



Native Believer

Ali Eteraz

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"*Native Believer* stands as an important contribution to American literary culture: a book quite unlike any I've read in recent memory, which uses its characters to explore questions vital to our continuing national discourse around Islam."

-- **New York Times Book Review**, Editors' Choice

"M.'s life spins out of control after his boss discovers a Qur'an in M.'s house during a party, in this wickedly funny Philadelphia picaresque about a secular Muslim's identity crisis in a country waging a never-ending war on terror."

-- **O, the Oprah Magazine**

"*Native Believer* is a page-turning contemporary fiction that addresses burning issues about the very essence of identity, and without question Ali Eteraz is a writer's writer, one whose ear for the English language is just as acute as fellow naturalized Americans Vladimir Nabokov (born in Russia) or Viet Thanh Nguyen (Vietnam)."

-- **Los Angeles Review of Books**

"[A] poignant and profoundly funny first novel....Eteraz combines masterful storytelling with intelligent commentary to create a nuanced work of social and political art."

-- **Booklist**

"Eteraz's narrative is witty and unpredictable...and the darkly comic ending is pleasingly macabre. As for M., in this identity-obsessed dandy, Eteraz has created a perfect protagonist for the times. A provocative and very funny exploration of Muslim identity in America today."

-- **Kirkus Reviews**

"In bitingly funny prose, first novelist Eteraz sums up the pain and contradictions of an American not wanting to be categorized; the ending is a bang-up surprise."

-- **Library Journal**

"Who wants to be Muslim in post-9/11 America? Many of the characters in Ali Eteraz's new novel *Native Believer* have no choice in the matter; they deal in a variety of ways with issues of belonging and identity in a society bent on categorizing, stereotyping, and targeting Muslims."

-- **KPFA Pacifica**

"Ali Eteraz is a pen name that means 'Noble Protest.' In his darkly funny debut novel, the protest may not be entirely noble, but it is essential—the story follows M., a Philadelphia man who is Muslim by birth but not by belief. When he gets fired for owning a copy of the Quran, his life spirals out of control as he tries to find some semblance of a place in the world."

-- **Literary Hub**

"Ali Eteraz's fiction has encompassed everything from the surreal and fantastical to the urgently political. *Native Believer*, his debut novel, explores questions of nationality, religion, and the fears and paranoia in American society circa right now.

--Vol. 1 Brooklyn

"A sad, funny, and haunting novel that debates what America is. The novel captures post-9/11 U.S. in a brilliant satire . . . With the groundwork laid for an ending that will surprise readers, *Native Believer* offers no pat answers about being Muslim in America, but it does pose a lot of good questions."

--Rain Taxi Review of Books

Ali Eteraz's much-anticipated debut novel is the story of M., a supportive husband, adventureless dandy, lapsed believer, and second-generation immigrant who wants nothing more than to host parties and bring children into the world as full-fledged Americans. As M.'s life gradually fragments around him--a wife with a chronic illness; a best friend stricken with grief; a boss jeopardizing a respectable career--M. spins out into the pulsating underbelly of Philadelphia, where he encounters others grappling with fallout from the War on Terror. Among the pornographers and converts to Islam, punks and wrestlers, M. confronts his existential degradation and the life of a second-class citizen.

Darkly comic, provocative, and insightful, *Native Believer* is a startling vision of the contemporary American experience and the human capacity to shape identity and belonging at all costs.

Native Believer Details

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Author : Ali Eteraz

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From Reader Review Native Believer for online ebook

Bharat says

The author could not decide what he wanted this book to be, so chose to go in three different directions (which is fine, I guess), then ended on an absurdist 4th (which felt like it was written by someone else).

Kara says

I felt strongly compelled to read *Native Believer* the debut novel of writer Ali Eteraz, because I am very highly interested in Middle Eastern-American fiction and reading any/all great modern literary fiction is my top reading priority right now. While I found Eteraz's literary craft unremarkable in style (i.e. the prose), form (e.g. organization of the text) as well thematic depth/development, I nevertheless found it a worthwhile and rewarding reading experience. Indeed, I would highly and broadly recommend this book to readers whose interest is palpably piqued by:

- A) any particular thing about the plot and thematic content available in the basic book descriptions;
- B) any individual element of Eteraz's background or specific reputed literary strength;
- C) the critical acclaim of qualities and strengths in this work, as they are specified by the reviewers;
- D) especially strongly for 1) those drawn by an interest in Middle Eastern American perspectives, and/or 2) how intersection of the Middle East and the US with their different, incredibly complex, and internally diverse cultures in our time would/could affect individual human lives in context, and finally and most clearly;
- E) those readers who have deeper knowledge of this area of literature, this author's work, have read a sample that increases/solidifies their interest in this read, or any other reason for interest that is based on more knowledge of anything about the work or reader herself than the minimums necessary to give rise to any one or more of the specific possible roots of interest discussed above.

