

# Navid Kermani

## On Neil Young, Lessing and Islam

Few issues have been more debated in the German public sphere of late than that of multiculturalism and the integration of Europe's growing Muslim population. Xenophobic, right-wing parties are springing up across the continent arguing that Islam and democracy are incompatible and that Muslims are threatening the European way of life, while multiculturalists seek to ease the concerns of politicians and the public alike. While many have published on these topics, few have written as convincingly and intelligently about the complexity of identity and the challenges and need for assimilation as Navid Kermani. Born in Germany to Iranian parents, Kermani is that rare writer who is an accomplished scholar, essayist and novelist. Having obtained a doctorate in Islamic Studies, Kermani examines not only the intricacies and beauty of Islam, but also pop culture, politics and his passion for German literature. His short stories and novels often deal with characters who are Muslim, yet they don't problematise a stereotypical 'clash of cultures.' Still, his works never shy away from difficult or controversial topics and they are always guided by his belief that Germany's minorities are an integral part of society. At the same time, he is a prolific essayist who writes passionately about German literature and his love for the classic and canonical writers – in particular, Lessing, Jean Paul and Kafka.

In the midst of the debates over multiculturalism and the questions about Muslim integration and assimilation, Kermani published one of his most important works on the topic, his 2009 essay collection *Wer ist wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime* ('Who is We? Germany and its Muslims'). The essays in this volume lucidly take up issues like terrorism, violence and Islam and the possibility and necessity of integrating Islam into secular Europe. The essays also touch on his own family heritage and how

his Persian and Muslim roots have shaped his life and ideas. The long and counter-intuitive title of the final essay is characteristic of his argumentation and his thinking: 'Warum der Westen seine Leitkultur missionarisch ausbreiten sollte und Warum Deutschland seinen Lehrerinnen erlauben sollte, das Kopftuch zu tragen' ('Why the West should evangelistically spread its core values and why Germany should allow its teachers to wear the head scarf'). At the core of his argument is the unique nature of the West's commitment to religious freedom, which does not exist to the same extent in most non-Western countries, and which similarly then explains the second half of the title. In these essays, as well as other speeches he has given, Kermani underscores the importance of the principles of the German Enlightenment – tolerance, rationality and secular law – and fundamentally rejects extremists on both sides of the political and ideological spectrum. His work thus represents an important voice in these literary and ideological debates.

### Selected Works

**Das Buch der von Neil Young Getöteten**  
(The Book of those Killed by Neil Young'; 2002)

Shortly after the birth of his daughter, Kermani and his wife found their baby had developed colic and cried uncontrollably. By chance, he found that the music of Neil Young soothed her and lessened her crying. As a music lover, Kermani used this opportunity to write a short book reflecting on Young's music, aesthetics and life in general.

**Ayda, Bär und Hase**  
(Ayda, Bear and Rabbit'; 2006)

This children's book tells the story of Ayda, a five-year old kindergarten pupil, who lives in Cologne with her Iranian parents. Ayda is sad that the other kids won't play with her because of her size. One day, while exploring the neighborhoods of Cologne,

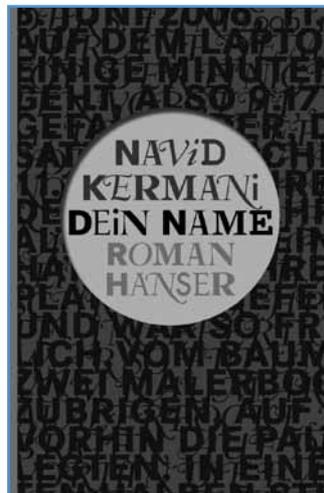
she meets a bear and a rabbit, two best friends who are curious to meet a young girl. Together they explore the world and learn about tolerance, perseverance and standing up for friends.

**Kurzmitteilung**  
(Memorandum'; 2007)

Dariusch, a young German-Iranian events manager from Cologne, receives an SMS informing him that a business colleague has suddenly died. The news shakes him out of his complacency and prompts him to embark on a journey of discovery: both of the young woman who died as well as of his own values and beliefs. This short novel takes place in the aftermath of the 2005 London Underground bombings and explores the identity crisis of the young Muslim protagonist and his coming to terms with his origins and religious heritage.

**Dein Name**  
(Your Name'; 2011)

Kermani's 1000-page magnum opus is an all-encompassing work that ostensibly deals with one day in the life of the writer Navid Kermani and his reflections on his life. The dust jacket states that Kermani offers the reader 'everything that there is to know about his life and life in general: his family's present and past, remembrances of deceased friends and the stirring writings of Jean Paul and Hölderlin.' A fascinating collage of a



novel that is supplemented by the poetics lectures he gave in Frankfurt during the writing process and published subsequently in 2012 ('Über den Zufall: Jean Paul, Hölderlin und der Roman, den ich schreibe'; 'On Chance: Jean Paul, Hölderlin and the novel that I'm writing').

**David N. Coury** is Professor of Humanistic Studies (German) and Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin (USA) and the founder and co-Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and Partnerships. He has published widely on contemporary German literature and film with a particular focus on the interaction between Germany and the Muslim world. His article 'Enlightenment Fundamentalism: Zafer Şenocak, Navid Kermani, and Multiculturalism in Germany Today' appeared in Volume 7 of the *Edinburgh German Yearbook*.



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Born in 1967 in Singen to Iranian parents, **Navid Kermani** studied Islamic Studies, Philosophy and Theatre in Cologne and Bonn. He later received his doctorate and completed his professorial dissertation in Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn. Kermani is a member of the German Academy for Language and Poetry as well as the Hamburg Academy of Sciences and has been the recipient of numerous awards for his writing. In 2009 Kermani was asked to give the Frankfurt Poetic Lectures and then again in 2011 the Göttingen Poetic Lectures. His published works are wide-ranging and include academic works on Islam (*Der Schrecken Gottes*, 2005), short story collections and vignettes (*Vierzig Leben*, 2004; *Du sollst*, 2005), a children's book, novels and reportage. In spring 2014 he will be the Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor at Dartmouth University.