

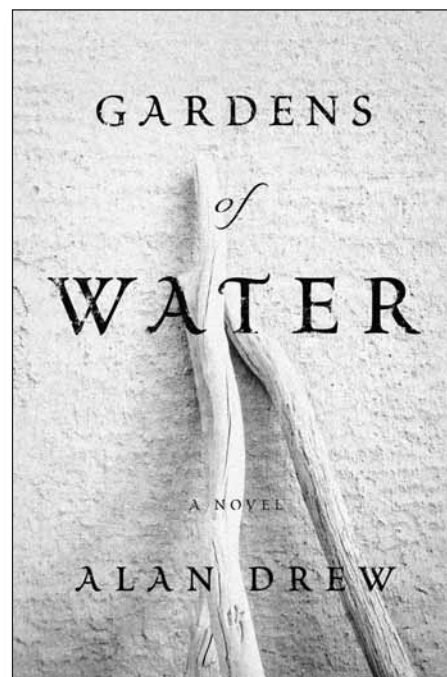


Gardens of Water

Written by Alan Drew

Random House | Hardcover
978-1-4000-6687-2 | 352 pp | \$25.00

READING LEVEL: 7



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• about this book •

Gardens of Water offers an impressively moving and extraordinarily intimate look at two families—one Kurdish, one American—whose lives are forever altered by the destruction wrought by an earthquake that befalls their Turkish suburb. Inspired in part by his own years in Istanbul, when he experienced first-hand the devastation of the Marmara earthquake, author Alan Drew has written an unforgettable first novel that calls into question how religious faith, sacrifice, and family loyalty come into play in the aftermath of a catastrophe.

Sinan and Nilüfer Başıoğlu, devout Kurdish Muslims and parents of a nine-year-old son, İsmail, and a fifteen-year-old daughter, İrem, are in no way prepared for how their lives will unravel in the weeks following the earthquake. For days, they struggle with the loss of İsmail, who is missing and presumed dead, buried in the rubble that is all that remains of their modest apartment and their family's livelihood, a local grocery. But when the boy is found alive, thanks to Sarah Roberts, an American neighbor who saves İsmail's life before she perishes from the quake, the Başıoğlus must come to terms with their own prejudices and misgivings about the Americans.

Without her parents' knowledge, in the weeks prior to the quake, İrem has been communicating secretly with Dylan, the seventeen-year-old son of Sarah and Marcus Roberts. Resentful of the attention her younger brother receives—first as the sole boy in the family, and then because of his seemingly miraculous survival—İrem chooses to pursue her relationship with Dylan, knowingly incurring risks that endanger her and her family's happiness.

At the urging of Marcus Roberts, the Başıoğlus' move into the temporary housing camps set up by American relief workers. In such close quarters, İrem and Dylan find it increasingly difficult to conceal their growing feelings for each other. As the true nature of their relationship becomes clear to Sinan Başıoğlu, who already feels powerless in the face of so much loss, he must make excruciating decisions to protect his family's reputation.

The deep bonds among father, son, and daughter; the tension between honoring tradition and embracing personal freedom; the conflict between cultures and faiths; the regrets of age and the passions of youth—these are the timeless themes Alan Drew weaves into a brilliant fiction debut.

• about the author

ALAN DREW was born and raised in Southern California, and has traveled throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. He taught English literature for three years at Üsküdar Amerikan Lisesi, a private high school in Istanbul, arriving just four days before the devastating 1999 Marmara earthquake. In the aftermath of the quake, Drew and his wife traveled to the epicenter of the disaster and encountered camps set up by American church group relief workers, which inspired in part the setting for *Gardens of Water*. In 2004 he completed an MFA degree at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he was awarded a teaching/writing fellowship. He lives with his wife and son in Cincinnati.

