

**BABEL**



**READER'S GUIDE**  
**READING LOLITA**  
**IN TEHRAN**  
**AZAR NAFISI**

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Reading Lolita  
in Tehran

*A Memoir in Books*

AZAR NAFISI



# AZAR NAFISI

Early in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi explains that Tehran is defined for her by what is missing. The city's true past was papered over by the Grand Ayatollah's invented past; veiled women learned to express themselves through their invisible features. For 18 years under the Islamic regime, she seemed always to be retreating from the home she had returned to. "Its absences were more real than its presences," she writes.

Those absences help explain both her emotional and physical relationship to the place. Nafisi has spent nearly as much of her life outside Iran as she has in it. And her engagement with her homeland has always been a process of telling or reading stories that enable her to live with or without it. After she left Iran in 1997, she described her connection to it as a "portable world" she carries with her in her teaching and literary career.

"The only way you can truly, permanently preserve your home is to constantly question and redefine it for yourself," she has said, "to keep it alive inside you."

Nafisi was born in 1955 and was raised in a secular and prominent family known—as her mother boasts in *Reading Lolita*—for contributing to literature and science for 800 years. She describes her childhood Tehran, under the rule of the autocratic Shah, as a "lively and very sensual place" where public freedoms were restricted more than private ones.

From the age of four, she clashed with her mother, Nezhat Nafisi, a woman defined by her controlling manner and her pervasive disappointment. She found solace in her father, Ahmad Nafisi, who showed her that stories are both an escape from the world and a tool for understanding it. She and her father "developed a secret language," she writes in *Things I Have Been Silent About*, her 2008 memoir. "We made up stories to communicate our feelings and demands, and built our own world."

Nafisi left Iran at age 13 and was educated at Swiss and English boarding schools. While she was away, her father, then the mayor of Tehran, was jailed



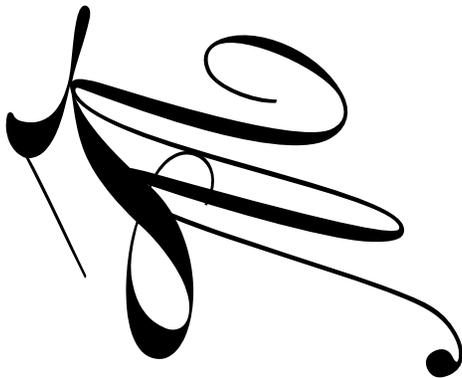
on corruption charges. The same year, 1963, her mother became one of the first female members of the Iranian parliament. Nafisi was able to return for a year during this tumultuous period. She married impulsively and moved to the United States with her husband to study at the University of Oklahoma, where she continued studying after her divorce and earned her Ph.D. in English literature.

Nafisi married her current husband Bijan Naderi in 1977 and returned to teach in Tehran in 1979. Her homecoming coincided with the start of the Islamic Revolution and she found her life and teaching constricted by the often brutal demands of the new clerical order. She taught for two years at the University of Tehran until she was expelled for refusing to wear the veil. In 1987, she took a post at the University of Allameh Tabatabai and taught there until 1995, when she resigned and formed the reading group at the center of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Two years later, she and her family moved to America.

For the past decade, Nafisi has been a faculty member at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. She has written two memoirs and a book-length study of Vladimir Nabokov. She has also become a prominent advocate and commentator on the need for a richer understanding

between Western countries and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, and a vocal supporter of the power of the humanities to encourage such dialogue and self-reflection.

“When you tell your own story, you take control over reality,” she has said. “In Iran, reality had power over us. And one way of negating that control was by telling our own stories.”



# AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The period between 1979 and 1997—when Azar Nafisi lived in Tehran—was a defining time in the history of modern Iran. Her arrival and departure intersected with the beginning and end of two profoundly oppressive decades when the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution were codified into a system of government.

In that period, a conservative interpretation of proper religious devotion shaped the constitution and redefined what was acceptable in terms of education, dress, speech, and personal and public behavior.

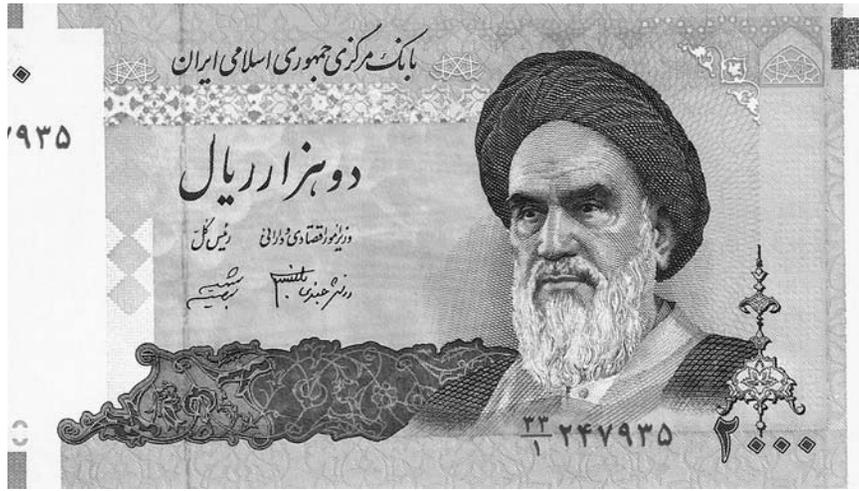
Rumblings of the revolution began a year before Nafisi’s return, when people began to demonstrate against the autocratic and corrupt rule of the Shah. (Nafisi herself participated in some of these protests while she was in Norman, Oklahoma.) Although diverse groups united to fight the Shah’s rule—Marxists, Leftists, Islamists—theocrats led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini eventually claimed the mantle of the revolution. After gaining power, Khomeini’s supporters began to execute members of the once-allied groups.

