

Azar Nafisi: A Painful Step into the Past

Iranian writer Azar Nafisi's breakthrough came with a best-seller about her days teaching literature in Islamic Tehran. ● Her new book, "Things I've Been Silent About," deals with the more delicate issue of growing up in troubled family in the years leading up the Islamic Revolution. ● Despite family woes, her love for her father, and for literature, come shining through. ● by Farian Sabahi



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Iranian writer Azar Nafisi came to the literary forefront with publication of her 2003 memoir "Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books," which became a global bestseller and has been translated into 32 languages. The book chronicled her teaching experience in Tehran following the Islamic revolution. Iranians, she said, had the right to imagination, a right that many Westerners took for granted and no longer even considered. It was through literature, wrote Nafisi, that many young Iranians were able to make a connection with the rest of the world.

In 2006, she published the children's fable "BiBi and the Green Voice," "with illustrator Sophie Benini Pietromarchi. "Things I've Been Silent About: Memories," a new memoir that focuses on her parents, was released in January 2009, and delves into an often painful family past. The book is based on a Nafisi's childhood diary, whose contents she kept under lock and key for decades, a decision she later came to regret. Among her memories is falling in love for the first time in Tehran, difficult for a young woman whose early life had been lived out largely in Britain, Switzerland, and the United States.

As in "Reading Lolita," Nafisi makes repeated references to Western literature, and in particular to Anglo-Saxon classics. In an effort to explain the untapped talents of her mother and Aunt Mina, she paraphrases American poet Emily Dickinson's evocation of "a dim capacity for Wings." But more than anything else, "Things I've Been Silent About" may actually be a tribute to classical Persian literature, beginning with the "Shahnameh," or "The Book of the Kings," by the Persian poet Ferdowsi.

Writer Azar Nafisi.

Let's begin with Ferdowsi. Let me start by asking you to tell us the story of Iraj, who is described as by Ferdowsi as a brave, fair and good man. So fair that he'd never seek revenge, which makes him unlike many other heroic figures in "the Book of Kings." You say it was your favorite childhood story.

The story of Iraj is among the first ones I remember my father ever telling me, when I was three. Our epic poet Ferdowsi lived thousands of years ago. My father said Iran was an ancient and many-times invaded nation where poetry helped give people a sense of identity and continuity. My father loved talking about good men, and I always tried to figure out which ones might live up to that distinction. One evening he told me the story of Iraj, whose father Fereydun lived 2,500 years ago and was the great Persian ruler who had defeated foreign King Zahak.

Like King Lear, Fereydun at one point decided to divide his empire among his three children, putting them to the test to determine which one was the bravest. One night he attacked them, and the one who responded with the greater courage was Iraj, his youngest. The king decided to give one child China, another the West, while

In 1979, anti-Shah protestors in Tehran hail Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.



AP / Getty Images

the best part, Persia, home of the brave, to Iraj.

But his brothers Salm and Tur were jealous and wondered why the best part of the kingdom had gone to the youngest. The story tells how the two brothers, unable to live with their jealousy, challenged Iraj and killed him. Iraj was braver and stronger than both of them, and could have killed them both. Instead, he just warned them, saying that if they went through with their plan they'd become killers and surrender their souls.

What is the moral of this ancient history?

That we shouldn't follow in the footsteps of our enemies. To defeat evil you have to move in different ways, employing different methods. In the "Shahnameh," Iraj's death is avenged by his son, who grows up to kill his uncles Salm and Tur. It's a fairly natural outcome in a book that's based on heroes who kill for honor. Ferdowsi put Persian life of the time into epic verse, much as Homer did with the Greeks. For my father, the hero wasn't the one who does the killing but the person who refuses to kill to save the souls of his own murderers.

To what extent has classical Persian literature been a comfort to you in exile, and to your father, who was imprisoned by the Shah after being mayor of Tehran?

Can literature can be a sort of “home” for those in the Iranian Diaspora?

Yes, I think that literature can be a “portable” home, which is part of the message I wanted to send out to children in the “Bibi and the Green Voice” story — that the world of literature is a global passport you carry with you because reading doesn’t depend on nationality, language, race, gender or the ethnic group to which you belong. We’re all citizens in the Republic of the Imagination.