• teaching ideas

As a work of fiction that grounds itself in the complex realities of life in everyday Turkey, *Gardens of Water* lends itself to classroom study in a variety of disciplines. Its unique depiction of the experiences of an ethnic Kurdish family in Turkey make it required reading for any class on Kurdish history and culture. The novel's rich examination of Turkish life from the perspectives of both Kurdish and American characters suggest it as an ideal text for social studies and comparative culture classes. Its reflections on religious belief, extremism, and conversion merit its consideration as a thought-provoking text for any religious studies class, or for classes that explore the practice of Islam or Christianity.

Gardens of Water offers valuable context for European history classes that examine the impact of national resistance groups like the PKK, and for any history classes that explore the role of the West in the politics of the Middle East. The book's compelling portrait of life in a camp make it suitable for inclusion in a refugee or migration studies class. A women's studies or gender studies class that considers cross-cultural constructions of gender would certainly find compelling material in *Gardens of Water*.

As a work of fiction that explores the relationships that evolve among characters who inhabit an outwardly religious culture (Turkey) and an outwardly secular culture (America), *Gardens of Water* would also benefit from inclusion in classes that examine classic novels of cultural misunderstanding like *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles. The book's engaging narrative, persuasively drawn characters, and riveting plot make it a worthy novel for study in any class of literature.

• discussion and writing

1. How does the party in celebration of İsmail's circumcision highlight differences in Sinan and Nilüfer Başıoğlu's treatment of their son, İsmail, and their daughter, İrem? How do İsmail and İrem experience those differences on a daily basis? Why is Nilüfer's decision to invite their American neighbors to this rite of passage significant?
2. How does the author's description of the earthquake's onset shroud the episode in mystery? To what extent do Sinan's reactions to the earthquake and to the loss of İsmail seem consistent with his faith? How does İsmail's unlikely survival permanently link the Başıoğlus family with Dylan and his father, Marcus?
3. How are Sinan's attitudes about Americans complicated by the relief presence in Gölcük after the earthquake? Why does Sinan feel conflicted about allowing his family to live in the camp? Why does Marcus feel especially compelled to convince Sinan to relocate his family?
4. How does the earthquake affect İrem's personal freedom, specifically as it relates to her relationship with Dylan? What role does the forbidden nature of her relationship with Dylan play in İrem's changing attitudes toward her parents and their expectations of her?
5. How does the author's use of multiple perspectives in *Gardens of Water* affect your appreciation of Sinan and İrem's individual conflicts over the course of the novel? To what extent do father and daughter serve to reveal traditional and contemporary interpretations of modern Islamic society? Why do you think the author chose to relate the narrative through the consciousness of these characters, and not others?
6. How does the image of Paradise inform the characters in *Gardens of Water*? Consider Malik Anbar, who refuses a doctor admission to his tent to minister to his son, Derin, who ultimately dies from his infection; İrem, whose suicide renders Paradise inaccessible, according to the Koran; and Sinan, who feels his Kurdistan homeland is akin to Paradise on earth.
7. How would you characterize the interests of Kemal Bey with respect to the Başıoğlu family? How does Sinan's reliance on Kemal for a job in Istanbul complicate the men's relationship? Why does Kemal seem to take such an inordinate interest in İrem's relationship with Dylan, and how does he take advantage of their secret affair?
8. In what ways is Dylan's behavior toward İrem typical of a teenage boy who has just buried his mother and who feels estranged from his father? What explains his attraction to İrem, and why does he continue to pursue her, despite all the risks it entails for her? How does their physical consummation of their relationship change their feelings for one another?
9. Why does Nilüfer openly resent Sinan's job at Carrefour? Why does Sinan refuse to explain to her that his job is merely a means to pay for their family's return to their homeland in Yeşilli? Why does Nilüfer seem more troubled than Sinan by their daughter's increasingly brazen behavior?
10. How do themes of family honor and freedom come into conflict in İrem's decision to leave the camp with Dylan and travel to Istanbul? Why does her irrevocable decision to pursue her heart's desire threaten her family's name?
11. How does the author's decision to divide *Gardens of Water* into three parts affect your appreciation of each of the three sections? Why did he decide to divide the book at these moments in the narrative? How might an alternative structure have impacted your reading?
12. How does İrem's envy of İsmail and his easy freedoms affect her relationship with her brother? How does her reaction to the news of his survival of the quake betray her conflicted feelings about him? During her farewell, why does she choose not to enlighten İsmail about their father's threats to kill her?

