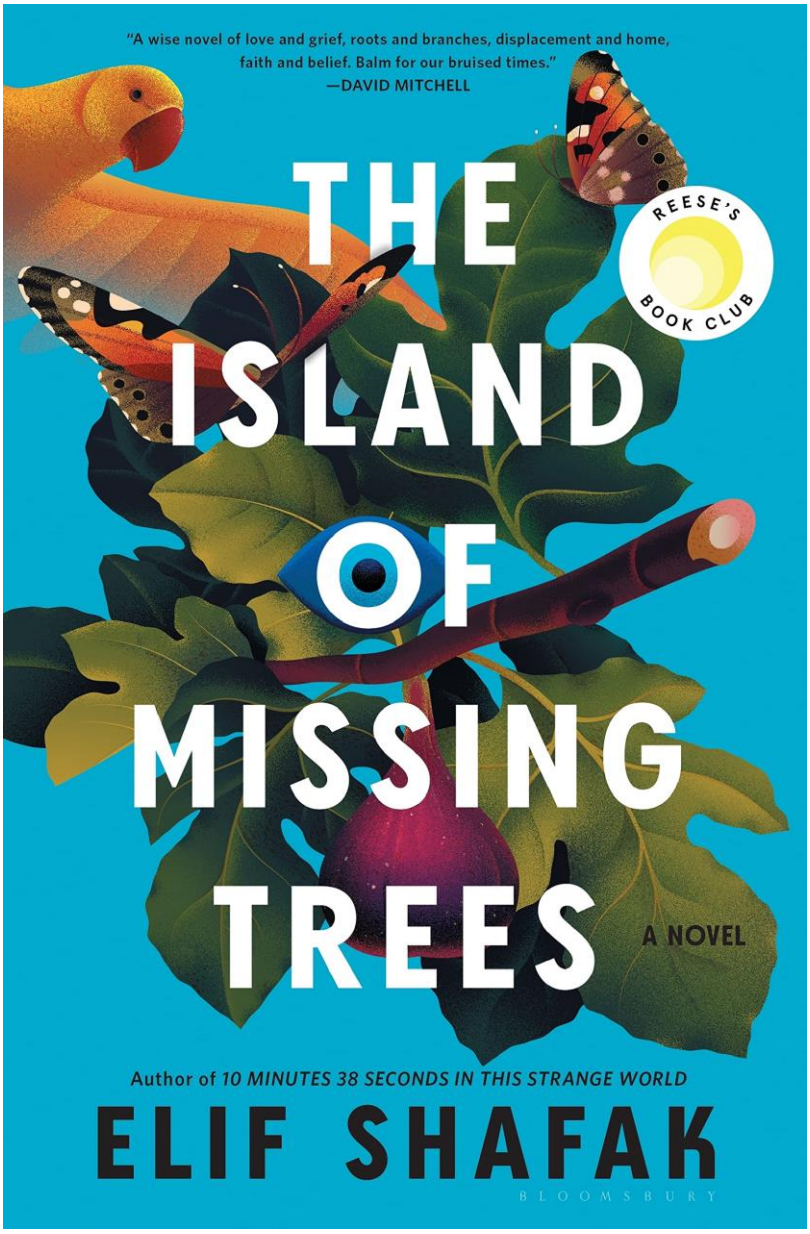

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About Elif Shafak

[photo credit: Ferhat Elik]

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist. She has published 19 books, 12 of which are novels, including her latest *The Island of Missing Trees*, shortlisted for the Costa Award, RSL Ondaatje Prize and Women's Prize for Fiction. She is a bestselling author in many countries around the world and her work has been translated into 55 languages. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and RSL Ondaatje Prize and was Blackwell's Book of the Year. *The Forty Rules of Love* was chosen by BBC among the 100 Novels that Shaped Our World.

