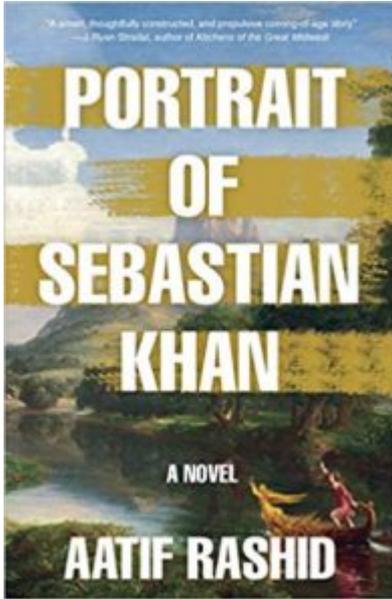


Small Press Release: Portrait of Sebastian Khan (an excerpt)

written by Jacob Singer | March 25, 2019



Portrait of Sebastian Khan by Aatif Rashid
263 pages – 7.13 Books/ [Amazon](#)

Sebastian Khan stares at his reflection in the window: black, wavy hair, light-olive skin, high cheekbones and aquiline nose. It's the kind of face young women find attractive, dashing and mysterious in its racial ambiguity (the genetic result of two half-Pakistani, half-white parents), aged eighteen years and two hundred and thirty-one days, and accompanying a figure that likewise strikes a desirable chord in the female heart, tall but not too tall (five feet, eight inches), hipster-svelte but not emaciated (one hundred and forty-five pounds), attired in a white-buttoned blue blazer, slim-fitting crimson chinos, and dark-brown leather shoes, all worn with a pose of aristocratic nonchalance. It's the eyes, though, that give the image its aesthetic harmony, large, dark-brown eyes, of a brown so dark and deep that it swallows up the pupils, confident, graceful, hypnotic eyes, framed in dark-rimmed glasses that only magnify their power, and containing in their swirling depths all the infinite wisdom of a young man.

The window belongs to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and beyond Sebastian's reflection lies that city, its red brick buildings strewn with autumn leaves, the skies above gray and cloudy. But Sebastian sees only his reflection. He runs a hand through his hair and notes via the window as a girl, mid-twenties at the oldest and dressed with art-student chic, glances up and lets her gaze linger on him as she walks down the marble-floored museum hallway. He listens to the echo of her shoes and smiles when her steps briefly slow as she passes behind him.

Sebastian turns from the window and walks down the hallway to the adjoining room. He's in Philadelphia for only a few more hours—the Model United Nations Conference he was here for is over, and his team's plane will soon depart back to San Francisco, and tomorrow he'll be back in his freshman dorm in Berkeley—and so he wants one more time to gaze upon the painting, which has always been his favorite.

Before the next room he finds it, hanging unceremoniously by the doorway, overlooked by all the passersby eager to plunge headfirst into the twentieth-century rooms beyond (though not by Sebastian, who, like the painting, prefers to remain here, firmly rooted in the nineteenth century): *The Thorny Path* by Thomas Couture (1873). The painting centers on a woman who is almost naked, wearing draped around her body only a single white sheet that nevertheless manages to leave exposed both her breasts. She sits enthroned atop a carriage, which with a jaunty tilt of her head she wills forward, through a shadowy forest path. Below her, each clutching a rope that leads back to her magnificent seat, are not horses but men: a nobleman, a soldier, a scholar, and a troubadour. Despite the surrounding darkness, the woman shines, as if with divine light.

As a whole, the image is meant to be an allegorical critique of the decadence and immorality of nineteenth-century French society, or so the description beside it says. But Sebastian cares little for Couture's rather obvious didactic intent. In fact, his gaze barely lingers on the woman (naked though she is) and instead focuses on the men before her. The nobleman is fat and tired, his stomach hanging grotesquely out before him. The soldier is defeated, his sword pointed at the dirt and his face turned away in shame. The scholar is distant, a pen in his hand and his gaze faraway. Only the troubadour has his head held high, his expression proud and glowing as he pulls the carriage forward. To Sebastian, this troubadour becomes the unintended center of the piece.

Sebastian is not stupid (a straight A student, in fact), and so he does immediately recognize the painting's stern morality and the not-so-subtle reference to the transience of youth in the form of the old crone, hunched in the carriage behind the semi-naked woman. But he chooses to ignore it all, the crone and the larger message. Art for him is about the perceiver and not the artist, and Sebastian reads the painting not as one of shame or sadness, but as a celebration of the troubadour's spirit. Alone of all these men, the troubadour pulls the carriage with purpose and optimism, happy to bear a burden as exquisite as this woman.

Sebastian had a similar interpretation of another Couture favorite of his, *Romans during the Decadence* (1847). Couture intended that piece as a moral condemnation of drunken debauchery, yet to Sebastian, the piled naked ladies and men in laurels and togas lying amidst columns and marble statues were altogether a beautiful celebration of bodies and worldly pleasure. But Sebastian often ignores the obvious thematic elements of art. He is the kind of young man who reads *Frankenstein* as a defense of ambition and views *La Dolce Vita* as a glorification of the hedonistic life. His favorite literary figures are Amory Blaine, Julien Sorel, Don Quixote, and Don Draper. Most tragically of all, he believes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to be a celebration

of the Epicurean spirit of Henry Wotton instead of a critique of decadence and aestheticism. And so, what can one expect when a young man like that gazes up at a painting such as this?

Staring at it thus, Sebastian only reaffirms his decision to study Art History. To him, nothing is more beautiful than that which is real and yet still immortal, like these figures in this painting. He imagines the actual model for the troubadour, a young man once, but aging quickly even just a few years after posing, lines appearing on the forehead and around the mouth, the rosy cheeks and lips fading to yellow, the beautiful locks of hair thinning and falling out, the fine, erect, Apollonian figure flattening and developing a gut, the knees starting to ache from any prolonged period of standing before eventually giving out entirely. Now, of course, the model is long dead, his bones turning to ash somewhere in a Parisian catacomb. But the figure in the painting will always be young. And so, in that troubadour's upturned face, Sebastian imagines his own eyes reflected back. As far as he's concerned, a piece of art is just a mirror, and Sebastian can't help but long to be young forever too, to have his reflection in the window proceed unchanged, Dorian-like, through the ages.

In truth, though, Sebastian's love of art is more complex than simple youthful yearning—because when he was twelve, his mother died, and nineteenth-century paintings like this one provided him a refuge from the pain of her loss. Sebastian may insist that his tastes are due entirely to his devotion to the ideal of beauty and not at all to anything as bourgeois as childhood trauma. But that is simply another of his classic misinterpretations. And so, even Sebastian sometimes pauses when staring at this painting, detecting hints of mortality in the immortal canvas and wondering— is this young troubadour not deceived? Is this bard of love and beauty not just caught up in the lie of his own song?