



Season of the Rainbirds

Nadeem Aslam

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Set during a monsoon season in the 1980s in a small town in Pakistan, *Season of the Rainbirds* is centred on the mysterious reappearance of a sack of letters lost in a train crash nineteen years previously. Could the letters have any bearing on Judge Anwar's murder? The letters and the judge's death trigger a series of tragic events and as the murder investigation progresses, dark tales of passion and betrayal unfold and long-buried secrets come to light.

The narrative segues between several characters—the judge's family, a cleric troubled by local inhabitants' lapses, a Muslim deputy commissioner defiantly involved with a Christian woman, a feudal landlord and a crusading journalist reporting on the delivery of the mail packet—and comes to a head when the journalist disappears and the country lurches between fear and uncertainty following an assassination attempt on the president.

One of the most exquisite fictional debuts, *Season of the Rainbirds* is a compelling portrayal of a society in strife, of a timeless world where daily rituals are played out against an ominous landscape of oppression, decadence, bigotry and power.

Season of the Rainbirds Details

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Author : Nadeem Aslam

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From Reader Review Season of the Rainbirds for online ebook

rubina brar says

I was attracted to the beautiful and colorful cover of this book in the local bookshop and then seeing that it was by a Pakistani author, one that I had not yet read, I immediately bought it of course. Pakistani authors have a way of writing that is beautiful and compelling at the same time. Though they most often write of tragedies and human atrocities, as is the case with Season Of The Rainbirds, but they write in such beautiful words, in language that flows like poetry.

For this reason itself, I enjoyed reading this book although it was not what I had expected. The blurb at the back of the book led me to believe the book is about a sack of letters, delivered after nineteen years and the consequences thereof. But to my surprise the letters had hardly any part to play in the events that unfold in the book and in-fact they hardly get more than a passing mention. Nevertheless, the story is beautifully told although it does not focus on a particular person or event. The most poignant story is of the Deputy Commissioner Azhar and his Christian mistress Elizabeth. The small conservative town is scandalised by their immoral relationship and slowly but surely rises up in protest. The description of the everyday life of the citizens is so simply and honestly penned down, that its not hard to imagine their hard and obscure lives. The reaction against Azhar and Elizabeth's relationship is something I had expected as Indian and Pakistani villages and towns are not that different inspite of the religious and national divisions. The rudimentary thinking is identical across all small towns and villages. The similarities between an Indian and Pakistani town do not end there, as always the barber is the town chatterbox, who has knowledge of everybody and to whom everyone goes for information. The land owning noble family is the virtual owner of the town and the political and moral authority on everyone. And lastly, in such a small town, everyone knows of the most intimate affairs of everyone else. All this was very relatable and made the book that much more realistic to me. Now to the letters, they made for a very interesting plot point but then the author somehow decided not to use it, atleast that is what it seemed like to me. After all the hullabulloo about the letters being delivered and all the drama it caused, there was nothing to them after all. But maybe it was supposed to signify just such a thing, that sometimes a small harmless event can be made into such a calamity just by anticipation.

In any case I enjoyed reading this book even if it was not what i expected. I can't wait to read more books by Nadeem Aslam. I'm giving this one a rating of 3.5/5. Pick it up if you're interested in a simple but descriptive story set in small town Pakistan.

Kelly Marie S says

One of those books I liked, but can't really explain why. I gave it 4 stars, but more of a 3.5/3.75 read.

Ryan Mishap says

This is a masterful exhibition of restraint and wisdom--and beauty--for a first novel published when Aslam was but 25. Wait, that needs an exclamation mark!

Chapters are days of the week lived by a cast of characters in a small town in Pakistan decades ago. The connections and differences are drawn expertly; the descriptions put me right there and I've never been to Pakistan.

I had his second novel out from the library, but I took it back. You see, it is the last one I haven't read and I don't want there to be no other Aslam novel to look forward to.

I don't know why this dude isn't a major literary star.

