

# AND WEST IS WEST

Worlds Apart: A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion





# WORLDS APART

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## *A Note from the Author*

“East is East, and West is West, and never the two shall meet,” wrote Rudyard Kipling to describe a nineteenth-century clash of cultures. When I began writing *And West Is West* at the beginning of the winter of 2010, America was experiencing a similar disconnect. The euphoria of the revolutionary 2008 election was fading, and the recession was not letting up. We existed in what seemed a permanent state of military conflict. And so, fed by bad news and political expediency, the division between our cultures became a chasm.

Beyond it was the question of where the country was being led. The inherited wars and recession were not the president’s doing, but his decision to rely on drone strikes, more than even the previous administration had, was chilling. And his employment of the same people involved in the financial meltdown to fix it was perplexing. Weren’t drone strikes against alleged terrorists a renewal of America’s old policy of foreign intervention through assassination? And why wasn’t even one of the leaders of the banking institutions that had devastated the world’s economy indicted? What was going on?

Finding no answers to these questions, I sought them out the way I usually do, through writing. Immediately I knew that my characters would not be the movers and shakers of our institutions; they would be neither the high flyers who go to Davos, nor the CEOs, nor the Pentagon generals. They would not even be their lieutenants. They would be the people caught in the lower echelons who do the actual day-to-day work. They would be young and very good at their jobs. They would be happy with their duties, with their place in society, and with the progress of their lives. The glow of youthful promise would be the novel’s starting point.

Gradually, over the initial months of the manuscript's composition, my principal characters took shape: Jessica Aldridge, an Air Force drone pilot in Nevada; and Ethan Winter, a computer programmer for a Wall Street bank. To develop them, I was relying greatly on my own experiences and those of the people I'd met while working in gas stations and boatyards, teaching college English, working as an editor for a philanthropic association, writing technical manuals, or coding database-driven websites. To learn about the drone program, I read numerous interviews with pilots and operators, reviewed the public blogs of service members, and studied an invaluable transcript of a drone strike made available through the Freedom of Information Act by the *Los Angeles Times*. There was much to learn.

Studying up about what Ethan might do as a "quant" was more challenging. Unfortunately, the Freedom of Information Act does not apply to corporations, and what goes on in the financial world, just as what happens in Vegas, mainly stays there. No doubt for good reason. In his book *Flash Boys*, Michael Lewis details how high-frequency stock traders exploited the market during the period in which my novel takes place, 2011–14. My own experience with high-speed trading goes back to 1999, when I was copywriting for a client who was developing what would become Wall Street's second largest automated trading platform. My job was to translate terms like *packet-switching* into readable English. For Ethan I invented more interesting work: he would be programming his bank's currency trading computers to take advantage of the second-by-second market volatility caused by terrorist acts.

As my characters' stories came together, *And West Is West* naturally picked up on other themes: the prying of the security state, the destructiveness of secrecy (government and familial), how a bad conscience can eat at the soul but lead to transformation. Abetting the actions that haunt Jessica and Ethan is the technology that we all use for major periods of our day: the screens of our smartphones, tablets, and computers, screens through which we conduct much of our lives and that actually screen us against face-to-face interaction. America's notorious isolationism was caused initially by our country's geography, but our technology has reconfigured it. Now we are isolated within our own small, virtual worlds,

and this lets us more freely attack others, whether by posting a comment from our living room or firing a missile remotely from a Nevada trailer. Meanwhile, we are shielded by physical distance from any immediate confrontation with what we have done.

While the book's title touches on distancing, it is also an exasperated shrug at the West's inability to learn from its destructive behavior, and it leads to a central question in the novel: What, beyond shrugging, can any individual here in America do about our system? There is the example of Snowden, but beyond his extreme, are we left only to fret? The corporate-military complex is embedded and seems unstoppable.

The journey of Jessica and Ethan provided me with a partial answer. Though they work through screens, the consequences of their actions lead them into crises of conscience that radically transform their lives. This aspect of *And West Is West* may seem a hopeful dream of resistance, yet I would contend that we win in this world not by destroying our enemies but by enriching our humanity.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. The title and epigraph of the novel come from Rudyard Kipling: “East is East, and West is West, and never the two shall meet.” Do you agree with Kipling’s observation? How is this separation shown in the novel? In what ways is the gap bridged?
2. The novel opens with drone pilot Jessica Aldridge on a remote mission that causes the deaths of two innocent young women. How far, and in what ways, do the effects of collateral damage extend throughout the novel?
3. Ethan’s bank job involves writing computer programs that take advantage of terrorism-related events. Is this aspect of his work immoral? Why or why not?
4. The use of contemporary devices—phones, laptops, computers—separates Jessica and Ethan from the immediate consequences of their work. How do you think the characters are affected by this remove? In what ways might technologically enabled distancing affect your own life or work?
5. Why do you think the Lestons never told Zoe about her parents? Why did Walter leave this for Ethan to disclose?
6. Many characters in the novel are involved with drugs, both licitly and illicitly. Ethan uses Ritalin to stay focused at work and Ativan to calm himself. Zoe borrows Ethan’s Ritalin, Porter’s Xanax, and Marla’s muscle relaxants. Don was a drug dealer. Jessica shares Shelly and Newt’s marijuana stash. What are the negative and/or positive effects of all this drug use? From your experience, is the portrayal accurate?

7. Jessica's father was an unreliable parent who abandoned his wife and child. Why does the adult Jessica confide her deepest concerns to him, a convicted murderer serving time? Is her trust misplaced or justified?

8. Ethan claims that the end-of-life choice that Walter Leston makes for himself and his ailing wife is "the easy way out." Would you agree? Why or why not?

9. What are Zoe's true feelings toward Ethan? And what are Ethan's true feelings toward Zoe, both before and after Zoe's tragedy?

10. Daugherty and Pyle, the FBI agents tracking Jessica, are opposites in age and attitude. What causes Daugherty, who initially admires Pyle's capabilities and drive, to ultimately dislike his partner? What does he do about it? How far should Pyle be allowed to go in order to do his job?

11. Does having lost their careers ultimately ruin Ethan's and Jessica's lives or redeem them?

12. Secrets are at the root of many crises in *And West is West*. Do you think secrets contribute to dysfunction in families and organizations? If not, how much secrecy is necessary for society to function?



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Ron Childress started work in boatyards up and down the New England coast, but at nineteen enrolled in community college and went on to earn his BA, MA, and PhD in literature. Childress worked for several years as a communications manager for a professional association near Washington, DC, before joining his wife in her tech marketing agency. In 2000, he left the business to pursue long-form fiction full time.