On April 1, 1979, Iranians voted in a national referendum to turn the country into an Islamic Republic. In December, the country adopted a theocratic constitution and Khomeini became Supreme Leader.

The way of life created out of that upheaval is at the center of Nafisi’s book. “The regime in Iran is so arbitrary,” she has said. “You don’t know what you are guilty of. One day you might go out in the street wearing lipstick or with your hair showing, and they don’t do anything to you. The next day you might be complying and not wearing lipstick and they’ll take you. The thing that keeps the fear going is that people never know where they stand.”

The first eight years of the post-revolutionary period also corresponded with the Iran-Iraq war that fortified the Islamic regime’s internal power and left up to 1 million Iranians dead.

After the war, between 1991 and 1997, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani focused on rebuilding the economy but not disturbing the power of the ruling clerics or the constricting social and nationalist standards of the revolution.



Ayatollah Khomeini as he appears on Iranian currency.

When it was published in 2003, Nafisi's book was criticized by some Iranians for ending with her departure in 1997, the same year the moderate reformist Mohammad Khatami began the first of his two four-year terms as president.

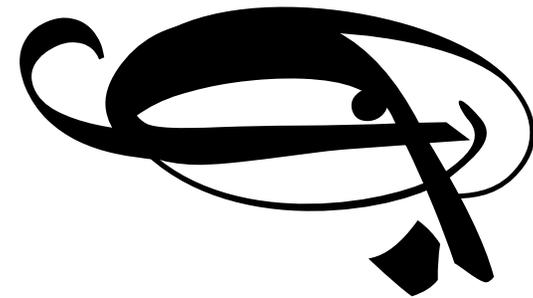
Khatami sought to introduce the rule of law, democracy and an open political process into the republic and he encouraged dialogue across nations. Most of his efforts to change the structure of the government were ultimately unsuccessful because the Ayatollah-appointed Guardian Council would not support him. But his election, and the election of reformists after him, "represented titanic public rejection of the suffocation Nafisi made so vivid" in her memoir, according to a 2004 *Washington Post* article on the book's Iranian reception. The article also outlines the measure of "personal space" Iranians got back under Khatami: lovers could hold hands in the street, satellite television was widely accepted (though nominally illegal), the Islamic dress code for women was relaxed.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 was a dramatic shift back toward conservatism, but his contested reelection in 2009, and the widespread protests that followed, revealed the willingness of the Iranian people—especially young people and women—to speak out against a regime that would stifle their liberties and, apparently, steal an election.

The regime responded with violence against protestors and created show trials for its critics, actions that reminded Nafisi of the start of the revolution three decades ago. "Such events have never been aberrations or accidents in the history of the Islamic Republic but stones on which its foundations were built," she wrote in the *London Times*.

But the protests and violence that echoed the start of the regime this time seemed to indicate its weakness. The protests appeared to gain momentum after each time they were violently suppressed, Nafisi wrote, "creating greater divisions and discord within the regime itself."

"The Iranian people have shown the regime and the world their desire for a dignified life, one that can only be fulfilled in an open and pluralistic society," she wrote. "Force and violence cannot crush the desire of a people to live freely and with dignity."



# QUESTIONS

1. In the opening paragraph of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi refers to the texts her class will be reading as “harmless works of fiction.” How does the idea of “harmless” fiction set the tone for the book? Where is that statement challenged?
2. Nafisi notes that “what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth.” At what moments do her students find the “epiphany of truth” about life outside Tehran—or their own lives in it—by reading fiction? When do others confuse fiction with reality, and at what cost?
3. The magician reminds Nafisi that she is gradually withdrawing from the world. Why is this kind of withdrawal dangerous? Why does the magician do it and what does he lose?
4. Nafisi writes that “more than anything else” the “arbitrariness” of teaching under the Islamic regime “had become unbearable.” What are some of the regime’s arbitrary actions and how do they impact people’s everyday existence? How is such arbitrariness terrifying? How is it absurd? Why are arbitrary actions so oppressive?
5. Sheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights* “fashions her universe... through imagination and reflection.” How do the characters in Nafisi’s book also use this tactic in order to survive? When does imagination fall short in helping them deal with the regime?
6. What are some ways that personal and private actions intersect with the public/political world in the Tehran that Nafisi describes? How does that intersection interfere with friendships, love, appearances, sex and work?
7. Throughout the book, Nafisi emphasizes that Ayatollah Khomeini created a “myth” of a country to fit the “illusory past” he understood had been stolen from him. How does he create this myth through language, including propaganda? How is his imaginative creation the same or different than that of the characters in or writers of the novels Nafisi’s students discuss?
8. Describe some of the different ideas about the veil expressed by Nafisi, Mahshid, Mr. Nyazi and others. How is it both so important and “just a piece of cloth” and how does its omnipresence change its meaning for everyone?
9. Nafisi returns to the idea that all of Iran’s population is complicit in its destruction. She writes, “The worst crime committed by totalitarian mindsets is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes.” Where do you see examples of this complicity? Is she too harsh on herself and her fellow citizens?
10. Nafisi declares “*Gatsby* was the right choice” to teach at the University of Tehran in the midst of the revolution. What, in her conversations with Mr. Bahri and during the book’s trial, makes it clear it is the “right” choice?
11. Does Nafisi set an example for her students when she decides to leave Iran for America? Is it a positive or negative example? Why?



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