Vivek Tejuja says

It had been a while since I had read, "Season of the Rainbirds" by Nadeem Aslam and almost forgotten how much I loved it. I had just finished "The Blind Man's Garden" and thought of going back to this one. To relive the reading experience and ironically enough I loved it more this time than I had the last time. Every writer's first novel according to me gives the most insight to the kind of writer he or she will become and I believe in it to a very large extent. The first novel almost shapes the author's sensibilities and what he or she wants to communicate as a common theme in almost every book thereon. "Season of the Rainbirds" set the benchmark for Nadeem Aslam, where I was concerned.

"Season of the Rainbirds" is a book set in a small town in Pakistan, centering on the reappearance of a mysterious sack of letters lost in a train crash nineteen years ago. This is then supposedly said to be connected to Judge Anwar's death. From there on the story starts and the other characters begin to get embroiled in the plot. The differences in their opinions and lifestyles are evident and that is what makes them so different from each other that the read tends to be juicier. In such kind of a book there are secrets waiting to tumble and Nadeem provides us with just that. He gets into the skin of characters, so much so that in many places of the book you tend to think and more so believe that the characters have come from life, from people that he knew or knows of.

The plot seems to be thin in some places, however I ignored that because I was aware that this was his first book and also because I have read more of Aslam to know better. What got me going is Mr. Aslam's ability to almost turn this to a parallel mystery tale: What is in those letters? Why did they turn up after all these years and how? Only a writer like Nadeem Aslam can know how to propel the story to his intent and engage the reader – both logically and emotionally at every page. To me, that is the power of true writing and to also manage that with a first book says a lot about the writer. I would definitely recommend all his books; however, "Season of the Rainbirds" somehow will always hold a very special place in my heart.

Rhiannon Grant says

An interesting book which didn't quite grab me. It's mostly a character study of a community, but has a small and distracting plot element; the plot is interesting, but not developed enough to pull me into the context. I wanted to know more about some of the people, but that didn't fit into the whole-community level on which the story unfolds. A book for people with different tastes to mine.

Terri says

I'm in love with Nadeem Aslam's prose and his skill at creating sense of place, but the structure of this one (his first book) is a little bit odd. There are a very large number of characters to keep track of, and the book gets to the end and just... stops. If you're interested in reading something absolutely brilliant set in Pakistan, I'd start with *The Golden Legend*, and then come back to *Season of the Rainbirds* afterwards.

Harsha Priolkar says

Hmmm...apparently *Maps for Lost Lovers* from the same author was all the rage...but this his debut novel, while showing promise was a rather disjointed experience for me. The prose is eloquently descriptive as Aslam skilfully narrates the routine in a small village in Pakistan, but where I was disappointed was in what I perceived as a lack of depth in exploring the characters that peopled said village. So even as events proceeded to their rather obvious conclusions (perhaps obvious to me because events in an Indian village would be no different), I felt the familiarly fleeting sense of foreboding, frustration and helplessness accompanied by a lack of empathy. Perhaps the lack of empathy stemmed from the fact that I wasn't invested enough in the characters - they all seemed so hazy as if through the dusty lens of an old camera.

The characters to me were also very stereotypical...the wealthy, unprincipled landowners; the corrupt, self-serving policemen; the usual mix of well-meaning, hypocritical villagers and the requisite men of religion who wield power but no control over their flock. Nothing in the story itself is original, and that's where I was expecting the story-telling to lift it above average. I was disappointed. The blurb makes it sound like a bag of long misplaced letters are the crux of the issue - the proverbial pebble that disturbs the pond. But I didn't think that at all! The most horrifying in the book had nothing to do with the letters at all. In fact they are hardly mentioned and when they are, they are certainly not made out to be of any particular importance. Also, the author inserts chapters in italics that I assume are flashbacks but I had trouble keeping track of who they referred to and their purpose in the book.

This book had promise and Aslam does have, dare I say, a poetic edge to his writing, sensitive to nuance and mood. But for me, I prefer some flesh on my skeletons! It feels to me like the author compiled his best writing and made a story of it. I wish instead that he had published a book of short stories where each character would have got his just due! I think they deserved it. In all honesty, I did buy this book more than anything for the beauty of it's cover! Lesson learnt ;)

EditorialEyes says

3/5. For this and other book reviews, interviews, and more, visit [EditorialEyes Book Blog](#).

