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Statement

## Ian Johnson on *A Mosque in Munich*: narrative as “the sugar around the medicine”

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We spoke this week with writer Ian Johnson about his new book, *A Mosque in Munich*. After winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for his [coverage of the Falun Gong movement](#) for The Wall Street Journal, Johnson went on to do a series of articles about Islam in Europe. Returning to one of the stories from that series, Johnson expanded it into a book-length historical narrative showing how the U.S. fostered militant Islam in Europe throughout the Cold War, with widespread repercussions. Here, he talks with us about the importance of characters, the advantage journalists have when covering the intersection of history and current events, and whether or not The Wall Street Journal would publish his 2005 feature on Islam today.

***A Mosque in Munich* seems heavily researched. Can you talk a little about how you gathered material for it?**

One way, of course, was through interviews. At the back of the book I have a list of 30 or so interviews that I did. I also did a lot of work in archives—the book is maybe two-thirds based on archival work and maybe one-third on interviews.

It started out as journalism. I began doing this as a series on Islam in Europe for *The Wall Street Journal*, and it morphed into something else. My models were books like [Adam Hochschild's](#) *King Leopold's Ghost*, stories that are history but written in a narrative style.



***A Mosque in Munich* encompasses several decades and a lot of geography. Did you have a mantra to keep you focused as you wrote?**

I thought I could keep it under control by focusing on this mosque. If I focused on all our dealings with radical Islam, then it would have ended up as a giant survey book, which I didn't want. By focusing on the mosque, I'd have a geographic place that I could look at and get my hooks into.

Primarily, though, I'd say, the book focused on several important characters. Even though a lot of characters come and go—it's kind of like a Russian novel—there are three primary characters: a Nazi academic and spymaster, a CIA agent and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The story is primarily told through those people.

**Your prologue seems to suggest that the book got its start in a chance observation you made of a map of important world mosques that included the Islamic Center of Munich. It's a wonderful narrative moment. Had you been thinking of doing something on the West's ties to and use of Muslims for political ends before that?**

It was a little bit of a literary conceit. My finding it begs the question of why I was in this bookstore, and why was I looking at these issues to start with. I was over in London researching groups and organizations. So, I had a longer interest in the topic, but I think that this is what really crystallized it. I'd heard a little bit about the mosque before and knew it was important in contemporary Germany, but I couldn't see why it would be on the map. And so that was sort of the thing that got me wondering if there was more to the mosque than I thought.

**Was it a challenge to pick those three main characters for the book or did they out themselves to you early on?**

Very early on. I knew this guy von Mende would make a great character right from the start. And Ramadan is so famous, I knew I wanted to focus on him. The CIA agent came along a little bit later—I think it took a little bit more time before I realized he would be a good person to write about.

When I originally wrote this as a roughly 5000-word article for *The Wall Street Journal*, I didn't have as much information on the U.S. side, so I had to go back. I was able to make the Robert Dreher character come alive, to some degree, by talking to his family members.

**You said you didn't want to do a giant survey book. Did you struggle over what history to leave out? What ultimately guided those decisions for you?**

I could have done more on the contemporary era. The final section of the book is maybe 50 pages or so—I could have spent more time fleshing out that part. I began to think that it would get a little too

complicated. I didn't want to be writing one of these books where you have too many characters.

I think maybe the book already has a lot of characters and challenges readers—that's why there's a list of characters at the front. If I had done any more in the contemporary era, especially for those who are not specialists, it would have been too much.

**Do you have thoughts for others writing historical narrative tied directly to current events?**

I think that's a very good area for journalists to look at—things that haven't turned into pure history, where there are still people to talk to. Sometimes archives are just coming open, and journalists can use their skills to access these things in a way that academics often don't. I think of course there's a big appetite for pure historical books, and they sell very well. But maybe for people who are coming out of journalism, it may not be a bad idea to focus on something that's right at the intersection of history and contemporary events.

**Do you think *The Wall Street Journal* would publish your original 5000-word piece today? There's been such a move away from narrative at the paper.**

I think they probably wouldn't run it. They have moved away from longer pieces and I don't think the editors view that a good use of resources. Even back in 2005 when this ran in the *Journal*, it was probably only because of the London Tube bombing—because of the giant appetite for things on radical Islam. In the acknowledgements, I thank Paul Steiger for making the space in the paper. Nowadays, I don't think anything half that length would get in. They just don't go for it.

**You chose a narrative angle for your book, so clearly you think it works best for some stories. What do you think it can deliver that other forms don't?**

People seem to look at the word count, and they think, “Oh, that's two or three thousand words—that's going to be hard for people to get through.” But if it's written well, it really sucks people in. The whole value of narrative is to trick people into long articles by having color characters and interesting stories to move things along.

It's a lot easier to read a narrative with two or three thousand words than the equivalent analysis piece, with talking heads that can get boring and unreadable. I don't think anyone really wants to read that material, but narrative can be the sugar around the medicine. It gets people into the topic, but a lot of editors don't realize that. They just focus on the length and say, “People don't have the time for it.”

But people do have the time for it. You see that at successful magazines like *The New Yorker*. People are willing to spend time reading stuff—you just have to present it in an attractive, interesting way.

**Some journalists have the idea that they'll do a couple long features on a topic then write a book. Do you have any cautionary tales about that approach?**

I think that articles can be a good way get ideas for a book, but I think that books don't work so well if they're just a collection of articles. Books need to have a through story that takes you from the beginning of the book to the end. It's hard. I did a series on Islam in Europe. There were five long articles, and this book, the story of the mosque, was just one of those stories. And for my book *Wild Grass*, one of the people I profiled appeared in the *Journal*. The people from the other two parts of the book didn't.

Sometimes the articles are good jumping off points, but I don't think you can just repackage them and then take a lot of other stuff from your notebooks and jam it in there. It rarely works that easily.

Reporting for book is a lot different than reporting for an article. If you're reporting a story, you know, “I've got X amount of words, I'm going to work efficiently and get what I need for that.” You rarely build in the time you need to get the depth you'll want for a book. Unless you know ahead of time, you're going to have to go back and re-report a lot of stuff, which can be difficult.

When an article has already appeared in the newspaper, you can ruin your relationship with sources. Maybe your sources think you're writing a really positive thing about them, and then they see the article and they don't want to talk with you again. It's not always as easy as you think to go back.

It's difficult, unless you know right at the beginning and you can somehow build in that extra reporting time. And even that's hard nowadays because we're so focused on efficiency and cranking out stories quickly.

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