Eteraz's novel is true literary fiction that will offer its reader a genuinely original, intelligent perspective, which I expect would stimulate some amount of fresh and interesting thinking about the contemporary issues involved in the story in any smart, close reader whatever her ignorance or conversely depth of reading and/or personal lived experience related to any important element(s) of this story's content. A consistent strength of this work that should increase the pleasure and overall value of this read is smart sense of humor, which undergirds the story from the first page to the last. Eteraz's sense of the absurd, frequent and apt identification of irony, and the altogether light touch with which he treats everything in the story without shortchanging the themes and issues he raises. Actually, Eteraz does a lot better than meet that low bar; he maintains the depth and complexity of the story's content throughout. Indeed, my ultimate impression based on my first full reading is that Eteraz has created a work of real significance in *Native Believer*. It is definitely a noteworthy debut altogether; one particular notable element making it so noteworthy is this novel is without inconsistencies in its demonstration of its strengths, as far as those strengths go, over the course of the text. This is key to the book's success as a work of art altogether, and it seems to me a rare and particularly commendable trait in a debut novel. It definitely mitigates the underwhelming ambition ("ceiling") of the

work, which somewhat disappointed my hopes as I approached this read.

The text is very straightforward (i.e. easy reading by lit fic standards) and makes a very quick read given it's shorter than most modern novels published these days (ostensibly) for adult readers. The novel is written from in the first-person, using American vernacular that is quite casual -- for example, sentence fragments appear frequently so as to maximize the reader's sense of undiluted, unfiltered access to the narrator's own storytelling voice as spoken or thought internally at the expense of grammar, among other things (e.g. more sophisticated prose raises the ceiling on nuance and depth of understanding of the perspective presented, although they are by no means the exclusive means to raising this ceiling far higher than that set by Eteraz's writing in *Native Believer*).

To conclude, I'll list the particular impressions I had of this novel, which I expect may be of particular use in evaluating the relative worth of this read by a number of (different) readers. This novel:

--doesn't bite off more than it can chew

--has food for significant and original thought for any reader who cares to seek that kinda thing in the text

--is written in non-intimidating vernacular from a 1st peson perspective -- making it an exceptionally easy (as well as quick) read among works of literary fiction** (see note at end)

--is funny(!) Humor is at the foundation of the perspective and is present throughout the text. It's not lol stuff, but

it's good, accessible and I'd guess broadly enjoyable to potential audiences (in some worthwhile way/to some notable degree) -- as well as smart humor, which enhances the literary quality and effect of the work on the whole.

--is very good but not noteworthy, let alone outstanding or not-to-be-missed, literary fiction when judged against other works already published this year let alone in comparison to any broader temporal sampling of English-language literature, which are worthy of that name. Is the point of this observation unclear to you (that would not surprise me given how poorly written it is)? My point in mentioning this is that I expect readers looking for the best new literary debut novels will be disappointed with this read; I'd recommend it only in cases where there is some other particular draw for the reader other than the fact (IMHO) of its being quality debut literary fiction.

--offers an interesting, intelligent, original perspective as a work. I speak not only of the narrator's perspective but moreover and more particularly of the novel's stated perspective -- in other words, the perspective Ali Eteraz has presented through this work of art considered as a/on the whole.

Thanks for reading my (often too awkwardly and too lengthily expressed) ideas. I truly hope they are of some use to at least some of you fellow readers in deciding whether or not this read will satisfy or disappoint your personal hopes and expectations for it.

Please be advised I received a free copy of this work through my undeserved good fortune and the generosity of the publisher via the wonderful LibraryThing Early Reviewers program with the understanding that I would post an honest review of work once read.

**By "works of literary fiction" I specifically intend to refer to novels written in English fitting this description written in any of the last few centuries of all levels of quality, and notably, in current times,

regardless of how broadly or narrowly one defines literary fiction so long as at least some cited example of designation in this category or as its functional equivalent is present.

SueKich says

The USlamist.

Some years ago, Ali Eteraz wrote an acclaimed coming-of-age memoir called *Children of Dust* and this, his first novel, has been long-awaited in the States. The narrator is not so much a lapsed believer in Islam as a non-believer. As the second-generation son of immigrant Asian parents, what he does believe in is America. So strong is his faith that he yearns for nothing more than to father children, to feed his DNA into the native fabric of his country. If only his wife could – or would – oblige.

We are not told until the end of this book that the narrator calls himself M; no guessing what it stands for. Physically slight, an intellectual and a dandy, M is married to a giant of a white wife from the top tier of South Carolinian society. Marie-Anne has become obese and hirsute, the side-effects of her meds for an unusual medical condition. They make an oddly compatible couple. For a while, he thinks he's going places in the world of PR. "Marketing was a religion that paid well and we would have been foolish to cast doubt upon our deity." But post 9/11, the establishment is not quite as colour-blind as he had assumed. It comes as quite a shock.