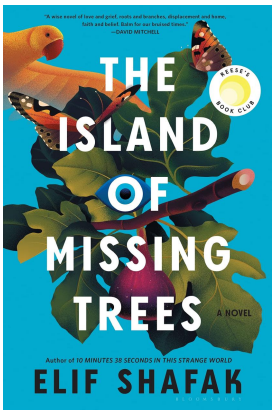
Shafak holds a PhD in political science and she has taught at various universities in Turkey, the US and the UK. She also holds a Doctorate of Humane Letters from Bard College. Shafak contributes to major publications around the world and she was awarded the medal of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Recently, Shafak was awarded the Halldór Laxness International Literature Prize for her contribution to 'the renewal of the art of storytelling.'

Sources:

www.elifshafak.com

https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/author/elif-shafak/

Synopsis – The Island of Missing Trees



Two teenagers, a Greek Cypriot and a Turkish Cypriot, meet at a taverna on the island they both call home. In the taverna, hidden beneath garlands of garlic, chili peppers and creeping honeysuckle, Kostas and Defne grow in their forbidden love for each other. A fig tree stretches through a cavity in the roof, and this tree bears witness to their hushed, happy meetings and eventually, to their silent, surreptitious departures. The tree is there when war breaks out, when the capital is reduced to ashes and rubble, and when the teenagers vanish. Decades later, Kostas returns. He is a botanist looking for native species, but really, he's searching for lost love.

Years later a Ficus carica grows in the back garden of a house in London where Ada Kazantzakis lives. This tree is her only connection to an island she has never visited---her only connection to her family's troubled history and her complex identity as she seeks to untangle years of secrets to find her place in the world.

A moving, beautifully written, and delicately constructed story of love, division, transcendence, history, and eco-consciousness, *The Island of Missing Trees* is Elif Shafak's best work yet.

Source: https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393356311

NPR Interview

‘The Island of Missing Trees’ is Elif Shafak’s latest novel

Source: https://www.npr.org/2021/11/15/1055749057/the-island-of-missing-trees-is-elif-shafaks-latest-novel

Nov. 15, 2021

Steve Inskeep

NPR's Steve Inskeep speaks with Elif Shafak about her book, "The Island of Missing Trees." It's about the trauma of civil war imperiling future generations.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

The well-traveled novelist Elif Shafak once made a discovery about a well-traveled tree. She was living in the United States when she learned about the fig.

ELIF SHAFAK: When I was in Michigan, Ann Arbor, the winters were so cold, and I remember meeting Italian American families who would bury their fig trees if the winters were particularly harsh.

INSKEEP: Burial turns out to be a widespread practice. It's even been reported on NPR. People who take fig trees out of the Mediterranean work to preserve them in colder climates.

SHAFAK: And basically, what they do is they prune the branches, and then this vertical tree is gently pushed into the ground. You dig a trench in the ground, and once the tree is lying there horizontally, you cover it with organic materials, straw, like, to keep it warm. And come next spring, when the weather's warmer, you unbury the tree.

INSKEEP: Now, you can imagine a novelist would take an interest in this ritual of burial and unburial, of disappearance and rebirth. And it became part of her newest novel, "The Island Of Missing Trees." The story reflects on a divided nation on a divided island in the Mediterranean, Cyprus, where Greece and Turkey went to war in the 1970s. The main characters are a family who fled the violence to live in the U.K. Elif Shafak says it's a book she struggled to write.

SHAFAK: How do you tell the story of a divided land without yourself falling into the trap of tribalism or without yourself falling into the trap of nationalism? As a storyteller, I could never find an angle, an opening, until I found the fig tree. So this might sound weird, but I feel grateful to the fig tree because it gave me a completely different perspective, and only then I was able to sit down and start writing the novel.

INSKEEP: I want people to know that the narrator of this story, to the extent that there is one, is a fig tree, which speaks in the first person. Is this how you came to that, then? You wanted a neutral observer of it all?

