but loving toward Pamuk and his brother. Their marriage was plagued by his father's infidelities and his parents were often separated during his childhood, and sometimes they disappeared together for long periods, leaving Pamuk and his brother with other relatives. The author's brother was two years older and during frequent childhood fights, the brother would beat him quite violently. The family lived in a large apartment building with other relatives, including a grandmother who ruled the family firmly after the death of Pamuk's grandfather, and various aunts, uncles and cousins. The extended family was quite close and held large celebrations for holidays and other occasions, although those events typically dissolved into bitter arguments, often over business. Although its wealth was vastly reduced over time, outsiders continued to believe that the family was rich and Pamuk's parents were included in large society events.

The Black Rose

The author devotes one chapter to his first love, whom he does not name but refers to as the Black Rose, which is the Persian meaning for her name. They had known each other for several years before becoming involved when he was 19 and she was a



couple of years younger. She often came to his apartment/studio to watch him paint, and he painted many portraits of her reclining on a couch. When her parents found out about the relationship, they tried to end it because they believed that Pamuk would never be anything more than a poor painter. Eventually, her father sent her to school in Switzerland in order to get her away from Pamuk, and he never heard from her again. However, she was significant to his life because losing her plunged him into a deeper melancholy and led him to leave architectural school.

The Melancholic Writers

Although he says that most Turkish writers have failed to write about Istanbul, the author was strongly influenced by four writers who captured the city's melancholy. Memoirist Abdulhak Sinasi Hisar, poet Yahya Kemal, novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, and journalist/historian Resat Ekrem Kocu all lived within a short distance of Pamuk when he was growing up, and although he never met any of them, he has imagined what their lives must have been like and wondered whether he had any chance encounters with them in the streets or local shops when he was a child. Although all four writers tried to emulate the French writers who influenced them, they eventually wrote about the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Ahmet Rasim

Ahmet Rasim was a journalist who wrote a newspaper column between 1895 and 1903, as well as a number of books about Istanbul. As someone who chronicled Istanbul and its residents, he was a major influence on the author and other columnists who later wrote about the city.

Antoine Ignace Melling

Antoine Ignace Melling was a painter of French and German ancestry who lived in Istanbul for nearly 20 years. During that time, he painted a number of landscapes of the city, and the author believes his works are the best at depicting what the city was like during his time.

Gerard de Nerval

Gerard de Nerval was a French poet who came to Istanbul in 1843. The author thinks his writings about the city gave it an exotic air, and says Nerval was a major influence on melancholic writers Yahya Kemal and Tanpinar.

Theophile Gautier

Theophile Gautier was a French writer and a friend of Gerard de Nerval. He spent 70 days in Istanbul in 1852 and wrote about the city's poorer sections.



Objects/Places

Istanbul

Istanbul is the city in Turkey where the author grew up and continues to live.

Pamuk Apartments

Pamuk Apartments is the building in which the author spent much of his childhood, living in one unit of the large building while other extended family members lived in others. He now lives in the same building again.

Bosphorus River

The Bosphorus is a river and major shipping lane that runs through Istanbul.

Pashas' Mansions

Dignitaries from the Ottoman Empire, called pashas, built wooden mansions in Istanbul, many of them along the banks of the Bosphorus. Most of the mansions have since burned or been destroyed to make way for apartment buildings.

Nisantasi

Nisantasi is the section of Istanbul where the author spent much of his childhood, and is the location of the Pamuk Apartments.

Cihangir

Cihangir is a section of Istanbul where the author lived with an aunt and uncle during a time when his parents left for several months, and the site of a family apartment that Pamuk later used as an art studio.

Melling's Paintings

Artist Antoine Ignace Melling painted many landscapes during the 18 years he lived in Istanbul. The book containing these engravings has been a major influence on the author's views of the city.



Family Portraits

The home in which Pamuk grew up, like the homes of his relatives, was filled with photos of family members that covered every wall and surface. These photos were never allowed to be moved.

City Signs

The author says that he has always been somewhat obsessive about reading the signs and billboards that dot the streets of Istanbul; he notes that many of them contain admonitions about what citizens should and should not do.

The Istanbul Encyclopedia

The Istanbul Encyclopedia is a voluminous work begun by writer Resat Ekren Kocu and never completed. It is primarily a collection of oddities and curiosities about the city, but is popular with those who want to understand Istanbul's past.



Themes

Melancholy

By far, the primary theme of "Istanbul: Memories and the City" is melancholy. The author writes at length about the air of melancholy that he says envelopes the entire city of Istanbul and its people. Although from time to time he notes other reasons for its existence, he comes back to the idea that it stems from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which led to an overall decline in the fortunes of both the city of Istanbul and its people, with the exception of an increasingly small number of wealthy families.