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A small village in 1980s Pakistan might seem to be a quiet setting, but much is going on beneath the surface in Nadeem Aslam's *Season of the Rainbirds*, even before several major events rock the community. First, a well-known and corrupt judge is murdered, and then a sack of letters that went missing in a train crash nineteen years previously suddenly reappears. What is in the letters, and what buried secrets might they

reveal? Who murdered the judge? And when great political disaster threatens to strike, what are the local repercussions? As we follow a host of townsfolk and several visitors over the next few days, the life, religious concerns, and culture of this tiny Pakistani village unfold in vivid detail.

Nadeem Aslam's first novel is less a gripping tale of suspense and mystery than it is a week in the life of an isolated village that's been shaken up by unforeseen events. With a *dramatis personae* of two dozen characters, Aslam brings to life the daily comings and goings, the feelings and events and societal beliefs that make a life. Maulana Hafeez, a devout cleric, tries to help the predominantly Muslim population. Deputy Commissioner Azhar is trying to find out who murdered the judge. Both men are largely interested in keeping the peace, though often in very different ways and for different reasons.

As we move through the days, we are introduced to other storylines. Mujeeb Ali is a local landowner, not to mention a politicking, bullying, murderous thug. He may be responsible for the death of Kalsum's son. Kalsum's sister Suraya, meanwhile is visiting from Canada, where her husband is trying to divorce her according to Canadian rules but keep both her and the new woman he wants to marry according to Muslim laws allowing for more than one wife. This troubles Maulana Hafeez, who tries to stress that multiple wives are only allowed under certain circumstances, but who is equally troubled because he believes Suraya cannot be allowed to leave her husband.

Nabi the barber and Zafri the butcher are an excellent source of local gossip. Yusuf Rao is a lawyer and one-time political activist who backed the wrong party nineteen years ago. Though he claims that that life is behind him now, we see glimpses of the violence and intimidation that occurred then, the voters "swayed," the votes miscounted. Saif Aziz is a journalist who arrives in town to cover the reappearance of the letters, but who feels his own political past coming to haunt him.

The prose is exquisite throughout, illustrating mundane but beautiful everyday moments: the sudden clarity brought about by a near-sighted man who tries on glasses for the first time, for example. Descriptions are a frequent joy throughout: "She stood at the window, looking out. Her hair she had tied with a ribbon and in her ears she wore tiny gold roses. In the trees and under the eaves of the silent houses clusters of sparrows were huddled together, their feathers fluffed into soft masses as they waited for the rain to clear." With ease and grace, Aslam has brought this village to startlingly real life, creating for the reader its sounds, its smells, the contrasts of the heavy days before the rainy season starts with the eventual coming of the rain.

We get a good sense of who the main characters are as well, though some don't move beyond character sketches. Azhar and Maulana Hafeez are interesting, flawed, and very real people. The maulana genuinely wants to keep his flock on the right path, saying "My privilege is simply to warn people of the dangers of straying on to the wrong path, I don't have the authority or the means of preventing them from doing so"—although he is certainly always at hand with a verse from the Qu'ran to explain why owning a television set is evil.

One of his greatest concerns, and indeed a conflict that draws itself throughout the book, is Azhar's affair with a Christian woman named Elizabeth. They are unmarried but live together, somewhat defiantly so in 1980s Pakistan, causing a huge problem for the community. Azhar possesses a large amount of power, so he cannot simply be shunned or shamed into "correct" behaviour; Maulana Hafeez wants to try to persuade him gently to the right path while the villagers grow more agitated, seeing the affair as a threat to the greater community.

This idea of putting the needs of the community before individual needs may seem strange to a western

reader in 2013. That Azhar's affair is more than just something the villagers disagree with for religious reasons, that they view it as a personal offense and as a threat, is challenging. Similarly jarring is the casualness with which people who don't fit in are beaten, or the torturous interrogation methods applied to Judge Anwar's murderer. Women are shuttered into incredibly limited roles in a way that I found difficult to read about, but because the story is told from the whole village's point of view, it is told unflinchingly and unapologetically. This makes for a fascinating but troubling read.