SHAFAK: I wanted an observer that lives longer than human beings, you know? Trees have this, you know, longevity. They were here before us, and they will most probably be here long after we humans have disappeared - but also to think more closely about issues like, what does it

mean to be rooted, uprooted and rerooted? So if you're telling the story of immigrants, people have experienced displacement, either within the island or outside. Then to think this through roots and uprootedness was an important not only metaphor but an important emotional attachment for me.

INSKEEP: One of your main characters spends his life learning about trees. He's a botanist and also, in a simpler way, just a gardener with a fig tree in his backyard. He is from Cyprus, I should tell people. He is Greek and Christian. So on one side of this divide, he fell in love with a woman who's on the other side. She is Turkish and Muslim. He spends a little bit of his time burying and digging up trees. She has devoted her life to digging up bodies. What is her story?

SHAFAK: Yeah, they are - they're very different not because they come from, you know, "opposite tribes," quote-unquote. They're different because their personalities are different. Kostas is such a gentle soul, and he cares so passionately about the suffering of animals and plants and, of course, the suffering of humans, as well. For her, though, human suffering or the injustices, you know, taking care of the wounds is essential. There is a bicommunal organization in Cyprus, and Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are working together in this organization. And basically, they're digging the ground all across the island in order to find the bones of people who have gone missing during the troubles, during the time of ethnic violence. And the reason why they're doing this - they want to give the dead a proper burial, you know, a sense of dignity, and the families a sense of closure, a possibility for healing.

INSKEEP: Well, let's end this conversation at the beginning of the book with your youngest character. What happens at the beginning when she's in school, and what is - what are you telling me with that scene?

SHAFAK: Her name is Ada, or Ada in Turkish, which means island. She comes from, you know, a complex family background in the sense that her father is Greek Cypriot. Her mother is Turkish Cypriot. She was born and bred in the U.K. And her family has not told her much about the past because they wanted her not to be affected, you know, by the sorrows of the past. But that doesn't mean she's not curious. She senses the silences. She senses the absences. I think it's - we're living in an age in which it's not easy to be young, not easy at all. Also, it's an age that doesn't allow us to celebrate multiplicity, you know? We can't bring our own pluralism out. And many people understandably feel entrapped, almost. It's an age of uncertainty, angst, like, this existential anxiety, and it feels like there's a scream building up inside so many of us. So many people feel voiceless. So there's a moment at the beginning of the novel when Ada, in the middle of the classroom - she screams. She almost unleashes this scream that had been building up inside her.

INSKEEP: What do you mean when you say we can't express our pluralism?

SHAFAK: It's an age, I think, in which we are constantly pushed into boxes and labels. You know, when I look at myself, just to give you an example, of course, I'm an Istanbulite. I'm Turkish. And I carry Istanbul with me. I think it's very visible in my writing, my love for the city. However, I also feel attached to the Balkans. You know, put me next to a Greek author, Bosnian author, Bulgarian author - I have so much in common with them. Equally, I have elements in my soul from the Middle East. Again, put me next to a Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian author. I have so much in common with them. Equally, I call myself European, you know? - the values that I share. Over the years, I have become a Londoner, a British citizen. And despite what politicians have been telling us in the U.K. because of this Brexit saga that we're going through, I want to call myself a citizen of the world. But they are telling us that if you're a citizen of the world, it means you're a citizen of nowhere. And I reject that. So can we not think of identity not as a static, singular thread, but can

we think of identity as multiple belongings, more fluid, like, concentric circles, local, regional, international and global? That's the thing that is never encouraged in this age.

INSKEEP: The latest novel by Elif Shafak is "The Island Of Missing Trees." It's always a pleasure talking with you. Thank you so much.

SHAFAK: It's been such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

The Guardian Interview

Novelist Elif Shafak: 'I've always believed in inherited pain.'

Source: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/18/elif-shafak-island-of-missing-trees-interview

Jul. 18, 2021

Rachel Cooke

The award-winning Turkish-British writer, whose new book explores love and politics in Cyprus and London, talks about generational trauma, food in exile and how heavy metal helps her write.

If trees could talk, what might they tell us? "Well," says the Turkish-British writer Elif Shafak, smiling at me over a cup of mint tea, her long hair a little damp from the rain. "They live a lot longer than us. So they see a lot more than we do. Perhaps they can help us to have a calmer, wiser angle on things." In unison, we turn our heads towards the window. We're both slightly anxious, I think, Shafak because she arrived for our meeting a tiny bit late, and me because this cafe in Holland Park is so noisy and crowded (we can't sit outside because yet another violent summer squall has just blown in). A sycamore or horse chestnut-induced sense of perspective could be just what the pair of us need.

Shafak, who is sometimes described as Turkey's most famous female writer, has a reputation for outspokenness. A fierce advocate for equality and freedom of speech, her views have brought her into conflict with the increasingly repressive government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In person, however, you get no immediate sense of this. Gentle and warm, her voice is never emphatic; she smiles with her (green) eyes as well as her mouth. And while her new novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* – her first since the Booker-shortlisted *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* – is certainly political, its themes to do with violence and loss, it's also a passionate love story, one of whose most important characters just happens to be – yes – a gentle and sagacious tree.

Grown from a cutting that was smuggled from Cyprus to London by its owner, Kostas, after he and his forbidden love, Defne, left the island in search of a new beginning, it has seen it all, this little fig. It grew originally in the taverna where Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, used to meet as teenagers – a restaurant that was reduced to rubble when it was bombed in 1974 – and thanks to this, it knows everything that they've been through: the pain of separation, the melancholy of exile. But it also represents a physical link between past and present for their teenage daughter, Ada, who was born in London, and who, when the book begins, understands nothing of her parents' secrets and shared trauma.

"I've always believed in inherited pain," says Shafak. "It's not scientific, perhaps, but things we cannot talk about easily within families do pass from one generation to the next, unspoken. In immigrant families, the older generation often wants to protect the younger from past sorrow, so they choose not to say much, and the second generation is too busy adapting, being part of the host country, to investigate. So it's left to the third generation to dig into memory. I've met many third-generation immigrants who have older memories even than their parents. Their mothers and fathers tell them: 'This is your home, forget about all that.' But for them, identity matters."

Can a person be homesick for a place they've never been, or knew only briefly? She believes that they can: "You carry a place in your soul, even through the stories you were *not* told. You can

sense the void. The past matters, because it shapes us, whether we know it or not." This kind of longing, she believes, is often triggered by food, which is one reason why her novel is full of enticing descriptions of Cypriot dishes (as you read, you may find yourself longing for a slice of sticky baclava, the "correct" recipe for which is almost as hotly contested as that of hummus). "Religions clash, but superstitions travel well across borders," she says. "And it's the same with food." In the kitchen, the lives of a Greek family and a Turkish one may be very similar.

Ada's aunt, Meryem, visiting her in London, turns every meal into a banquet, even breakfast: this is her way of controlling the world. "I was raised by women like her," says Shafak. "For my grandmother, food was more than food. It was about bringing people together. You can solve problems around the table. You can achieve peace. Yes, there are things Meryem doesn't know how to talk about. In some ways, she is outmoded. But she associates food with love, and to me that's very real."

She had long wanted to write about Cyprus and its troubles. "In Europe, we still have a divided capital [Nicosia, where a militarised border has since 1974 separated the Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus, the latter a country recognised only by Turkey]. It's so near geographically, and it's part of the history of this country, too [Britain was the colonial power in Cyprus]. Yet we know so little about it, even though so many people travel there." The question was: how to approach such contentious territory? "I just didn't dare. It's a wound that is still open… until, that is, I found the tree. Only then did I feel comfortable enough. She – my tree is very female – gave me a chance to look beyond tribalisms, nationalisms and other clashing certainties. She also gave me the chance to think about roots, both in a metaphorical sense, and a literal one."