This Philadelphia story tells of the narrator's strange marriage, his journey into the small city's underworld (with its Muslim porn industry, *Talibang Productions*) and how M finally decides where his loyalties lie. Does he alter his original self-assessment that he feels "five-eighths American. 62.5 percent"? With its shocking conclusion, this book is definitely worth reading to find out. Eteraz engages, surprises, chafes, outrages, reconsiders and - ultimately - gives the reader plenty to think about. Oh, and did I forget to say? It's also very funny. 4.5*

Jeremy says

Who are you? Do you get to be what you will yourself to be, or are you what others say you are? These questions are uneasily (but in a good way) explored in Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer*. It's narrated by M., a second-generation American of West Asian parentage, and nominally Muslim. Born and raised in the South, he went to college at Emory where he meets his future wife, Marie-Anne, she the Amazonian white girl, with a cortisone problem, from genteel South Carolina, who works for a company that provides unmanned aerial surveillance. M. works in a PR firm in Philadelphia, the cradle of America. After being fired by his new boss, for seemingly being Muslim (which goes said/unsaid), M. becomes unmoored and starts wandering around Philadelphia, meeting up and falling in with a motley assortment of Muslims, whose main connection is that they are firstly Americans, searching for their outwardly dual identities to be seen as one. Eteraz goes boldly into what it means to be Muslim *and* American in a post-9/11 world. He doesn't mince words and doesn't shy away from some controversial material and ideas (which the ending proves in its subversive blindsided ending). Eteraz has written a novel about a specific identity in a specific time, taking nothing away from what it means to be a native of any one place, and what it means to believe.

Adi says

Well written and provocative but a bit of a challenging Story

Megalion says

I usually enjoy novels exploring the human condition. I set this book down at 37% several days ago and just now admitted that I don't want to pick it back up.

I think if I had picked this up at a different time, I would have enjoyed this one too.

Thanks to the publisher for giving me the opportunity to read it via a free reader's copy in exchange for my honest review.

Sanjida says

This book starts off at 5 stars because it's a love letter to my favorite city in America, Philadelphia.

And of course, me being who I am, and the narrator being who he is, every part of this story was a punch to my gut.

If you're interested in a more cynical remix of The Reluctant Fundamentalist, by way of Gatsby and Passing, do pick this up. And trigger warnings to my fellow "West Asian".

Susan says

This is - I think - the first time I've ever given just two stars to a book. I - who am usually a very fast reader - found this book very, very slow reading. The characters are interesting but did not seem believable. And the ending - just wait. I was very interested in the subject - a young Muslim though atheist, married to a white Southern "belle" living in Philadelphia (a city with which I am familiar.) But the story was so convoluted - the wife's illness which is mysterious and treatable but not- the "friends" who are not friends, the job/not job. Just couldn't figure out where the author was going and why. I have read some autobiography of the author which helps in understand the book, but that should not be needed in reading fiction. However, I found it interesting enough that I'd like to see what else Eteraz writes; where he is trying to go is of great interest but I don't think he got there.

Jennifer Collins says

It's hard for me to know what to say about this book. Although the writing is entertaining, as are the characters, the truth is that I just didn't enjoy it.. at all. On its face, I was excited to read it--the book presents the story of a man who, though raised as a Muslim, simply doesn't practice any belief system. When his boss

fires him in an apparent reaction to his assumed religion, though, his wife and everyone around him seem to be pushing him to re-build his identity in direct relation to his being a Muslim, though he didn't even consider himself one to begin with. There's a lot of nuance to the psychology of what's presented here actually, and it's a story that ought to be told and discussed... and yet. Stylistically, and in terms of tone, there's not really anything about this book that I enjoyed, beyond the broadest possible look at the subject.

In some ways, I'd compare it to American Psycho, but with a cynical look at belief and love integrated where the other takes a look at consumerism and sex and violence. Another relevant comparison might be the works of Flannery O'Connor, because of this author's juxtaposition of cynical belief, or lack thereof, with characters who are as much grotesques as full-bodied presentations, entertaining as they are. And yet... neither comparison really gets at the work, though each pulls at a piece of what bothers me about it.

Simply, I suppose I just felt that everything was a little bit overdone, a little bit extreme. And maybe that's the point--I wouldn't be surprised if it is. But nevertheless, I'm afraid it made the book a struggle for me to get through.

Claudia Putnam says

Mixed feelings about this one. Beautifully written, but heavy handed. Initially it seemed it would follow the same trajectory as The Reluctant Fundamentalist, which I loved, but which would be predictable a second time around. However, this book is quite surprising. Still, the message is a bit obvious--America is hard to love and over demanding. And a liar. And even when you give her everything she wants, or even when you prove your loyalty beyond doubt, you will be judged. By America. For being TOO American.