Pamuk frequently uses the Turkish word "huzun," which means "melancholy." He says that the feeling of huzun is central to Turkish poetry and music, and that the people of Istanbul are resigned to living lives of poverty and depression so they accept melancholy as a way of life. While Istanbul was once a colorful, vibrant city, it now seems entirely black and white, with people dressing in drab colors, and even the packs of dogs that roam the streets are a dull color that is somewhere between charcoal and gray. He describes the city's poorer neighborhoods at length, indicating that the decay and ruins reflect the city's overall air of melancholy, yet he finds the ruins strangely beautiful because they are part of the city and its history. Pamuk also devotes a great deal of space to several Turkish and French writers who reflect the city's melancholy and wrote about it.

The author seems to believe that to be a native of Istanbul is to be melancholic. Early in the book, he notes that the gloom that pervades the city also claimed his own family as their fortunes declined, his parents fought and endured many separations, and disagreements among various factions of the family became greater. He writes at great length about his own personal melancholy, which he has battled since childhood and yet somehow embraces. Even weekend trips to the river became depressing because his family would break into a quarrel, and when his parents were not separated, they fought constantly. He even claims that the fights his brother and he had as children were designed to ward off their fear of sharing in the city's melancholy. As the book nears its end, Pamuk describes an experience in which he traveled down the Golden Horn section of the Bosphorus River, saying it caused him to "accept the huzun that gives Istanbul its grave beauty, the huzun that is its fate."

The theme of melancholy, as might be expected, casts somewhat of a pall over the book, depicting the author as a sad, unfulfilled person who is perhaps destined to remain that way, and giving a hopeless air to the city of Istanbul as he describes it.

Home

Because the book is predominantly a memoir, one of its major themes is that of home. The author describes his earliest home as an apartment building in which his immediate



family lived in one unit while other members of his extended family occupied others, coming and going through the various apartments at will. He devotes an early chapter to describing the house as a museum. It was dark and gloomy, and filled with pianos that no one played, locked glass cabinets containing knick knacks that no one touched, and family photographs that were never moved. Today, after living in other parts of the city, Pamuk has returned to that same building and makes his home there.

Despite its gloominess, his home was very important to the author because it connected him to his parents, who were often separated when he was growing up. Despite their constant quarrels, Pamuk preferred being in his own home with his family and was upset when their separations forced him to live with an aunt and uncle in another part of the city, separated from his brother. He didn't feel he belonged in that house, and felt that he was not taken seriously. When he was taken to his own home for visits with his brother, his attachment to that house caused him to hold onto the radiator when it was time to leave, hoping his aunt would relent and allow him to stay in his own home. Pamuk also notes that as he grew older, his family's declining fortunes forced them to move often and describes the unsettled feeling that caused.

A central feature of Pamuk's childhood home was his grandmother's bed, where she spent the first half of every day. From that bed, she ate breakfast, planned the day's meals, talked with family members who stopped by to see her, and generally directed the activities of the family.

In addition to the houses in which he lived, Pamuk writes at length about his hometown of Istanbul and his conflicted feelings about it. Although he has never thought about leaving the city to live elsewhere, he is disturbed by its gloom and melancholy, yet his love for it is evident.

Eastern vs. Western Culture

The theme of Eastern vs. Western Culture is prevalent throughout this book as the author describes the changing face of Istanbul over the course of his lifetime. He writes about the fact that his family, like other families and the city itself, was torn between its eastern roots and a desire to be more western, noting that even the decor of their home was designed to demonstrate the fact that they were westernized. Many Istanbul families who have gained wealth more recently have chosen to move west, primarily to London, and even those who stay in Istanbul try to appear more European than they really are.

The author notes that even the way people refer to the city's history is colored by whether they are eastern or western, as westerners refer to the events of 1453 as the fall of Constantinople, but easterners call it the conquest of Istanbul. During Pamuk's childhood, tensions between eastern and western factions of the city — those who were Turkish and those who were descendants of the earlier Byzantine empire — rioted in the streets, and he describes at length what he calls the Turkification of Istanbul — modern efforts to emphasize the city's Muslim culture over its Greek past.

The author notes that residents of Istanbul are very conscious of how the city is seen by westerners, but their feelings are conflicted. While its residents criticize many things about the city and want very much to change them, they are hurt and resentful when westerners criticize these same aspects of the city's culture. Pamuk also laments that its gradual westernization has made the city less exotic, and therefore oddly less interesting to westerners who were attracted to those older aspects of its culture. Further muddying the waters is the fact that many residents of Istanbul see the city as too eastern while others see it as too western, causing them to feel that they are never quite at home in their own city.



