

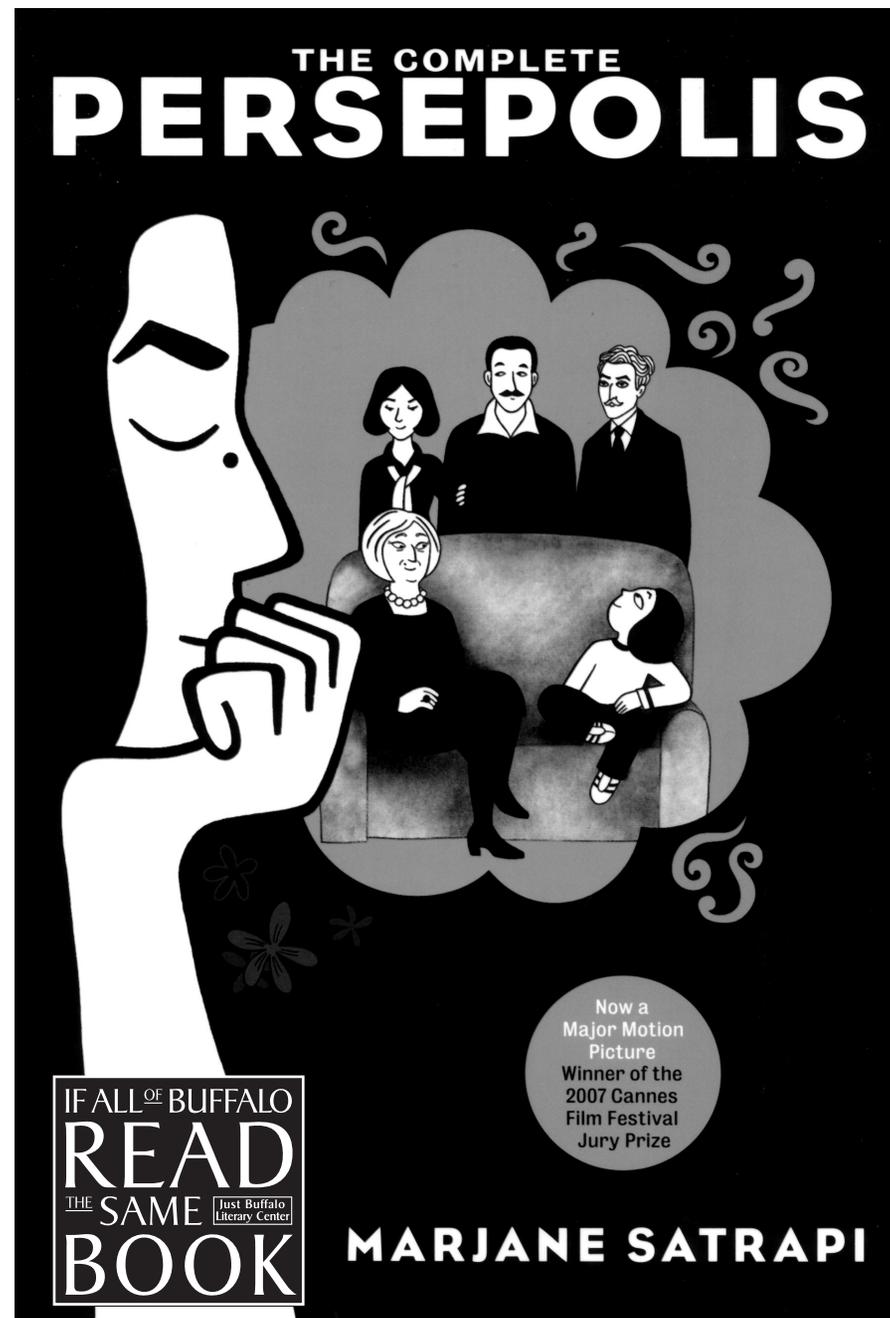
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READER'S GUIDE

PERSEPOLIS

MARJANE SATRAPI



THE COMPLETE
PERSEPOLIS

IF ALL OF BUFFALO
READ
THE SAME Just Buffalo
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BOOK

Now a
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MARJANE SATRAPI

MARJANE SATRAPI

Marjane Satrapi's memoir, *Persepolis*, is a black and white picture book meant to counter the division of our perception of the world into simplistic categories like good and evil, East and West, and believer and infidel. "Nothing is scarier than the people who try to find easy answers to complicated questions," she has said. Her graphic novel is built out of a series of anecdotes—she has called it "a small story, to explain the bigger picture." Her method of first-person testimony—"the way I saw it"—reveals a complicated country at a complicated time.

Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran in 1969 and raised in Tehran. Her parents were progressive intellectuals; her father was an engineer and her mother designed dresses. They had a bourgeois lifestyle—they drove a Cadillac and had a maid—but were also leftists with modern ideas about parenting. Although Iran was governed by dictators for much of Satrapi's life there, she has said that in her house "even if we wanted to buy a sofa, each person had one vote, and my vote counted just as much as my parents'."

Her parents protested the Shah's regime and, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, they protested the fundamentalism of the new Islamic government. Satrapi attended the Lycee Francais in Tehran before and after the fall of the Shah. She was expelled in 1984 for hitting the school principal; her parents sent her to live and study in Vienna, Austria after she criticized a teacher for lying about the political prisoners taken during the Islamic regime.

Satrapi lived in Austria from 1984 until 1988, a period when she struggled to integrate into Western society while a war with Iraq was destroying her home country. She returned to an Iran recovering from eight years of war, and found that the country had become apolitical. "We were so fed up with this eight years war; it was so good that the war was finished. People just wanted to live, just to continue being alive," she has said. But Satrapi, like her female peers, enacted small cultural challenges. "Year by year, in Iran, women show a centimeter more hair, a centimeter less scarf," she has said. "They have this bright pink lipstick, and prop their breasts up as high as they can, and that is their rebellion."



Satrapi studied art in Tehran, married and divorced, then moved to Paris in 1994 and studied illustration in Strasbourg. In 1995, she was given Art Spiegelman's Holocaust comic book, *Maus*, which became a major inspiration for her own graphic novels. After years of rejection of her children's books—she has said she was turned down 180 times—she published *Persepolis* in 1999, a project that took her four years. The book and its sequel, *Persepolis 2*, have been translated into 24 languages. Satrapi points to the storytelling power of images to explain the successful transference of her story to cultures around the world.

"Image is an international language," she has said. "The first writing of the human being was drawing, not writing. That appeared much before the alphabet. And when you draw a situation—someone is scared or angry or happy—it means the same thing in all cultures."

Satrapi has since written several other books that have been translated into English: *Embroideries*, about Iranian women's ideas about sexuality; *Chicken with Plums*, a memoir of her great-uncle Nasser Ali Khan; and a children's book, *Monsters are Afraid of the Moon*. Satrapi co-directed the film version of *Persepolis*, which won the 2007 Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Satrapi's books, which she said will one day chronicle the story of her family in Iran from 1900 until 2040, are a record of a country perpetually misunderstood from the outside and rarely talked about inside. She wrote *Persepolis*, she has said, "because so many people died in my country, because of politics, wars, internal policies. Nobody ever talks about these things. I couldn't live with that idea... So I had to do this book. I cannot leave their story."

PERSIA/IRAN

Persian history is full of stories of invasion and domination. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi dramatizes those sweeping forces in a single frame, labeled “2500 years of tyranny and submission”: “First our own emperors. Then the Arab invasion from the west. Followed by the Mongolian invasion from the east. And finally modern imperialism.”

Persepolis, “city of Persians,” was the name given Iran by the ancient Greeks—for Satrapi it connotes the thousands of years of history that have shaped the modern country. In the twentieth century, Iran was roiled by coups, war and repressive regimes. In 1921, Reza Khan, the commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, marched his army to Tehran and, with England’s strong approval, overthrew the government. Four years later, he was proclaimed Shah of Persia. In the name of modernizing the country, he strengthened the army, called on citizens to wear Western clothing, forbade women to cover themselves with chadors, destroyed mosques, and imprisoned ayatollahs and liberals. He also built roads, schools and airports with profits from the country’s oil he sold to the West.

