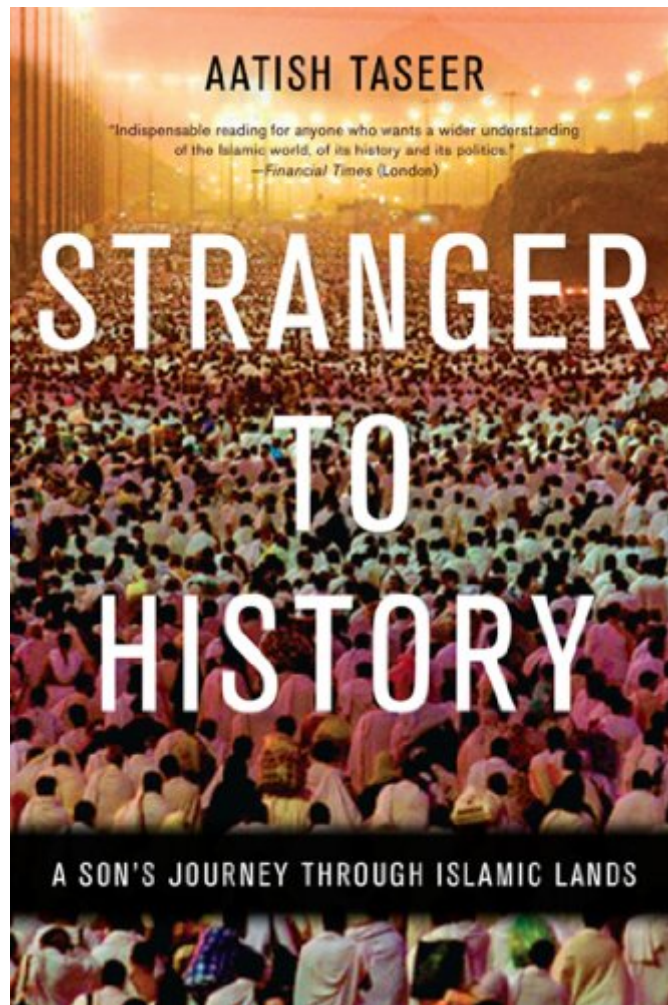


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# Stranger To History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands



## Synopsis

"Indispensable reading for anyone who wants a wider understanding of the Islamic world, of its history and its politics." —Financial Times  
Aatish Taseer's fractured upbringing left him with many questions about his own identity. Raised by his Sikh mother in Delhi, his father, a Pakistani Muslim, remained a distant figure. *Stranger to History* is the story of the journey he made to try to understand what it means to be Muslim in the twenty-first century. Starting from Istanbul, Islam's once greatest city, he travels to Mecca, its most holy, and then home through Iran and Pakistan. Ending in Lahore, at his estranged father's home, on the night Benazir Bhutto was killed, it is also the story of Taseer's divided family over the past fifty years. Recent events have added a coda to *Stranger to History*, as his father was murdered by a political assassin. A new introduction by the author reflects on how this event changes the impact of the book, and why its message is more relevant than ever.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Aatish Taseer has a mixed family background, his mother (Tavleen Singh) being a Sikh Indian, and his father (Salmaan Taseer) being a Muslim Pakistani. This offers him a unique position to observe

and understand the changes taking place in Islamic countries. This first book, is part a travelogue through Muslim lands, and part a journey of self-discovery, as he struggles to understand his own roots, and his relationship with his estranged father. The journey begins as an argument with his father over the 'Pakistan ethos', and takes him through Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and finally Pakistan. He devotes considerable time and effort to Pakistan, and offers some fresh insights into Pakistani 'ethos', and its troubles. The most valuable, to me personally, was the one related to the loss of the middle class at the time of Partition. This may have resulted in Pakistan's elitist governance structure, and lack of modernisation of the economy. The people he meets are mostly non-intellectuals, and this may explain why many of them come across as rather simple, groping for outward symbols of his Islamicness. Their fascination with the string and steel bangle on Mr. Taseer's wrist is remarkable - I have also experienced this kind of curiosity from my Pakistani friends. It is particularly remarkable because no one talks to you about your religious beliefs in India. He intersperses old and fresh history with his own personal story, which makes an interesting combination. The content has the studied neutrality of Mr. V.S. Naipaul and the socio-historical touch of Mr. Amitav Ghosh. Yet it is also quite different from either of these authors, particularly because this book is very personal as well. Mr.

Aatish Taseer was conceived during an extramarital affair between the now late Pakistani businessman and politician Salmaan Taseer and Indian journalist Tavleen Singh. By coincidence I started reading the book on Jan. 3rd, the day before Salmaan Taseer, then governor of the Pakistani province of Punjab, was assassinated. I didn't make the connection until about 2/3 of the way through the book - Taseer's father turns out to be quite prominent in Benazir Bhutto's PPP (Pakistan People's Party); his grandfather a close friend of the poet Mohammed Iqbal, widely regarded because of his association with Muhammad Ali Jinnah as one of the founders of Pakistan (in spite of his death in 1933). The book bounces jarringly between the profound and the mundane as it traces Aatish's journey to discover the estranged world of his father. Born in India as the only child to a Sikh mother (she never married) and a Muslim dad who lived on the other side of the border, Aatish embarks on a journey through Muslim lands in the hope of learning to understand how to approach his dad. This journey takes us first to Turkey. then Syria, Saudi Arabia where out of curiosity, not faith, he performs the Hajj, Iran, and then finally Pakistan itself. The author mentions that he also visited Oman and Yemen, but for reasons not specified he was unable to write about his experiences there. Along the way we meet Islamic fundamentalists, tragic circumstances and political realists. Aatish was in Syria during the cartoon controversy and the

burning of the Danish embassy.

In a recent review for Poetry Magazine, the poet and journalist Austin Allen asserts that T. S. Eliot's body of work "entices all of us, even the most Prufrockian schlub, to view history as personal" and to personify it as the source of our daily temptations and frustrations" (September 2015). Aatish Taseer, no schlub, Prufrockian or otherwise, in his 2011 memoir, *Stranger to History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands*, nevertheless has written a contemporary substantiation to Allen's claim. Taseer personifies the psychological world he grew up in, Punjabi, India, haunted by its pre-Partition past. A deeply serious person, tall, handsome, engaging, considerate, with an encyclopedic knowledge of Indian languages, culture and history, Taseer's eyes, even at instances of high " or low " hilarity, are shadowed not only with his own past and its disillusionments, but with disenchantment, sorrow, in what he sees as the cultural fall of a century. He is taken with the idea of the 1947 split of Pakistan from India as a symbol of himself, or perhaps it works the other way around: perhaps he is a symbol of it. His eight-month journey through strongholds of the Islamic world " with only his British passport to defend him - and he dispassionately interviews locals as he goes " begins in Turkey, where politics and faith are purposely, sometimes heedlessly, insensibly divorced, proceeds through Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where politics and religion are one, and ends at ailing Pakistan " when he crosses on foot " demonstrating an admirable lack of prudence. Henry James, in his essay "The Art of Fiction," offers this advice to writers: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"

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