Style

Perspective

As a memoir and autobiography, this book is told from the perspective of its author, Orhan Pamuk, but it contains frequent references to the perspectives of others who have influenced him. In discussing his childhood and early years, Pamuk is quite introspective, revealing intimate details including early sexual feelings, pain caused by his parents' volatile relationship, his longing for attention from his mother, and his dismay at losing his first love. He is frank about his propensity for engaging in fantasy even into adulthood, and even his frequent daydreams about killing someone. From time to time, he refers to conversations with or remarks made by other people who have populated his life, and one must assume that these are accurate reflections of those people's thoughts and opinions, although they have obviously been filtered by the author.

In addition to being a personal memoir, the book is also a remembrance of the author's home city of Istanbul and its changing fortunes. While much of the book is devoted to the author's own observations about the city, he refers frequently to others who have written about it, including several Turkish writers and a few Europeans who spent time in Istanbul. The reader must assume that Pamuk is providing an accurate reflection of these writers' observations, and it should be noted that he depicts their opinions of Istanbul as being similar to his own, and therefore an admittedly strong influence on him.

Tone

The tone of this book reflects its primary theme of melancholy. Throughout the work, the author describes the air of melancholy that has descended over Istanbul as the city has become poorer, as well as the personal melancholy that has pervaded his own life, and that feeling clearly has an effect on the book's tone. Even when Pamuk writes about positive experiences during his childhood and young adulthood, those experiences are overshadowed by melancholic events, such as arguments between his parents and the loss of his first love. He devotes a great deal of attention to describing the city's poorer neighborhoods, which are marked by ruins, and the decaying or burned out mansions left over from the Ottoman Empire. The reader is left with a feeling that the author's life has not been particularly happy, as he has a strong tendency to look for the worst rather than the best in most situations. Even his fantasy life is filled with thoughts of killing other people, and he openly admits to embracing his own melancholy. From beginning to end, the book has a definite air of gloom and sadness.

it should also be noted that this book has been translated from the original Turkish, which might be a factor in its overall tone.

Structure

The book is divided into 37 chapters of varying lengths, each of which has a title descriptive of its contents. It also contains a great number of black and white photographs of the author as a child, his family, and scenes from the city of Istanbul. None of the photos are labeled, so the reader is left to make an educated guess about their exact content, although it is often fairly clear from the context in which they are placed. As an epilogue, the author provides credits for many of the photos, but not a description of their subjects.



Quotes

From a very young age, I suspected there was more to my world than I could see.
Page 3

Conrad, Nabokov, Naipaul — these are writers known for having managed to migrate between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilizations. Their imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness. My imagination, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. Istanbul's fate is my fate. I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am.
Page 6

A person who was not fasting during Ramadan would perhaps suffer fewer pangs of conscience among these glass cupboards and dead pianos than he might if he were still sitting crosslegged in a room full of cushions and divans. Although everyone knew it as freedom from the laws of Islam, no one was quite sure what else westernization was good for.
Page 10

It was a long time coming, arriving by a circuitous route, but the cloud of gloom and loss spread over Istanbul by the fall of the Ottoman Empire had finally claimed my family too.
Page 17

And so while I enjoyed their kind smiles and — even more — their presents, their incessant kisses meant enduring the abrasions of their beards and whiskers, the stink of their perfume, and their smoker's breath. I thought of men as part of some lower and more vulgar race and was thankful most of them belonged to the streets outside.
Page 25

And likewise, as I watch dusk descend like a poem in the pale light of the streetlamps to engulf these old neighborhoods, it comforts me to know that for the night at least we are safe; the shameful poverty of our city is cloaked from Western eyes.
Page 35

On snowy days, Istanbul felt like an outpost, but the contemplation of our common fate drew us closer to our fabulous past.
Page 39

What I enjoyed most about our family excursions to the Bosphorus was to see the traces everywhere of a sumptuous culture that had been influenced by the West without having lost its originality or vitality.
Page 52



To be caught up in the beauties of the city and the Bosphorus is to be reminded of the difference between one's own wretched life and the happy triumphs of the past.

Page 57

As my mother told me herself years later, after a fierce mealtime argument with my father, I actually enjoyed the air of disaster that descended on our family and our house when she and my father quarreled.

Page 77

Was I attached to the house, perhaps? Fifty years later, I am indeed back in the same building. But it's not the rooms of a house that matter to me or the beauty of the things inside it. Then as now, home served as a center for the world in my mind — as an escape, in both the positive and negative sense of the word.

Page 89

These are nothing like the remains of great empires to be seen in western cities, preserved like museums of history and proudly displayed. The people of Istanbul simply carry on with their lives amid the ruins.

Page 101

Whenever I think of these writers together, I am reminded that what gives a city its special character is not just its topography or its buildings but rather the sum total of every chance encounter, every memory, letter, color, and image jostling in its inhabitants' crowded memories after they have been living, like me, on the same streets for fifty years. That's when I daydream that I too might have had chance encounters with these four melancholic writers at some point during my childhood.