Her botanical reading, as her bibliography reveals, was extensive (Richard Mabey, Merlin Sheldrake, an academic article about the notion of "optimism" and "pessimism" in plants). In the novel, Kostas at one point buries his fig, the better to protect it from the British winter. "I'd heard that they could be buried," says Shafak. "When I lived in Ann Arbor in Michigan, where it can be quite cold, I heard of Italian and Portuguese families doing this. I found out that it really works. You hide it safely beneath the ground for two months, and then, when the spring comes, you unbury it, and it's a kind of miracle, because it's alive." Later, this unburying is mirrored by other, grimmer exhumations: those carried out by the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, a bicommunal organisation that continues to try to find and identify the bodies of the civil war's disappeared.

Is she hopeful for the future of Cyprus? For all the pain in her book, Kostas's enduring fig tree suggests that she might be. "I want to feel optimistic," she says, softly. "The Committee on Missing Persons is so valuable. Many of those involved with it are women, and these young volunteers give me hope. But, of course, politicians are a different matter. That's more complicated." Right on cue, the two small children at the table next to us begin screaming like banshees.

Shafak spent the lockdown in London. Was it helpful to be able to visit Cyprus in her imagination? She shakes her head. "At the beginning of the pandemic, I read some tweets in which publishers said: this [isolation] isn't very different for authors; they already work from home, they're solitary anyway." That wasn't my experience at all. A writer isn't immune to what's happening in the world. People are dying. Even if you sit down at your desk, you start questioning yourself. Is this really what I should be doing? Does the perfect simile really matter? It's existential. I was struggling with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, and I want to honour those negative emotions. I don't like pretending that I don't have them."

But still, she is no stranger to separation. She moved to London with her husband, a journalist, and two children more than a decade ago, after her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* sparked a chain

of events that led to a trial for "insulting Turkishness" (she was eventually acquitted, though other books of hers have since been examined by Turkish prosecutors on the grounds of "crimes of obscenity"). It's now six years since she has felt able to visit Turkey. "I think about such things as belonging and home a lot," she says. "But when you're physically away from a place, it doesn't mean you're mentally disconnected. Sometimes, in your soul, you become even more attached emotionally. There is melancholy in being an exile – though I say this cautiously, because I'm also aware of the fact that the UK is my home, and I have a strong sense of belonging here, too." She sighs. "This is what some politicians don't understand, especially with this Brexit saga. You can have multiple attachments."

Was London the obvious place to come? "Yes, it really was. I love this country. It's so diverse, and I don't take that for granted, because I come from a country that has never appreciated diversity. But I've also seen it change. Imagine it. I became a British citizen, and a few months later, Britain left the EU. I used to think British people were so calm when they talked about politics, but that calmness has gone. Brexit broke a strained system. There are many things that worry me, and one is that the language of politics is full of martial metaphors now. This talk of judges being the enemy of the people. It makes me freeze. These are dangerous signs. I've met some arrogant politicians. 'Surely you're not comparing the UK to Turkey,' they say. No, I'm not saying that. But what has happened elsewhere can always happen here."

When she thinks about Turkey's young people, she senses the possibility of change. But when she looks at President Erdoğan and his regime, she sees only a country going backwards. "When he came to power, he and his party were posing as liberal reformists. They were pro-EU. They talked about recognising the pain of the Armenians and of reconciliation with the Kurds. Then, at first gradually, and later with bewildering speed, they became more authoritarian. We have elections, but that doesn't mean Turkey is a democracy. If you have the rule of law and a separation of powers, a diverse media and independent academia, then you have a democracy. But if those components are broken, then you don't. It's an ecosystem." Erdoğan has now been in power for 18 years. An entire generation has never known any other leader.