It's a good point. I only wished he hadn't taken so long to make it. Novellas don't sell, but I thought this was a novella at heart.

Krista says

The writing was very descriptive, and the book was engaging, but I found almost all of the characters unlikeable. Even more unfortunately, the two most unlikeable characters were the two main characters.

Beverly says

Eteraz's very timely novel is thought-provoking, inventive, amusing in tone and a little crass as it explores the complex issues of identity against the destiny we desire. The narrator known as M. is a second-generation secular Muslim raised in the South who was well on his way of solidifying his Americanization until he loses his job because his boss finds out M. has a Koran in his home. All the paranoia of the post 9/11 America and The War of Terror are now placed on his shoulders as he has been labeled a Muslim", an identity he never assigned to himself. In his despondent state, M. wrestles with the political, social and personal tensions as he works through who he is. I liked that the book is set in Philadelphia which has a set known identity associated with liberty and freedom and how it is upended as the author writes of an underground Philadelphia. The scenes of violence and disrespectful behavior towards women made me uncomfortable. Overall, I thought the writing was fresh as it explores issues of identity, religion, and stereotypes.

I look forward of reading future books by the author.

This book was provided by the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Sam Sattler says

Native Believer is the story of M., a second-generation Muslim American who knows almost nothing about the faith. M., who was raised in the South, is married to Marie-Ann, a white Southerner, and the two have made a rather comfortable life for themselves. It is only when M. throws a party for his co-workers and invites their new boss that things start to go bad for him – in a hurry.

The rather odd Germanic man seems to be enjoying M.’s company but when he spots a tiny Koran on the top bookshelf in M.’s apartment, the new boss makes an offhand comment about finding the Koran placed “above” all the other books on the shelves, especially those of some of the world’s most respected philosophers. The very next day, M. is called into the man’s office and fired.

M. wants nothing more from life than to be an American, a man with roots and children he intends to raise as modern Americans, not as Muslims. But after the murders of 9-11, it is not that simple. M. carries a Muslim name, and in today’s America, he is ethnically challenged enough to be seen as a suspicious person almost everywhere he goes. Now his life is falling apart.

His wife resents that he cannot find work, and the tension between the two aggravates the medical condition that causes her to gain huge amounts of weight in a matter of weeks. Their marriage is beginning to fall apart, and there is little that either of them seems to care to do about it.

M. is at a crossroads. As he wanders Philadelphia’s streets on foot, he runs into a group of devout Muslims who mistrust his lack of piety and want to convert him; he befriends a Muslim pornographer who says he is trying to get Americans to see Muslim men as anything other than terrorists; and Marie-Ann’s job brings him into contact with other Muslims who want him to help spread the good word about life in America to suspicious Muslims all around the world. In the meantime, M. feels like his world is being ripped apart.

Native Believer makes for a bit tedious reading at times, but it is filled with characters I wanted to know more about. M.’s struggle for a self-identity seems very real in today’s world, and I very much wanted to see how Eteraz would resolve his main character’s dilemma. Let’s just say that the book’s final two pages are nothing like I expected it would all end – so do not, under any circumstance, read the end of Native Believer first. Please.

Waqas Mirza says

Ali Eteraz’s debut novel is a kaleidoscopic panorama of 21st century America. It is an unadulterated portrayal of an empire that forces all to give in to its logic and does not hesitate to punish those who offer resistance. American Muslims are not so much the subject of the book as they are its raw material. Surveying broad swaths of a breathtaking tapestry, across a landscape populated by a colorfully sundry cast, Eteraz

manages to tease out the core contradictions of life in contemporary America. The story is set in a vividly rendered Philadelphia, where loyalties are in constant flux, where roots often act as shackles, and the pursuit of the American dream is hampered at every turn by the relentless pull of a past that never ceases to exist.

Michelle says

Disclaimer: I couldn't make myself finish this book. I was interested in reading about experiences of Muslims (or those who are assumed to be Muslim) in America, and in following the main character as he explored Islam... But at more than 50% of the way through the book, there still was not a female character (with the possible exception of his mother) talked about with respect. The guy loves his wife, yes, but he spends page after page explaining just how fat she is. To the point that he's actually excited when he thinks that one of her colleagues is attracted to her, because he doesn't want to be the only man in the world who could possibly find his fat wife attractive. His BFF treats women like masturbation aids. His female colleague seems to exist solely to be fodder for his and his wife's sexual fantasies. And just as I complained about the misogyny but said I was going to tough it out to get to the heart of the book, a woman got slapped in the back of the head by the guy she was fellating because her "slurping" was too loud. I give up.
