

---

## **Reading Lolita in Tehran** by Azar Nafisi

Azar Nafisi 1950-

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.

New Entry : 06/28/2004

### **Sidelights**

When Azar Nafisi was thirteen years old her parents sent her from her home in Iran to Lancaster, England, so that she could finish her schooling. When Nafisi returned to her birthplace things had changed. She returned in 1979 after the revolution of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini had enforced a strict moral code. Women were forced to wear veils and morality police patrolled the streets. According to Michael Harris of the Los Angeles Times, Nafisi has said that "in the course of nearly two decades the streets have been turned into a war zone, where young women who disobey the rules are hurled into patrol cars, taken to jail, flogged, fined . . . and sometimes raped or executed." Nafisi was fired from the University of Tehran, where she taught literature, because she refused to wear a veil. From 1995 to 1997 she set up weekly secret meetings with seven female students to discuss literature. Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books is the story of Nafisi, her students, and the books that they discussed during those meetings. The book has been translated into more than ten languages and is in its fifteenth printing.

As depicted in Nafisi's text, the seven students who meet weekly at the author's home are all very different from each other. Some are married, some are divorced, some are rich, some are poor. Their personalities and passions vary, they have different beliefs, but they are uniquely bonded by the shared experience of reading these novels together and discussing what they mean in their lives. In an article for the Guardian Unlimited Paul Allen wrote, "The charismatic passion in the book is not simply for literature itself but for the kind of inspirational teaching of it which helps students to teach themselves by applying their own intelligence and emotions to what they are reading."

"Reading "Lolita" in Tehran is more than a collection of keen perceptions of the nature of literature-- though it is certainly and formidably and beautifully that. It is also a portrait of daily life under despotism," noted Charles Matthews in the Manila Times. Nafisi divides the book into four sections. Each section discusses a piece of literature: "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austen." As we are taken through the sections we come to know daily life in Iran, the author, and her students and how these great works of literature fit into their lives; as well as how the pieces are relevant and meaningful in their daily operations. In a review for Library Journal, Ron Ratliff commented on the lives of Nafisi's students: "Their stories reflect the oppression of the Iranian regime but also the determination not to be crushed by it." He went on to say, "Nafisi's lucid style keeps the reader glued to the page from start to finish." In an article for the Star Tribune, Andrea Hoag commented that Nafisi's memoir "is a reminder that a safe, illusory world exists within the imaginary constraints of our great novels, a place where all of us can still take comfort."

In an interview for Newsweek, Nafisi claimed that she is grateful to the Islamic Republic regime. "The Islamic Republic took away everything I'd taken for granted. It made me appreciate the feel of the wind

---

## **Reading Lolita in Tehran** by Azar Nafisi

on my skin. How lovely the sun feels on your hair. How free you feel when you can lick ice cream in the streets." Nafisi now resides in the United States and teaches literature at Johns Hopkins University.

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Family: Born c. 1950, in Tehran, Iran; married; children: two. Education: Attended University of Oklahoma and Oxford University. Addresses: Home: Washington DC. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Random House, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

### **CAREER**

Writer and teacher. Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, professor. Taught literature at three Iranian Universities. Director of the Dialogue Project.

### **WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR**

- Anti Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels, 1994.
  - Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, Random House (New York, NY), 2003.
- Contributor to periodicals, including the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal.

Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books has been translated into more than ten languages.

### **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

#### PERIODICALS

- Atlantic Monthly, May 27, 2003, Mona Simpson, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books.
- Book, January-February, 2003, Lisa Levy, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, pp. 51-52.
- Booklist, April 15, 2003, Kristine Huntley, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 1443.
- Globe & Mail (Toronto, Ontario), April 19, 2003, Marni Jackson, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran.
- Kirkus Reviews, February 15, 2003, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 289.
- Library Journal, April 1, 2003, Ron Ratliff, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 98.
- Los Angeles Times, May 14, 2003, Michael Harris, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. E-13.
- Manila Times, May 14, 2003, Charles Matthews, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran.
- Nation, June 16, 2003, Gloria Emerson, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 11.
- Newsweek, May 5, 2003, Carla Power, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 58.
- Publisher's Weekly, March 17, 2003, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran, p. 62.
- Star Tribune, April 6, 2003, Andrea Hoag, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran.

#### ONLINE

- Atlantic Unbound, <http://www.theatlantic.com/> (March 15, 2004), Elizabeth Wasserman, "The Fiction of Life."
- BBC News, <http://www.newsvote.bbc.co.uk/> (March 15, 2004), "Moving Stories: Azar Nafisi."



---

**Reading Lolita in Tehran**  
by Azar Nafisi

- Guardian Unlimited, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/> (November 3, 2003), Paul Allen, review of Reading "Lolita" in Tehran.
- Identity Theory, <http://identitytheory.com/interviews/> (March 15, 2004), Robert Birnbaum, interview with Azar Nafisi.\*

**SOURCE CITATION**

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2007. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2007. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

Document Number: H1000154552