Shafak was born in Strasbourg, in 1971; her father was studying for a PhD in philosophy in the city. But when her parents separated, she returned to Ankara with her mother, where she was brought up between the ages of five and 10 largely by her grandmother. "Divorce was unusual at the time," she tells me. "But what was more unusual was that my grandmother, who was not educated herself, intervened so that my mother could return to university and have a career [she was later a diplomat]. Usually, young women divorcees were immediately married off to someone older because they were seen as in danger and needing someone to protect them." Shafak had come from a world inhabited by leftist students, smoking their Gauloises in black polo necks; even to a little girl, the conservative atmosphere in Ankara was a shock. Was her grandmother religious? "She wasn't strict. My two grandmothers were the same age and class and sect, but their interpretation of religion was very different. My paternal grandmother's was based on fear and shame, on *haram* and the unblinking celestial gaze, while my maternal grandmother's was based on love."

Her mother never remarried, but her father and his new French wife went on to have two sons, whom Shafak did not meet until she was in her 20s. "He was very disconnected from me. I didn't see him much. I have no photos of us together. There was an issue of anger … it took me a while to cope with that. Maybe what I found hardest was that he had been a bad, negligent person towards me, but a good father to his sons, and a good professor to his students. That was difficult, coming to terms with the idea that someone can be very good in parts of their life, and a failure in others. For a long time, I felt like the other child: the forgotten one."

Was it this – the need to be seen – that drove her to be a writer? By any standards, she has had a remarkable career: the recipient of numerous awards, her bestselling books translated into dozens of languages, her Ted talks watched by millions. (She doesn't disguise her ambition, telling me that she struggles to believe writers who insist they don't care about awards.) "No, I started writing fiction when I was very young, not because I wanted to be an author, but because I thought life was really boring. I needed books in order to stay sane. To me, story land was much more colourful and enticing than the real world. The desire to be a writer only came in my 20s."

What about her decision to use a different language? (*The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, which came out in 2004, was the first novel she wrote in English.) "I was constantly writing little pieces in English, but I kept them to myself. I had my voice in Turkish. But then there came a moment – I'd moved to America to be a professor – when I just took the plunge. It gave me such a sense of freedom. I still find it easier to express melancholy and longing in Turkish, but humour is definitely easier in English. We don't have a word for irony in Turkish."

It has stopped raining now, and the cafe is closing, so we go out into the fresh air. We're heading in different directions, but she's determined to walk me to the park gate. I notice what a good listener she is, her body angled towards mine confidingly. She is a very serious person. It's not only that she regards it as her political duty to talk of such things as equality and diversity; she seems to relish doing so. But there's a larky, student-ish side to her, too. Is it true that she loves heavy metal, I ask. Her gentleness seems a bit at odds with headbanging. "Oh, yes," she says. "I've always loved it." She lists several bands, none of which I've heard of. "I like all the sub-genres: industrial, viking…" While she's working, she listens to the same song over and over, using headphones so her children don't complain. Crikey. Can she concentrate? "Yes! That's when I write best. I don't like silence. It makes me nervous." Somewhere in the distance, I hear the obliging roar of a motorbike.

Discussion Questions
from JourneyWoman.com

Source: JourneyWoman.com (some questions were removed and some wording modified from the original)

https://journeywoman.com/travel-books/set-in-cyprus-the-island-of-missing-trees-by-elif-shafak-is-about-belonging-and-identity/

1) Why do you think author Elif Shafak chose to tell this story?

2) The wind and the birds travel freely across the Green Line, the border that divides Cyprus. So, it seems, do human traditions. Did you notice any commonalities between the island's two communities? Have you ever been surprised by shared traditions on your own travels through life?

3) Despite so much shared culture and history, Cyprus ends up divided into separate territories: Turkish/Muslim and Greek/Christian. Have you ever lived or travelled in a place that has forced people into separate areas, and how did that feel? How do Defne and Kostas deal with this division?

4) Yiorgos and Yusuf make it possible for Kostas and Defne to meet in secret, without divulging their own relationship. Why do you think they were willing to help them?

5) When he flees Cyprus, Kostas writes to Defne, "I've been thinking that you are my country." The separation experienced by many migrants is intensified by the traumatic events on Cyprus, though, creating a chasm between those who leave and those who stay. How do Kostas and Defne struggle to understand each other when they reunite?

