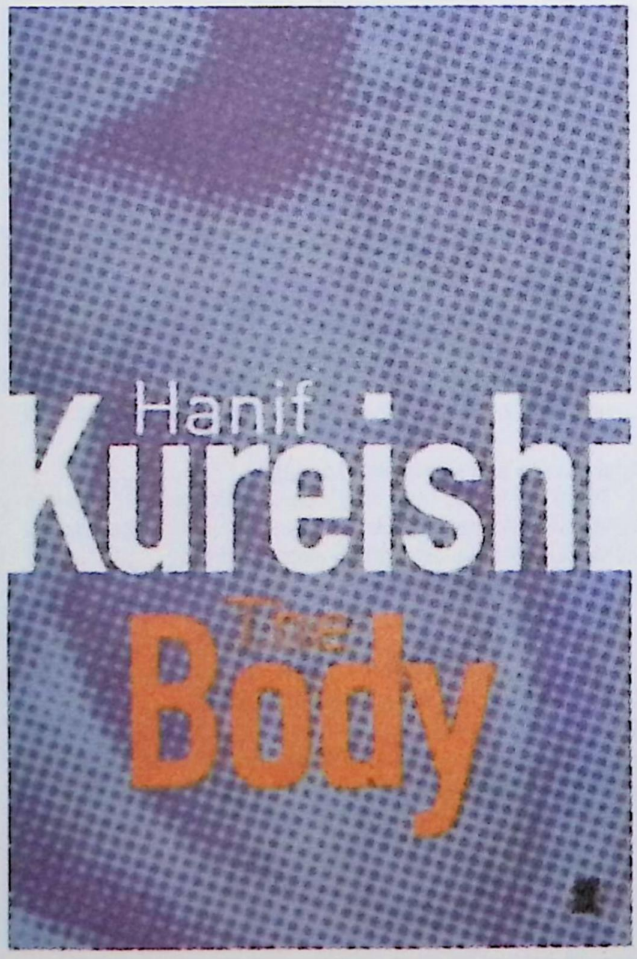
The Body

STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

Hanif Kureishi's "The Body" is a slim, compact novel that could easily be mistaken for a slight one. Its main character, Adam, is an aging writer and playwright who is offered the chance to inhabit a new, healthy, youthful body -- in other words, he'll be able to do all the things that young people enjoy doing but with the benefit of all the knowledge and experience he's stored up during the years.



Adam leaves his wife, whom he loves, and his grown children, telling them he's taking a little vacation. After the procedure, which puts him into the body of a stunning, long-limbed creature with soulful eyes, he travels aimlessly, staying up all night when it suits him, sleeping with whomever he wants. He ends up taking a job at a women's retreat center, where the middle-aged patrons, facing what they perceive as the end of their desirability, enjoy simply looking at him.

After his experiment is over, he plans to return to his old body, as well as to his family. But because "The Body" is a horror story of sorts, few things work out as Adam plans. This is a swift, fleet novel that also, somehow, feels heavy and rich, a meditation on the terror of aging and the overrated pleasures of youth, as well as on the nature of mature love. Kureishi makes it distressingly evident why Adam would want to discard his old body, even just for a time, in the first place: He's tired and wants to restore his curiosity about the world.

"I no longer believe or hope that book knowledge will satisfy or even entertain me, and if I watch TV for too long I begin to feel hollow," Adam laments. "I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors, or serials on TV ... It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can only grasp a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make out which side they are on. My age, education, and experience seem to be no advantage. I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate?"

Put that way, it's enough to make anyone run off to the body shop. But even with all the opportunities his new form offers, Adam discovers that he misses all the old things more than he imagined he would. In one of the book's most stunning sequences, he spends a few hours with his wife, who, of course, thinks he's just a beautiful, interesting stranger. He asks her questions about herself, and she obliges hesitantly, saying, "No one's much interested in women of my age." He puts her favorite song on the stereo, and they dance: "I knew where to put my hands. In my mind, her shape fitted mine."

"The Body" begins as a sharply pointed gripe session about the miseries of aging, and ends up an affirmation that getting old is hardly the worst thing at all. The greatest horror is losing everything you've used up a lifetime getting used to. Kureishi recognizes that the familiar isn't necessarily mundane.

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