

# The New Criterion

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## Orhan Pamuk: “The Museum of Innocence”

*by Dominic Green*



Chapter 47, courtesy Somerset House

A simple test to determine whether you are a person of refinement and taste, or a sofa-wallowing, chip-snacking barbarian: what mental image is conjured by the name “Mr. Pamuk”?

If those words evoke the first season of *Downton Abbey*, in which Mr. Pamuk, a dashing Ottoman diplomat, expires during coition with Lady Mary, then you are in the latter category. You will not be alone; I will be there too. If “Mr. Pamuk” means Orhan Pamuk, the Noble Prize-winning Turkish novelist, then you are in the former category—an exalted position, but quite possibly a lonely one too.

You will not be as lonely, though, as Kemal Bey, the protagonist of Pamuk’s novel *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*The Museum of Innocence*), which was translated into English by Maureen Freely in 2009. Set in Istanbul between 1975 and 1984, the novel relates the obsessive love of Kemal, a businessman from a decaying aristocratic family, for his distant and socially inferior cousin Füsün. Although he is in love with Füsün, he marries the more suitable Sibel after a splendid engagement party at the Hilton Istanbul. To allay his misery, he collects objects that are associated with his trysts with Füsün. When Füsün gets married, he invites himself over for dinner under false pretexts so that he can “borrow” further fetishes, sometimes with onanistic intent. And who wouldn’t?

Eventually, Füsün divorces her husband, and Kemal at last takes possession. This cheers him up immeasurably but, without giving too much away, things don’t go entirely to plan. Our hero—if, that is, there is anything heroic about this morbid stalker—ends up immuring himself with his Füsün memorabilia in what he calls his Museum of Innocence.

Setting aside the possibility that this entire depraved saga is not a veiled autobiography, the real object of Pamuk’s desire is the Istanbul of his youth, a city of decaying mansions, impossible romance, and a ubiquitous soft drink called Meltem. This canned elixir is both a woman’s name and the name of the cooling late afternoon wind. It stands for the promise of desire slaked, and symbolizes the unsatisfactory commercialization of Turkish society. In one of the novel’s intermittent lapses into comedy, Füsün becomes a model for Meltem. Kemal is haunted by giant billboards depicting her in a bikini, flagrantly slaking herself with a tin of the stuff.

As Pamuk wrote, he stimulated his imagination not with lashings of a certain sugary elixir, but with old Turkish pop songs and detritus from junk shops. When Pamuk finished the novel, he remained obsessed. He bought a house in the Beyoglu district of Istanbul, and stocked it with 83 vitrines. Each is an assembly of found objects, and perhaps stolen, sticky ones too. They are themed after the epoch and events of the book, but each is an imaginative variation on a theme. Those who get to the eighty-third chapter of the book are rewarded with a ticket, printed on the page, and redeemable at the Museum. It’s a delightful moment, like being lost in the Sahara and coming across a vending machine selling chilled Meltem.



Chapter 37, courtesy Somerset House

This spring, those who cannot get to Istanbul but find themselves in London have a rare chance to sample Pamuk's literary *Meltem*, his distinctive mixture of expansive nostalgia and clammy romance. A reduced version of the Museum, a mere 13 cabinets of claustrophobia, has set up at Somerset House, co-curated by Pamuk and Shona Marshall as part of the *In Istanbul* season. There are hair clips, bus tickets, bottles of cologne, cigarettes, coins, keys, football cards, postcards, coffee cups, photographs of café orchestras—everything, really, except for the bikini and a tin of *Meltem* bearing Füsün's lipstick traces. These, we presume, were too precious for Orhan Pamuk—sorry, I meant Kemal Bey—to let out of his grip. Pamuk has, though, created annotations for each of the vitrines, voiced by characters from the novel.

Oscar Wilde said that both the highest and the lowest criticism is autobiography. In the dark room of the installation I was overcome with nostalgia for people that never existed, in a city that I do not know. But then, I liked the novel. I cannot say whether someone who had not read it, or who did not like it, would have derived such pleasure from what might otherwise appear to be carefully curated rubbish, the gleanings of a quaint pervert. Such is the power of art.

I had an inkling, though, when I watched the accompanying video installations by Grant Gee. They are excerpts from a longer work, *Innocence of Memories*, for which Mr. Pamuk has written some new Kemal'n'Füsün material. The films show a man wandering around the backstreets of Istanbul at night. This is accurate, but far too literal. At times, the man looks less like a heartbroken voyager through the endless night, than a drunk who has lost his bus ticket. It would be much more pleasurable to stroke the items in the vitrines.

The second room of the exhibition contains reproductions of Mr. Pamuk's early drafts, some spattered with an unidentified soft drink and decorated with doodles of evocative post-Ottoman objects, and a film in which he talks about the relationship of his novel to his museum. Like the "distant relations" Kemal and Füsün, like the reader caught in the oppressive dream of the novel, and like the visitor who gets accidentally locked in the Museum overnight and freed in the morning, they are inextricably linked in memory, yet pulled apart by discrete fates.

"That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And with thee fade away into the forest dim," wrote Keats, who loved a beaker full of the warm South. Once tasted, the desire for Meltem cannot be satiated. Those wishing to ponder unappeasable memory and the search for consolation may wish to note that the bar of the Savoy is only a short, Kemal-like stroll from this strange, intimate, and tragic exhibition.

*The Museum of Innocence* opened at Somerset House, The Strand, London WC2 on January 27, and remains on view through April 3, 2016. For more information on the *In Istanbul* season, see: <https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/visual-arts/museum-of-innocence/in-istanbul>

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