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

“When I first saw Azar Nafisi teach, she was standing in a university classroom in Tehran, holding a bunch of red fake poppies in one hand and a bouquet of daffodils in the other, and asking, “What is kitsch?” Now, mesmerizingly, she reveals the shimmering worlds she created in those classrooms,

inside a revolution that was an apogee of kitsch and cruelty. Here, people think for themselves because James and Fitzgerald and Nabokov sing out against authoritarianism and repression. You will be taken inside a culture, and on a journey, that you will never forget.” —*Jacki Lyden, National Public Radio, author of Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

This book transcends categorization as memoir, literary criticism or social history, though it is superb as all three. Literature professor Nafisi returned to her native Iran after a long education abroad, remained there for some 18 years, and left in 1997 for the United States, where she now teaches at Johns Hopkins. Woven through her story are the books she has taught along the way, among them works by Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James and Austen. She casts each author in a new light, showing, for instance, how to interpret *The Great Gatsby* against the turbulence of the Iranian revolution and how her students see *Daisy Miller* as Iraqi bombs fall on Tehran. Daisy is evil and deserves to die, one student blurts out. *Lolita* becomes a brilliant metaphor for life in the Islamic republic. The desperate truth of *Lolita*’s story is... the confiscation of one individual’s life by another, Nafisi writes. The parallel to women’s lives is clear: we had become the figment of someone else’s dreams. A stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king, had come to rule our land.... And he now wanted to re-create us. Nafisi’s Iran, with its omnipresent slogans, morality squads and one central character struggling to stay sane, recalls literary totalitarian worlds from George Orwell’s 1984 to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Nafisi has produced an original work on the relationship between life and literature. *Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.*

### **From Booklist**

Nafisi, a former English professor at the University of Tehran, decided to hold secret, private classes at her home after the rules at the university became too restrictive. She invited seven insightful, talented women to participate in the class. At first they were tentative and reserved, but gradually they bonded over discussions of *Lolita*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *A Thousand and One Nights*. They neither draw exact parallels between the texts and their lives nor find them completely foreign. Nafisi observes: “*Lolita* was not a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives.” Nafisi mixes literary analyses in with her observations of the growing oppressive environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran: women are forced to wear the veil at university and eventually separated in class from men. Bombs fall outside while Nafisi tries to conduct class. Nafisi’s determination and devotion to literature shine through, and her book is an absorbing look at primarily Western classics through the eyes of women and men living in a very different culture. Kristine Huntley *Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved*