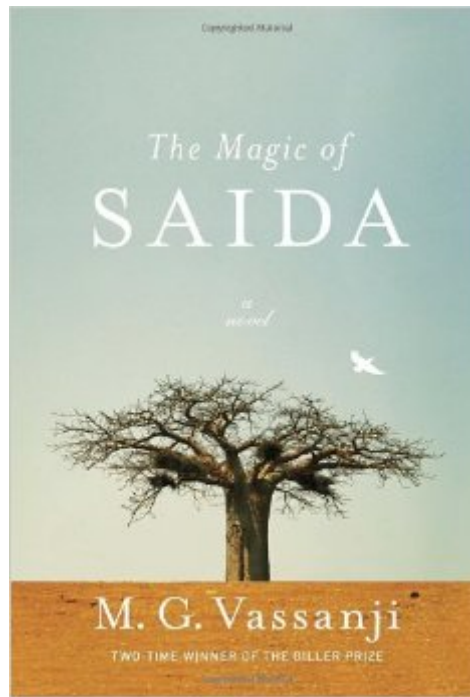


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# The Magic Of Saida



## Synopsis

Giller Prize winner M. G. Vassanji gives us a powerfully emotional novel of love and loss, of an African/Indian man who returns to the town of his birth in search of the girl he once loved and the sense of self that has always eluded him. Kamal Punja is a physician who has lived in Canada for the past forty years, but whom we first meet in a Tanzanian hospital. He is delirious and says he has been poisoned with hallucinogens. But when Kamal finds a curious and sympathetic ear in a local publisher, his ravings begin to reveal a tale of extraordinary pathos, complexity, and mystery. Raised by his African mother, deserted when he was four by his Indian father, married to a woman of Indian heritage, and the father of two wholly Westernized children, Kamal had reached a stage of both undreamed-of material success and disintegrating personal ties. Then, suddenly, he stepped off the treadmill, allowed an old regret to awaken, and set off to find the girl he had known as a child, to finally keep his promise to her that he would return. The girl was Saida, granddaughter of a great, beloved Swahili poet. Kamal and Saida were constant companions—he teaching her English and arithmetic, she teaching him Arabic script and Swahili poetry—and in his child's mind, she was his future wife. Until, when he was eleven, his mother sent him to the capital, Dar es Salaam, to live with his father's relatives, to become an Indian and thus secure his future. Now Kamal is journeying back to the village he left, into the maze of his long-unresolved mixed-race identity and the nightmarish legacy of his broken promise to Saida. At once dramatic, searching, and intelligent, *The Magic of Saida* moves deftly between the past and present, painting both an intimate picture of passion and betrayal and a broad canvas of political promise and failure in contemporary Africa. It is a timeless story and a story very much of our own time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Martin Kigoma, a publisher in Tanzania, meets Kamal Kunja in a hospital in Kilwa. As Kunja recovers from his sickness, he tells his story to Kigoma. Kunja's story interweaves with the story of Kilwa, its people and its myths. Kunja's trip from Canada to Kilwa ultimately becomes a journey of self-discovery. As he explores his past, Kunja contemplates his sense of rootlessness (not quite African, not quite Indian, certainly not Canadian), and begins to question whether he wants to be buried under several feet of snow on a continent to which he does not belong. Kunja was born in Kilwa to an African mother and an absent Indian father. He was the childhood friend of a girl named Saida, the granddaughter of Mzee Omari, a renowned poet who doubled as a national historian. The second part of the novel recites the history of Kilwa as it was understood by Omari, beginning with Kunja's ancestor in India who, in the 1870s, answered the call of jihad against the Germans who claimed the right to lead the Africans out of darkness (at gunpoint, if necessary). Omari tells how his own life is shaped by betrayal and forgiveness as Kilwa moves from the harsh rule of Germans to the gentler oppression of the British. After her grandfather's death, Saida becomes a *mganga* (spiritual healer or advisor). She gives Kunja a *tawiz* (locket) in which is sealed a prayer. Although Kunja eventually studies medicine in Uganda and becomes a physician in Canada, he never parts with the *tawiz* and never forgets his promise to return to Saida. As he continues his search for her -- a difficult task given the reluctance of villagers to discuss her -- Kunja recalls his life after his mother sent him from Kilwa to Dar es Salaam.

â ¢ The Magic of Saida is the story of Kamal Punja, a successful doctor from Edmonton, Canada, returning to his birthplace a small coastal town called Kilwa, part of what is now known as Tanzania to search for his childhood sweetheart, Saida.â ¢ What started out as story with a theme of looking for a lost love morphs into a fully complex storyline that examines identity, abandonment, love, hope, and dislocation wrapped up with magic realism elements and infused with history of the past and present.â ¢ Once again I was drawn into the skillful storytelling of the author as he looks at East Africa through a lens that explores history, politics, religion, ethnicity and societies yet making it personal and intimate.â ¢ As the storyline fluidity moves between the past and the present in Kamalâ s life and the past and present of the history of the region, it is Kamalâ s background of

having an African mother and Indian father that allows for the exploration of the cultures from an inside view. The reader gets to see sectarian conflicts get ignited by forces that have little to do with many who bear the burden of these conflicts and have even less power to resist. As Kamal is given opportunities that he is pushed to accept, often the price he pays is abandonment by those he loves. At times some of the historical parts dragged the story down but they are really so necessary to this story and to our understanding of migration and relocation of this area.

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