The lack of forward momentum or any real narrative structure outside the progression of days is frustrating, however. With so many characters, it is difficult really to get a sense of who Mr. Kasmī is, what Gul-Kalam is like, how Asgri is truly feeling. And the set-up, that a sack of missing letters and a judge's murder throws a town into chaos, is misleading. This isn't a mystery. The killer is caught halfway through the book and the murder is barely mentioned again; the letters don't show up until about the hundredth page and also barely appear in the narrative. There is unrest as people wonder what might be in these letters that would have been sent around the time of the last contentious election, but we see very little of what is in them and what the fallout truly is. The letters feel like a bit of a red herring.

With so many people and so many daily tales, the novel also feels, and perhaps must feel, unfinished. Almost no storylines are tied up, or even given any real direction. We are parachuted in and extracted again eleven days later, with more questions than answers. But perhaps we're a little wiser for having felt the rhythms of a life not our own, for seeing and beginning to understand the motivations of people like Maulana Hafeez. And for the lovely writing alone, this book is worth the read.

M. says

I was aware of Nadeem Aslam's existence. I just hadn't found any of his books in any bookstores I'd been to. And then this beautiful cover caught my glance, and I knew I just had to buy it. The premise is very intriguing but that's about it. Half-way through the book, I knew I was going to give it a three star or maybe a four, if I were to be generous. After all, there was no plot in sight, there were just threads of dialogues and loose story points going about and around. And then I finished the book, and decided to give it a 5 star. Oh the ending wasn't that fantastic. If anything you can't call that ending a 'ending', there was no closure, and I don't mind that because by then I'd realised something. This book wasn't about some plot. This book was about the characters, the background to the story and the theme prevalent throughout the book. The descriptions are just so breath-taking. I wish I'd the stamina to type one of the many beautiful lines from the book here but I don't. The characters and their actions they really make you think and question human nature. That being said, this book and I suspect all of Nadeem Aslam's books might be for a very specific targeted audience. If you're from subcontinent, you will love it. If you want to know what life is like here, oh boy will you know after reading this. And if you fall into neither category, and you still want to read this book then you won't be disappointed. The shifting paradigms and the ironical behaviours that are so inherent in our nature combined with mesmerizing writing, and just a wee bit of religious extremism will keep you addicted to this

Ali says

This was Nadeem Aslam's first novel, but I first discovered him when I read (and later reread) his second novel - *Maps for Lost Lovers* - which I thought was wonderful. I thoroughly enjoyed this one too.

This beautifully written novel centres on the inhabitants of a small town and: the discovery of a sack of letters, missing for 19 years, the murder of Judge Anwar, and an affair between Muslim deputy Commissioner and a young christian woman. These different plot strands are subtly woven together, to create a community under pressure. The small town political and religious tensions are really well observed. Set against the backdrop of a monsoon season, this is an atmospheric novel, that doesn't have any shattering plot twists or very much to "say", it;s the story of a small isolated community in Pakistan, but it is a really excellent novel nonetheless.

Lorina Stephens says

Season of the Rainbirds was Nadeem Aslam's debut novel, first published in 1993, and a dramatic, well-crafted novel it is, taking two literary awards, the Betty Trask and the Author's Club First Novel Award.

There is an understated control to Aslam's narrative, chronicling the murder of a corrupt Pakistani judge and the seemingly unrelated discovery of missing postal bags of letters from a train crash 19 years earlier.

Within this mystery are two men, one spiritual, one investigative, charged with the protection of the village. Through their stories and their struggles, Aslam reveals the ambiguities of the interpretation of temporal and spiritual laws, of well-meaning perpetuation of ignorance, and the hopelessness of achieving any form of clarity or meaningful justice.

