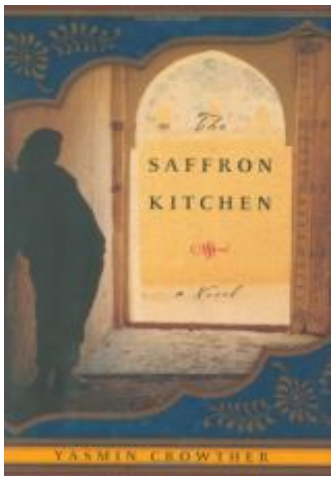
The Saffron Kitchen

by Yasmin Crowther



About the Book

Born to an Iranian mother and British father, Yasmin Crowther makes a unique and impressive debut onto the literary scene with her remarkable novel about culture, family, and identity. **The Saffron Kitchen** is a poignant and timely story about one woman?s struggle to belong to more than one world and how that pull between identities affects a family for generations to come.

Richmond Hill in London is a far cry from where Maryam Mazar was born and raised, the little village of Mazareh in Iran, but this affluent suburb is where she has lived for more than forty years. She has what seems a good and comfortable life, with a devoted husband, Edward, and loving daughter, Sara. But when Maryam?s last living sister dies and her twelve-year-old nephew, Saeed, comes from Iran to live with them, his arrival triggers a series of dramatic events, re-opening a wound that Maryam can no longer ignore. She decides there is only one way to heal: she must return home.

With her husband?s reluctant blessing, Maryam travels alone to Mazareh to face both the dreams and the demons of her past. Mazareh is in many ways a harsh place, with mud dwellings and little in the way of creature comforts. Yet when Maryam arrives, she begins to feel a sense of peace and wholeness, a connection with the earth, that has been missing for forty years. And perhaps most important, the first love of her life, Ali, her wealthy father?s former assistant, is here, awaiting her return. The healing has begun.

Maryam was a girl born before her time, independent and strong-willed, refusing to follow the traditional path for women: marriage and domestic life. Forced to leave Iran after her father disowned her for shaming the family through a misunderstood encounter with Ali, Maryam nevertheless has a powerful bond with this place and its people. But now she must decide if the life that includes her past will now become her future.

Back in London, both Sara and Edward are feeling confused and angry that Maryam seems to have no impending plans

to return. How could she abandon her family? When Maryam writes and asks her to visit, Sara feels she must go. She arrives feeling bitter and resentful that her mother is acting as if their life in London is meaningless, especially when she sees Ali and her mother together. But as Maryam introduces Sara to the people and places of her childhood and finally reveals the shocking details of her forced departure, Sara begins to understand her mother in a way she never could before. In the end, Sara comes to accept that only by letting her mother go, can she finally get her mother back.

Exploring the themes of displacement and exile, of families struggling to embrace more than one culture, of longing and despair, **The Saffron Kitchen** is ultimately a love story, not only between a woman and a man, but of a woman for her homeland.

Discussion Guide

1. The Middle East is very much in the news these days, and perhaps never before has it been more on the mind of Westerners. What issues did **The Saffron Kitchen** bring up for you, and did it change or influence your idea of Iran in any way?

2. Maryam says she hits Saeed to make him strong, just as her own father hit her as a girl. Do you believe this? Why or why not? Discuss the reasons you think Maryam feels so angry at Saeed. What does he represent to her? Why do you think some abused people grow up to continue that abuse, while others vow never to repeat the ?sins of their fathers??

3. When Maryam returns home (p. 28) after taking Sara to the hospital, she says to herself, ?I should never have left.? What is she referring to? The hospital? Iran? And what does she mean by this? How does her statement foreshadow what happens in the rest of the novel?

4. What is the moral of the Gossemarbart story and how does it relate to Maryam?s own story? Discuss the symbolism of the stone woman and its significance in the novel.

5. ?Your father was kind to us before his death,? Hassan tells Maryam upon her return (p. 116). Was there any good in this man? Was he a product of his time and traditions? What makes a man like Maryam?s father turn out the way he does in contrast with a man like Doctor Ahlavi?

6. Sara and Saeed form a strong connection with one another. Talk about the things they have in common, the things that make them different, and how they might derive comfort from one another.

7. Farnoosh, Hassan?s unmarried daughter, says to Maryam, ?You think [having your family is] enough? When you leave yours behind? Please don?t patronize me? (p. 128). Can you explain Farnoosh?s point of view? Do you see Maryam as selfish? Why or why not?

8. ?For each freedom we choose, we must give up another,? Maryam says (p. 128). What does she mean in terms of her own life? Do you agree or disagree, and why?

9. What do you think Maryam wants for Sara? Does Sara have a right to be angry at her mother? How would you feel, as a daughter or son, if your mother left you to return to the place of her birth?

10. Where does Maryam?s love for Iran end and her love for Ali begin? Are they separate?

11. Discuss how the author uses the color saffron as a symbol throughout the novel. What does it represent, to Maryam, to Sara, to Saeed?

12. Think about the different worlds to which you belong. Consider the transitions between these worlds and discuss how navigating these transitions affects your life.

Author Bio

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