What was your father’s in the “Republic”?

When I was a child, my father told me not just Persian stories but ones from around the world. Italy came into my house through “Pinocchio,” France with “The Little Prince,” the United States through “Tom Sawyer.” When I was a bit older I read Dante, Ginsberg, Calvino and Moravia: I knew even before meeting you, so to speak.



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When I was 13, my parents sent me to England. I was very angry because I left so much feeling behind in Iran, including the colors of the mountains, the flowers and the sunshine. It was cold and rainy in Lancaster, day and night; everything was gray. The only thing I had with me to remind me of my beloved Iran were my memories and three books of poetry, by Rumi, Hafez and the feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad. Lancaster was also bitterly cold; there was no central heat. You had to slot in coins to operate the heaters. But if you got too close to them they scalded you, if you moved too far away you got cold. In the book “Out to Be an Alien,” which was very popular at the time, I read that while people in Continental Europe were all out having sex, those in England went to bed with a hot water bottle! That’s just how I read my books: under the covers.

Your father plays a key role in your recent recollections, which is full of details about your childhood and adolescence. The relationship between your parents seems more like that of adversaries than spouses.

They both also had public roles. Your father became mayor of Tehran in 1960, but then ended up in jail.

While your father was in jail your mother became a member of parliament. You call her an unhappy woman who had “stopped dancing” years ago. You had a rich and complicated relationship with your parents, and a painful one with your mother. Reading about your mother, who gives gifts to her daughter to then ask for it back, made me consider another book I was reading, *La madre e la mamma: Dal mito al pensiero psicanalitico* (“Mother and momma: From myth to psychoanalytic thought”) by psychologist Simona Capolupo. How did you find the courage to write about your arduous relationship with your parents?

We face many censors in our lives, but the strongest

LEFT an illustration from the “Shahnameh,” Ferdowsi’s poetic epic about the early history of Iran.

RIGHT women taking part in the 1979 protest in what would become known as Revolution Square. All the country’s anti-Shah forces coalesced around Khomeini, who had been in exile in Najaf, Iraq and later in Paris. He had been an outspoken critic of the Shah since 1963.

may lie within us. It was admittedly hard to write this book. But in the end we write about the things that most haunt us. My mother died in January 2003, when I had just completed “Reading Lolita in Tehran.” My father died a year later. I lived in America and I wasn’t with them at the time of their deaths — they were in Iran — so I felt guilty. Vladimir Nabokov wrote about totalitarian regimes that suppress and control its citizenry by playing on its heartstrings. Death brings total silence. The only way I could handle the loss of my parents was to create a together a fictional dialogue on subjects we’d never had the time to discuss

In your latest book, your brother Mohammed and your husband Bijan are almost entirely absent. Are you keeping their stories in the background for a future book?

“Things I’ve Been Silent About” is intended to focus on the difficult relationships I had with my parents. My brother specifically asked me to mention him as little as possible and I respected his wishes. We’re very close and he is, after all, the protagonist and the voice of “Bibi and the Green Voice,” which is about the loneliness of a young girl who then has to reckon with the arrival of a younger brother. As for my husband, I don’t

have an adversarial relationship with him, so writing about that would risk boring the reader.

You and your husband were enthusiastic about 1979 Islamic Revolution, but you’ve said more recently that the youth of the time “ignored” the power of religion.

How did the ignoring come to pass?

Over the last century, all of Iran’s leaders were secular. We never imagined or conceived of religious rule. We absolutely wanted the charisma of Ayatollah [Ruhollah] Khomeini, but we counted on the fact that he’d then retreat to the holy city of Qum. Don’t forget that most revolutionaries are blinded by ideology.

As a young woman I saw only what I wanted to. Growing up I learned to see the world through the eyes of others. My family, like many others, was composed of people who had different views, some were very modern, others were Marxist, some were orthodox Muslims, but despite their views they were flexible. My grandmother, for example, was a practicing Muslim, but agreed to have a granddaughter like me, who had lived abroad. When the revolution broke out she began sobbing, saying that what was happening didn’t have to do with religion, because faith could not be imposed.



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