Page 110

Caught as the city is between traditional and western culture, inhabited as it is by an ultra-rich minority and an impoverished majority, overrun as it is by wave after wave of immigrants, divided as it has always been along the lines of its many ethnic groups, Istanbul is a place where, for the past 150 years, no one has been able to feel completely at home.

Page 115

You can often tell whether you're standing in the East or in the West, just by the way people refer to certain historical events. For Westerners, May 29, 1453, is the Fall of Constantinople, while for Easterners it's the Conquest of Istanbul.

Page 172

My fear, which I shared with everyone in the Turkish secular bourgeoisie, was not of God but of the fury of those who believed in Her too much.

Page 178

I'd read this same pleasure in my mother's eyes as she stepped out of the house to go to the party, having spent the whole day getting dressed. It was not so much the happy prospect of a fun night out; rather, it was the satisfaction of spending the evening with



the rich — knowing that, for whatever reason, you belonged to their set.
Page 197

As a child, I counted these ships heedless of the disquiet, agitation, and mounting panic they induced in me. By counting I felt as if I was giving order to my life; at times of extreme rage or sadness, when I fled myself, my school, and my life to wander in the city streets I stopped counting altogether. It was then I longed most keenly for disasters, fires, the other life, the other Orhan.
Page 201

But for those of us who watched the city's last yalis, mansions, and ramshackle wooden houses burn during the 1950s and 1960s, the pleasure we derived had its roots in a spiritual ache different from that of the Ottoman pashas, who thrilled to them as spectacles; ours was the guilt, loss, and jealousy felt at the sudden destruction of the last traces of a great culture and a great civilization that we were unfit or unprepared to inherit, in our frenzy to turn Istanbul into a pale, poor, second-class imitation of a western city.
Page 211

As Istanbul grew ever poorer, it lost its importance in the world and became a remote place burdened with high unemployment. As a child I had no sense of living in a great world capital but rather in a poor provincial city.
Pages 245-246

Even when I was a child, when the city was at its most run-down, Istanbul's own residents felt like outsiders half the time. Depending on how they were looking at it, they felt it was either too eastern or too western, and the resulting uneasiness made them fear they didn't quite belong.
Page 259

As I waver back and forth, sometimes seeing the city from within and sometimes from without, I feel as I do when I am wandering the streets, caught in a stream of slippery contradictory thoughts, not quite belonging to this place and not quite a stranger. This is how the people of Istanbul have felt for the last 150 years.
Page 289

When Istanbul grows a bit older and feel their fates intertwining with that of the city, they come to welcome the cloak of melancholy that brings their lives a contentment, an emotional depth, that almosts looks like happiness. Until then they rage against their fate.
Page 297

Never once did I entertain the idea of leaving the city. This wasn't owing to any great love of the place where I lived, but rather a deep-seated reluctance to abandon habits and houses that had made me the sort who was just too lazy to try out anything new.
Page 313



I've never wholly belonged to this city, and maybe that's been the problem all along.
Page 320

If we've lived in a city long enough to have given our truest and deepest feelings to its prospects, there comes a time when — just as a song recalls a lost love — particular streets, images, and vistas will do the same. It may be because I first saw so many neighborhoods and back streets, so many hilltop views, during these walks I took after I lost my almond-scented love, that Istanbul seems such a melancholy place to me.
Page 346

Still, every time I thought about it later, the notion of another house my father visited every day could not help but make me shudder; it was as if he had done what I had never managed — he'd found his double, his twin, and it was this creature, not his lover, he went to this other house every day to be with; the illusion only reminded me that something in my life, in my very soul, was wanting.
Page 361



Topics for Discussion

Why does Orhan refer to his family's home as a museum? How does he feel about the decor of the various apartments? What is the significance of the large number of photos on display in every apartment?

Discuss Orhan's fantasy life. What kinds of things did he fantasize about as a child and later as an adult? Why were his daydreams so important to him, and what affect did they have on him?

Why does the author prefer the indoors to the outdoors? Winter to summer? Darkness to light?

Why is the Bosphorus River so important to the author? How does he compare and contrast the river to the city of Istanbul?

How was the author affected by his father's long absences when he was growing up? How were his mother's absences different from those of his father, and how did they affect him differently?

Discuss the author's feelings about religion. What was his concept of God when he was a child? How did his views evolve as he got older? How did his parents influence his views? Why does he associate guilt so strongly with religion?

Discuss the author's views on the westernization of Istanbul. Why do Istanbul natives resent western criticisms of the very things they dislike about the city? What does Pamuk mean by the "Turkification" of the city? Do you think the author is in favor of westernization or not?

Why does Pamuk say Istanbul residents find beauty in the city's ruins?

Given everything he has said about Istanbul — good and bad — how do you think the author really feels about the city? Why are his feelings so complicated and conflicted? Do you think he is happy or unhappy about never having left the city?