6) The fig tree declares that "First-generation immigrants are a species all their own." How do the characters try to connect with the country of their birth, while making a life in a new land? If you've ever moved away from the place where you grew up, how have you found yourself seeking connections with home?

7) Ada "felt like I was screaming at everyone – everything." When the video goes viral on social media, strangers around the world respond by posting footage of their own screams. What do you think they were trying to express with their hashtag #CanYouHearMeNow? What are your thoughts on social media trends that give a voice to people who might not otherwise be heard?

8) Meryem thinks a djinn might have caused Ada's outburst at school, but Ada is sceptical. Meryem responds, "Maybe we give other names to grief because we are too scared to call it by its name." Do you think it can sometimes feel intimidating to admit to grief, and did this changed during the pandemic? Have you ever dealt with your own loss in unconventional ways?

9) Ada blames her mother for not loving her family enough to survive, but Kostas argues that – like a girdled tree that is "strangled by its own roots" – Defne was plagued with an invisible illness that wouldn't allow her to heal from the past. What do you think? And how does society treat those dealing with emotional pain, compared to those who suffer from physical disease and injury?

Reviews

Kirkus Book Review

Source: https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/elif-shafak/the-island-of-missing-trees/

THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES
By Elif Shafak • Release Date: Nov. 2, 2021

Following the travails of one fictional family from late-20th-century Cyprus to present-day London, Shafak explores the physical, psychological, and moral cost of the long conflict between Turkish and Greek Cypriots on the island's citizens and their environment.

Shafak, whose previous novels have ranged from realistic political and domestic drama to fanciful interpretations of Muslim spirituality and mysticism, here exhibits her passion for an endangered natural world that possesses wisdom the human world lacks. While the novel is framed around London high school student Ada's attempts to learn about her parents' past on Cyprus and what drove them to emigrate, much of the novel is narrated by a fig tree. The loquacious, well-traveled tree fills in parts of the plot unknown to the human protagonists and offers rambling treatises on Cyprian history, plants, and animals. Ada's father, evolutionary ecologist Kostas, has tended the fig tree lovingly in his London backyard since bringing a shoot with him to plant when he and his pregnant wife, Defne, left Cyprus more than 16 years ago. Back in the 1970s, Greek Orthodox Kosta and Turkish Muslim Defne had carried on an adolescent Romeo-and-Juliet romance until civil war separated them. When they reunited in the early 2000s, Defne left Cyprus with Kostas knowing her family would never forgive her. They didn't. That loss and guilt over deaths she may inadvertently have caused plague Defne for the rest of her life, so she and Kostas decide never to burden Ada with knowledge of that past. Now, a year after Defne's death, a still-grieving Ada erupts with anger at her parents' silence surrounding their earlier lives. Then Defne's long-estranged sister Meryam visits from Cyprus and truths emerge about the hardships, violence, betrayals, and impossible choices faced not only by Defne and Kostas, but all of Cyprus for generations.

Ambitious, thought-provoking, and poignant.

Washington Post Book Review

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/elif-shafak-island-of-missing-trees-review/2021/11/15/7b2dc65c-45b5-11ec-b8d9-232f4afe4d9b_story.html

In Elif Shafak's 'The Island of Missing Trees,' a surprising narrator makes sense of surreal events

Review By: Ron Charles
November 16, 2021

Turkish novelist Elif Shafak has spoken out against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan so forcefully that no one would question her political courage. In her essays and interviews, she has decried her homeland's alarming descent into authoritarianism, and in return both Shafak and her husband, the journalist Eyup Can, have been targets of Erdogan's intimidation.

It's both amazing and encouraging that such state-sponsored thuggery has done nothing to diminish Shafak's artistic creativity nor her faith in the power of storytelling.

Her latest novel, "The Island of Missing Trees," takes us to Cyprus, a land of "golden beaches, turquoise waters, lucid skies" and frightful conflict. In 1974, two teenagers — a Greek boy named Kostas and a Turkish girl named Defne — risk their parents' condemnation by meeting secretly at night. Desperate to avoid the prying eyes of gossipy neighbors, Kostas and Defne find refuge in the backroom of a tavern owned by two men who understand what it's like to pursue forbidden romance.

