

《The Rug Merchant (精)》

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内容概要

The Rug Merchant is a novel about an unlikely friendship and an unlikely love affair, and it introduces readers to Ushman Khan, one of the great characters of recent fiction.

In New York, isolated and far from his native Iran, Ushman has worked hard to build a wealthy, reliable clientele for his wares: exquisite handwoven rugs from his home city of Tabriz. With perfect rectitude, he caters to clients like the Upper East Side grande dame, Mrs. Roberts, who, despite the cultural gulf between them, thinks of him as a kindred spirit and plies him for stories about his exotic origins to feed her own imagination. But like many immigrants, he's living only half a life. He dreams of the day his beloved wife, Farak, will be able to join him in New York, share the fruits of his labor, and complete his vision of the American dream. But when she tells him that she is leaving him, Ushman, a moderate man shaped by the wisdom of his religion and the values and traditions of a conservative culture, is shattered and his loneliness is profound.

Unexpectedly, he meets Stella, a Barnard College student. Isolated in her own way, Stella finds herself at Ushman's Manhattan store and soon they embark on an improbable and powerful romance. Together this American girl from the Deep South and the cultured Iranian aesthete form a tender bond that awakens them both to the possibility of joy in a world full of tragedy.

New York City teems with quiet desperation in this lucidly written but languid debut novel. The titular carpet salesman, Ushman Khan, has left his mother and his wife, Farak, in Iran in order to make a new start in America. Told from Khan's perspective, the narrative traces his subtle acculturation into Western life while he sets up shop and develops loyal customers like the wealthy socialite Mrs. Roberts. He plans for his wife to join him, but learns that she has divorced him for a Turkish salesman. Crushed, Ushman buys plane tickets to Paris he will never use and finds temporary, self-loathing comfort in a prostitute. Only when he meets Stella, a Barnard freshman, does he begin to see a way out of his isolation. Like him, Stella is an outsider struggling with loss and looking for connection, but Ushman must first resolve his conflicted feelings about women and sex and American culture. Originally developed as a short story that appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2002*, this melancholy novel droops under the weight of a sympathetic but tentative, passive protagonist who can find no real solution to his profound alienation. (Mar.)

Any matchmaker will tell you: Opposites attract. In Meg Mullins's sensitive but flawed debut novel, *The Rug Merchant*, opposites form bonds of love and friendship that are as powerful as they are short-lived.

Ushman Khan, the title character, is an Iranian businessman who's recently immigrated to America to set up shop on Madison Avenue, leaving behind his wife, Farak. His business gets a huge boost from a major client, an Upper East Side socialite named Mrs. Roberts, who commissions Ushman to cover all the floors of her new apartment in Persian rugs. Mrs. Roberts is fickle and demanding, but she is also caring and genuine. She worries about Ushman's loneliness and reaches out to him during a moment of acute sadness. And Ushman, too, gives her emotional support during her husband's illness. Based on a mix of empathy and pragmatism, the relationship between Ushman and Mrs. Roberts is both unusual and believable.

Ushman would like to bring Farak to the States, but she resists: She has taken up with a Turkish merchant and files for divorce. Devastated, Ushman wanders into Kennedy Airport, watching couples meet, as though witnessing their reunions could somehow bring about the one he wishes for. There he meets Stella, a 19-year-old student at Barnard, who has just said goodbye to her parents. She is young, smart, funny, beautiful, and Ushman finds it nearly impossible to believe that she would be interested in him. But an incident in Stella's life propels her into his

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store one day, and the two begin an improbable affair. Like the sun and the moon, which are in eclipse when they become lovers, Ushman and Stella belong to different worlds. And they remain that way; Stella, as a character, is far too perfect, far too one-dimensional to really engage the reader.

Narrated in the present tense, from Ushman's point of view, *The Rug Merchant* moves along at a deliberately slow pace, allowing Mullins to explore the effects of loss, whether real or potential, upon her characters. Farak's infidelity is particularly painful for Ushman, for it represents a betrayal of her womb as much as of her heart: She is pregnant by her lover and well past her first trimester, while all five of her pregnancies by Ushman ended in miscarriage. Meanwhile, Mrs. Roberts's husband is bedridden, in the throes of a never-revealed but terminal disease, and so she, too, must live with the constant threat of loss.

The Rug Merchant is meant to be a meditation on how relationships between people can both transcend and be hampered by culture and class. Mrs. Roberts can appreciate the preciousness of an Ardabil rug, but she also requires Ushman to tell her exotic stories about his homeland or about himself before she buys them from him. When Ushman shows her a Ghiordes rug, she asks that he demonstrate Muslim prayer for her. "Without understanding its purpose, Ushman feels that her request must be some form of subjugation. Some reminder of his relation to her and her country."

Likewise, Ushman's relationship with Stella is at once tender and tense. He spends a great deal of his time marveling at her mix of innocence and confidence -- the latter of which he views as a direct consequence of her Americanness. When he catches a glimpse of her with a male student, he thinks that the "blond boy" is a better match for her. "Anyone would be." This feeling that he doesn't quite measure up is keenly apparent even in moments of shared intimacy.

The Rug Merchant is based on a short story by the same name that appeared in the *Iowa Review* and was later anthologized in *Best American Short Stories* (2002). The delicate, subtle style that highlighted that work can frequently be found in the novel. But the long form also reveals shortcomings in the consistency of the narrator's voice. In addition, Mullins appears to have trouble creating full lives for her characters. Although we hear that Ushman has a successful business, we never see him interact with any clients except Mrs. Roberts. He never chats with a neighbor, doesn't meet any friends, doesn't have any employees. Indeed, the only relationships he appears to have are those that serve the plot.

The Rug Merchant chronicles one man's relationship with two very different women -- one a friend, the other a lover. The more successful rendering is the least romantic. Ushman's friendship with Mrs. Roberts reveals a darker and affecting side to both of them, a touch that remains missing from the love affair with Stella. This imbalance makes the world that Mullins has created engaging, but not fully rewarding.

Reviewed by Laila Lalami

Ushman Khan lives a lonely and anonymous life in New York City, selling the exquisite handwoven rugs he imports from his home in Iran. He waits for the day when he has enough money saved to send for his wife, Farak, to join him. But Farak, embittered by her fifth miscarriage and weary of caring for Ushman's demanding elderly mother, leaves him for another man--a devastating act, barely comprehensible to Ushman, which leaves him stuck in America with his "lousy sham of a life." A chance encounter at Kennedy Airport introduces him to Stella, a Barnard student half his age who has recently experienced the first sorrow in her young life--her mother's failed attempt at suicide. The two are intuitively drawn to one another, each one sensing the other's unspoken bereavement--an emotional bond leading to a powerful sexual relationship that transforms them both. Ushman lingers in the reader's mind--a wounded soul, comfortable in his "routine of solitary misery," who is able to transcend sorrow, however fleetingly. Deborah Donovan

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Meg Mullins earned her MFA at Columbia. The story that formed the basis of this novel appeared in the Best American Short Stories in 2002.

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