During World War II, he declared Iran neutral and the Allied forces invaded in order to regain control of a strategic railroad. Reza Khan was exiled and in 1941 he abdicated the throne to his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, later simply called “the Shah.”

In 1951, when the Shah was in his early 30s and in Europe, Mohammed Mossadegh was elected Prime Minister and nationalized the oil industry. Shocked by the loss of private control of an important reserve, the U.S. and Britain backed a coup that pulled Mossadegh from power. That act, Satrapi has said, “killed the dream of democracy, not only in Iran but in the whole region.”

With total power, the Shah led Iran for 26 years, from 1953 until the Islamic revolution in 1979. At first, he was challenged by liberals who backed Mossadegh and Muslim clerics out of Qom, especially Ayatollah Khomeini, who was arrested and exiled. The Shah established a secret police, the Savak, that tortured and killed dissidents and caused much of the intelligentsia to flee. At the same time, he vowed to modernize the nation and establish Western standards of living in ten years.



Panels from *The Complete Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi © 2003, Pantheon Books

By 1978, devout Muslims and liberals started to rebel in public. The Shah’s army shot at unarmed civilians protesting in Qom, beginning a cycle of demonstrations and state violence. In *Shah of Shabs*, Ryszard Kapuscinski summarized the moment: “The Shah left people a choice between Savak and the mullahs. And they chose the mullahs.”

With the Islamic revolution in 1979, fundamentalist Muslims took control of the Iranian government and Ayatollah Khomeini became Supreme Leader. They quickly established leadership “committees” that dictated repressive rules about behavior and dress. They killed the Shah’s supporters, then arrested or executed those who disagreed with their new Islamic regime.

Their rise, Kapuscinski wrote, was an example of the “strongest,” not the best, emerging from hiding after a foiled dictatorship destroyed a country’s brightest minds. “In such circumstances history begins to turn in a tragic, vicious circle from which it can sometimes take a whole epoch to break free.”

Islamic theocracy continues in Iran, despite a period between 1997 and 2005 when the government was led by a reformist president who advocated tolerance. Its newest incarnation emerged with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. In interviews, Satrapi points out that Iranians have become much more secular in the last decade and enjoy some substantial freedoms: there are more women than men in schools; there is a relatively free press. “They are ready for democracy, but they have to fight themselves for democracy,” she has said, drawing a distinction between that and the imposition of democracy attempted by George W. Bush’s administration in Iraq and other Middle Eastern nations.

“Democracy, contrary to what they try to tell us, it’s not a paper that you hang on the wall and then you have a democracy,” she has said. “Democracy is a social evolution.”

QUESTIONS

1. Describe your process of reading *Persepolis*. How is it different than reading a book with just words?
2. What does Marjane discover about the difference between political speech in Vienna compared to political speech in Iran under the Shah? What are the risks and ideas behind political expressions in those different places?
3. What promise does the West seem to hold for Marjane before she leaves Iran? What is the reality she finds once she moves to Europe? Why and how does she move back and forth between cultures?
4. Why does Marjane accuse an innocent man on the street of harassing her in Tehran? What are the repercussions—to him and to her—of that action?
5. Who is a martyr in *Persepolis*?
6. What role does class play in the Iranian culture Satrapi describes? What does it have to do with work, war and education? How is class considered similarly or differently in Vienna?
7. Why is Marjane preoccupied with having a hero in her family when she is small? What defines a hero, for her? What happens to heroes in *Persepolis*?
8. What steps does the Satrapi family take to try to live a “normal” life after the Islamic revolution? What risks do they take to defy the regime, even in small ways?
9. Why does Marjane try to kill herself when she returns to Iran?
10. Describe the bias Marjane encounters in Europe. How do some people in Vienna treat her because she is Iranian? Do you see any instances in which she tries to hide her nationality? Why?

11. Why doesn't Marjane's marriage to Reza succeed? Why does her father support the marriage, even though he knows it will end in divorce?
12. Given that this is a graphic novel, the interactions between the images and the words are essential to understanding the story. Can you see any instances in which text is more important than image in conveying important information? Where image is more important than text? Are there spots where you can't have one without the other?



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