The tavern is called the Happy Fig, and it is, indeed, a cheerful oasis. "Here," Shafak writes, "stories of triumphs and travails were shared, long-standing accounts squared, laughter and tears combined, admissions and promises made, sins and secrets confessed." Cloistered in the backroom of the Happy Fig, Kostas and Defne pledge themselves to each other, unaware of the trouble gathering on the horizon. "You don't fall in love in Cyprus in the summer of 1974," Shafak warns. "And yet there they were, the two of them."

American readers unfamiliar with the tumultuous history of Cyprus will appreciate how gracefully Shafak folds in details about the violence that swept across the island nation in the second half of the 20th century. But this is not a novel about the cataclysms that reshape nations; it's about how those disasters recast ordinary lives.

Like Cyprus itself, "The Island of Missing Trees" is split by the Turkish military invasion in 1974. Kostas is sent to England in hopes of saving his life, while Defne remains behind as her homeland burns. The young lovers don't know whether they'll ever see each other again, but time eventually seems to answer that question. Separated by 2,000 miles, they discover that

overcoming the difference between their cultures is the easy part. “Whenever something terrible happens to a country,” Shafak writes, “a chasm opens between those who go away and those who stay.”

Chapter by chapter, the book moves back and forth across several decades, solving some mysteries and raising others. The scenes of Kostas as a young man in Cyprus appear between scenes of him as a successful botanist in the United Kingdom, where he’s raising a teenage daughter. She’s eager to know more about her heritage, but her father is reluctant to speak of the past. Determined to understand the people and the circumstances that gave her a life in England, she persists, asking questions of anyone who will answer her.

“The Island of Missing Trees” isn’t just a cleverly constructed novel; it’s explicitly about the way stories are constructed, the way meaning is created, and the way devotion persists. Without snarling readers in a thicket of confusion — don’t worry, each chapter is clearly dated — Shafak involves us in the task of assembling these events. “In real life,” she writes, “stories come to us not in their entirety but in bits and pieces, broken segments and partial echoes, a full sentence here, a fragment there, a clue hidden in between. In life, unlike in books, we have to weave our stories out of threads as fine as the gossamer veins that run through a butterfly’s wings.”

But Shafak has something more strange in mind than merely assembling disparate events over 40 years. The narrator that opens this novel is a fig tree — an unusually talkative fig tree. Recalling its former life on Cyprus, the fig tree says, “I fled that place on board a plane, inside a suitcase made of soft black leather, never to return.” Now, raised from a cutting and thriving again under Kostas’s care in an English garden, the fig tree is our secret witness. “A tree is a memory keeper,” it reminds us. “Tangled beneath our roots, hidden inside our trunks, are the sinews of history, the ruins of wars nobody came to win, the bones of the missing.”

With the melancholy wisdom of an immigrant, this loquacious fig tree hears the confessions of the grieving, and it recalls the joys and horrors of what happened during those tumultuous years back home. “I listen carefully,” the tree says, “and I find it astounding that trees, just through their presence, become a saviour for the downtrodden and a symbol of suffering for people on opposite sides.”

The fig tree isn’t the only narrator — parts of the novel are told from a traditional third-person point of view — but the tree’s arboreal perspective is grafted right onto the trunk of the story. Yes, it’s an odd conceit, particularly whimsical for a novel that explores such painful material, but not surprising from Shafak. As an author, she’s that rare alchemist who can mix grains of tragedy and delight without diminishing the savor of either. The results may sometimes feel surreal, but this technique allows her to capture the impossibly strange events of real life.

Near the end, Kostas’s precious tree tells us, “If it’s love you’re after, or love you have lost, come to the fig, always the fig.” This novel offers the same invitation — and the same reward.

Ron Charles writes about books for The Washington Post and hosts TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com.