• discussion and writing (continued)

13. How responsible is Sinan for his daughter's choice to take her own life? Why do the fellow camp dwellers who mourn İrem's death refuse to say her name aloud, and what does Sinan's reaction to Marcus's utterance of her name reveal about his feelings? Given her society's attitudes about sexual morality, to what extent was İrem's death preventable?
14. How does the fact of his being Muslim and Kurdish (an ethnic minority) in Turkey impose itself on Sinan's consciousness? What does his lost homeland represent to Sinan, and why is he determined to return to it, even in the face of seemingly impossible odds? How does the theme of reclaiming one's homeland resonate in other contemporary novels that examine the plight of characters who dwell in the Middle East?
15. Dylan's gift to İrem of a compact disc player leads to the Başıoğlu's belated realization that she is involved with the American. How significant is it that Western music—in this case, Radiohead lyrics—is responsible for the downfall of İrem in her parents' eyes? Why did the author chose music as the vehicle for İrem's fall from grace, and how did you interpret her memory of a Radiohead song (with Turkish lyrics) on her way to her death?
16. How would you characterize İsmail's journey of faith over the course of the novel? How does Sinan's trip with İsmail to Eyüp Camii, the holiest mosque in Istanbul, betray his own remorse at his son's inadequate religious preparation? To what extent do Marcus's efforts to influence İsmail's religious beliefs relate to investing the death of his wife, Sarah, with a greater meaning?
17. Why does Sinan decide to provoke his fellow refugees by accusing Dylan of the rape of his daughter? To what extent does Sinan's action seem informed by his general prejudice against Americans, his grief at the loss of his daughter, or his outrage at Marcus's efforts to convert his son to Christianity?
18. To what extent is Sinan's attack on Marcus Roberts warranted? How is the fact of the earthquake to blame for the violence that Sinan inflicts on Marcus, and—at the same time—how is it implicated in Sinan's decision to spare Marcus's life? What does Marcus's decision not to pursue any kind of retaliation against Sinan after his assault suggest about his own culpability in the series of events that prompted the attack?
19. How much of Sinan's moral code is driven by his religious faith? How does his rejection of his daughter (in lieu of her murder in an "honor killing") reflect his conflicted feelings about his moral obligations? What does Sinan's premeditated theft from his manager at Carrefour suggest about his character and his willingness to satisfy his own desires?
20. How might one interpret the closing image of the book, that of an old man driving his donkey cart alongside the Başıoğlu's train to Yeşilli and briefly overtaking it? In what ways is this image hopeful? How do you think the author intended this image to connect to a book that deals with one family's tragedy?

• suggested activities

1. Point out to your students that *Gardens of Water* makes use of a dramatic event—a devastating earthquake—at the beginning of the novel, and uses that catastrophe as a catalyst to unspool the lives of the characters. Ask your students to prepare short stories that begin with a bang, so to speak, and have them devote the remainder of their pieces to examining how their characters react and recover. Discuss with your students how beginning a work in medias res, especially in the midst of an unfolding crisis, can create opportunities in the fictional realm for characters to act in defining and significant ways.
2. Have your students compose a short story in which a piece of music or song lyrics play an integral role in the plot. Encourage them to raise the stakes by using music that produces strong emotional effects in characters, or leads them to make life-altering decisions. Have students read their stories aloud and discuss how sensory effects (and their attendant associations in listeners and readers) can sometimes be as lasting and dramatic as vivid physical description or plot.
3. Examine some of the political, religious, and cultural tensions in *Gardens of Water*. What impact do the disputes between the mayor of Gölcük, the local Imam, the Turkish military, and the American relief workers have on the ordinary Turkish citizens who are suffering because their homes and loved ones were lost in the catastrophe? Encourage your students to talk about competing interests in political issues that they've witnessed personally, or that are ongoing in your region. Ask them to create a piece of fiction that explores their feelings about the issue that they feel most passionate about.