Not unlike Rohinton Mistry in style, Aslam's adept use of understatement and simplicity serve as counterpoint to a complex social order and society. There are no simple answers. The world is shaded in grey, despite attempts by leaders to clearly define and categorize a repressive regime and social system. And Aslam's use of evocative yet simple language and metaphor serve as deft strokes of shading and colour for the reader, creating an unforgettable yet bewildering image.

Recommended reading.

Wasio Abbasi says

Season of the Rainbirds is Nadeem Aslam's first novel and he has thoroughly explored life of a small town of Pakistan. Set in Zia Ul Haq's era, around the time when the General's plane survived attack from Murtaza Bhutto's Al-Zulfikar, the story focuses on the lives of few characters immediately after the death of a retired judge in town.

Maulana Hafeez is the tolerant cleric of the town, in stark contrast to the extremism Maulana Dawood. He is the problem solver and self-appointed modesty watchman of the town who, after judge Anwar's death, also have to look into Deputy Commissioner Amjad's case who he is found to have a mistress at his home, Elizabeth Messih.

From the mysterious murder of Judge Anwar, the story unfolds to show the life and superstitions of townsfolk, their take on medicine and science, their understanding of government and how some of their lives changed drastically with abolition of democratic government and imposition of martial law. The story

also introduce us to a wide range of characters including an Ahmadi, a retired school master, a former courtesan, Christian servants and postmaster with his pregnant wife.

Despite its small size the story surprisingly explores many of the characters in depth and reader feels connected to the things happening in a completely different era.

Nadeem Aslam has used pros very skilfully and has wonderfully translated subcontinental elements for use in this story. The only drawback has been a weak ending. The story closed on a hopeful note after a troublesome incident, but the closure could have been improved since the ending is quite abrupt.

Martin Boyle says

This is the first of Aslam's novels, 11 years earlier than *Maps For Lost Lovers*. It lacks the poetry of his other work (although it retains a lot of lyricism), with a much simpler structure, helping to underline that his skill is firmly rooted in the ability to write a good story. Of course, his effortless prose and sharp observation help: the novel of a younger Aslam, of an author who will develop in style and in richness, but not of a lesser writer.

Season of the Rainbirds is all about telling stories. There is an underlying threat - of letters written and lost 19 years earlier coming back to haunt the villagers. But that is just the hook for a series of interlocking short narratives baring the soul of the community.

This is a book to cherish and to re-read.

Jane says

3.5/5. Rather amorphous, atmosphere-drenched novel of the people in a small village in Pakistan. From mention of "The General" and the attempt on his life, I assumed it was the Pakistan of Zia ul Haq. Quite different from what I thought it would be: a murder mystery on the death of a corrupt judge and how a bag of mail lost for 19 years but eventually found had influence on the solution. I was wrong; the mailbag was an anticlimax having nothing to do with the murder, and culprit was found early on. Beautiful writing; I felt myself strongly insinuated into the lives of the villagers, from a cleric, a landowner, the Deputy Commissioner, his Christian mistress, to the common people and their wives and children. The author's first novel; I got a taste for what he might become as a writer. I do want to read some of his later work.

Recommended.

jo says

this is nadeem aslam's first novel and it doesn't have the linguistic dreaminess of his later ones. i enjoyed it but couldn't help a constant comparison with his other work. it's set in a small pakistani town at a time when all hell is breaking loose in the rest of the country. it touches on the changing nature of islam (or maybe the constant tension in islam between common sense and lovingness, and oppression) and on the dirty intrigues of local government. it touches on the delicate play between local government and national government. especially, it touches on how religion can't avoid being in the pocket of power even when it strives not to. it reminded me a lot of Leonardo Sciascia and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, who are both geniuses at

capturing the large implications of local tyrannies (both writers write about sicily, which tends to be kind of its own country, while being very much part of italy). there are writers who represent local tyrants as caricatures, but aslam, sciascia, and lampedusa appreciate all the smarts, canniness, and skill that go into negotiating positions of local authorities when larger, more powerful authorities loom above. they are cynical, bitter writers, but they are also writers who pay homage to the resilience of the people and the endurance of culture.
