



My Friends: A Novel

By Hisham Matar

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Hisham Matar's "My Friends" is a captivating exploration of friendship, exile, and the enduring impact of history. The book covers almost thirty years, beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing through the aftermath of Libya's long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi's downfall in 2011. The novel explores the intertwined lives of three young Libyan men, Khalid, Mustafa, and Hossam, as they navigate the complexities of life in unexpected exile in London. Matar's soft and soothing narrative style perfectly captures the fear, anger, frustration, homesickness, and forbearance of very different, ambitious young men thrown together by longing for their families, familiar landscapes, and lives they had expected to experience.

The narrative starts on April 17, 1984, as a small group of protesters gathered near the Embassy in London to demonstrate against Gaddafi. Tensions were escalating as Gaddafi intensified his crackdown on domestic opposition and targeted Libyan exiles abroad. Many of these exiles, deemed enemies of Gaddafi, were killed by suspected assassins connected to a global Libyan intelligence network.

During his 42 years, Gaddafi imprisoned, tortured and assassinated dissenters at home and abroad. Gaddafi's regime was involved in several bombings, such as his regime blowing up a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie in Scotland, killing all 259 people on board in 1988. There was considerable mistrust against the Gaddafi regime, but Libyans were silenced and oppressed. A day before the April 17th demonstration, two student activists were publicly executed in Tripoli.

On April 17, 1984, a gunman in London opened fire on protesters from inside the Libyan Embassy in St. James Square. As Matar recalls, 11 Libyan protesters were injured, including Khaled and Mustafa, and a British police officer named Yvonne Fletcher was killed. Following the incident, Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Libya for years. That incident sits at the emotional centre of this novel. Matar examines the characters' relationships from multiple angles, delving into the subtle ways their bonds have evolved and the pain that arises when they falter. The author's insightful portray-

al of Khalid's inner thoughts and emotions lends the narrative a profoundly personal quality, drawing the reader into the character's world.

My Friends is narrated by Khaled Abd al Hady, who left Benghazi in 1983 to attend the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and has lived in London for thirty-two years. After being shot during the protest, Khaled spent weeks in the hospital recovering. After being discharged from the hospital, he was granted political asylum. Since he can't be certain if any protest photos captured his face or if Libyan security forces have informants at his hospital, he's unsure whether he's been marked. He's also avoided telling his family about the incident, fearing that their phone calls might be intercepted by Libyan security. Consequently, he hasn't informed them about his plans to visit.

Being exiled became part and parcel of his life, and Khaled vividly describes the sensation of pain in his chest resembling "a cold fog expanding within the lung." Although he may not have wanted to become a permanent resident of London, he must now adapt himself to get used to living in foggy weather compared to Libya's sunny and warm climate.

Khalid, is a complex and often self-deluded protagonist. His love for his two friends is palpable, even as he grapples with their rivalries and the moments when they exclude him. Matar's frank and empathetic approach to Khalid's character allows the reader to empathize with his struggles and recognize his flaws, creating a multifaceted and relatable protagonist. Alongside the intimate exploration of friendship, the novel also delves into the broader themes of identity, belonging, and the legacy of colonialism. As the characters grapple with their roles in the Arab Spring and the Libyan Civil Wars.

When Gaddafi was toppled, the expectations were very high among Libyans who believed that the country would transition to democracy and stability. However, things did not go as planned. Removing Gaddafi from power proved difficult, but disarming the militias and restructuring the Libyan army has proven to be an even more daunting task. Since the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, Libya has been grappling with significant challenges of instability and insecurity, marked by political deadlock and division within state institutions.

Matar's characters grapple with the loneliness and uncertainty of forging new lives in a foreign land, compounded by the ever-present fear and secrecy of being marked as a dissident. The author's sensitive portrayal of these experiences lends the narrative a profound sense of empathy and understanding. Throughout the novel, Matar skilfully navigates the delicate balance between the personal and the political. The characters' struggles are inextricably linked to the broader historical and social forces shaping their lives. The author's ability to seamlessly weave these elements together creates a rich and multifaceted tapestry that challenges readers to consider the complex interplay between the individual and the collective. *My Friends* is seen as a masterpiece of historical narrative due to its detailed portrayal of intimacy and relationships during both a terrifying dictatorship and a violent revolution.