• vocabulary

Alan Drew italicizes the many Turkish words that he uses in place of English. Almost all of these words can be deciphered using context clues. Those used most frequently include:

- *abaya* – a traditional garment worn by Muslim women; a kind of *hijab*.
- *Anne* – mother.
- *Allahu Akbar* – the first part of the *adhan*, the chant that calls Muslim to prayer five times a day, frequently translated as “God is great.”
- *Baba* – father.
- *bakkal* – grocery.
- *Bey* – a polite title, deriving from the names of the original rulers of the Ottoman realm, that today means something like “Mr.” in English.
- *Öcalan* – Abdullah “Apo” Öcalan, the founding leader of the Kurdish militant group Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).
- *PKK* – Kurdistan Workers Party. A militant group founded in the 1970s by Öcalan and led by him until his capture in 1999.
- *yabancı* – foreigner; outsider.

• beyond the book

1. Throughout *Gardens of Water*, Sinan and other characters refer to Öcalan's arrest and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Ask your students to research the history of this quasi-mystical figure in the history of Kurdish resistance, and his founding of the PKK. In the course of their research, students should find out more about the PKK's objectives, its foes, and its reputation in the wider international community, especially the United States. Ask the class to consider what Sinan's affiliation with the PKK (at least in spirit) suggests about his own views on nationalism and homeland. How does Sinan's sympathy for the PKK relate to his father's murder, and to his ambivalence about having American neighbors?
2. In *Gardens of Water*, the Başıoğlu family relies on their faith to sustain them through much of the trauma that the earthquake introduces into their lives. Ask your students to read more about Islam, and to investigate some of its central tenets. What does the *Qur'an* (*the Koran*) have to say about children obeying and disobeying their parents, lust, stealing, suicide, violence, despair, and revenge? How does the Başıoğlu's interaction with others in their Muslim community reveal their religious tradition, as grounded in the *Qur'an*? To what extent does their religious observance allow them to accommodate non-Muslims in their community, without compromising their beliefs?

• for further reading

Islam, by Karen Armstrong

No god but God, by Reza Aslan

The Sheltering Sky, by Paul Bowles

The Kite Runner, by Khaled Hosseini

A Thousand Splendid Suns,
by Khaled Hosseini

Atatürk, by Andrew Mango

Who Are the Turk?, by Justin McCarthy
and Carolyn McCarthy

Turkey Unveiled, by Nicole Pope
and Hugh Pope

*The Kurds: A People in Search of Their
Homeland*, by Kevin McKiernan

Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History,
by Susan Meiselas

The Qur'an, as translated
by M.A. S. Abdel Haleem

The Koran-Selected Sutras,
translated by Arthur Jeffrey

The Wisdom of the Prophet,
translated by Thomas Cleary

Understanding Islam,
by Thomas W. Lippman

Islam and the West, by Bernard Lewis

The Middle East, by Dr. William Spencer

Warriors of the Prophet, by Mark Huband

• about this guide's writer

This guide was prepared by JULIE COOPER, a writer from Bainbridge Island, Washington. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie has taught beginning and advanced fiction writing at the University of Washington, and works as a freelance writer of educational materials and reading group guides for several major publishers.

• notes

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Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**
Cisneros, Sandra. **La Casa en Mango Street**
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**
Doctorow, E.L. **Ragtime**
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**
Matar, Hisham. **In the Country of Men**
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**
Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**
Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**

Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**
Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**
Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Cat's Cradle**
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five**
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

Nonfiction:

Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**
Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. **Made to Stick**
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**
Katz, Jon. **Geeks**
Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**
Lewis, Anthony. **Gideon's Trumpet**
Miller, Jennifer. **Inheriting the Holy Land**
Nafisi, Azar. **Reading Lolita in Tehran**
Nazario, Sonia. **Enrique's Journey**
Opdyke, Irene Gut. **In My Hands**
Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Almost a Woman**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Quando era puertorriqueña**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**
Taylor, Nick. **American-Made**
Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**
Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**