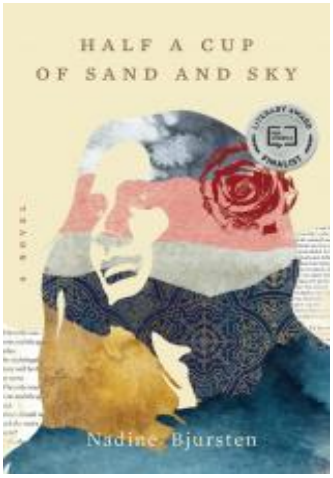
Half a Cup of Sand and Sky

by Nadine Bjursten



About the Book

A finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY is a moving portrait of one woman?s search for love and belonging cast against a nuanced backdrop of political turmoil.

It is 1977, and the anti-shah protests at Tehran University are intensifying, but Amineh is not like her peers who want a say in the future of their country. Her thoughts are on the beautiful literature of another era and her past of rose harvests and Rumi poetry evenings under the desert sky. A chance encounter with Farzad, an opposition leader and disarmament activist, will thrust her into a life she didn?t ask for and didn?t want. Nobody wanted the tyranny that is quickly turning worse than the tyranny it replaced. But maybe Amineh has been looking at her life all wrong. Maybe the thing she is seeking is not in the past at all.

Discussion Guide

1. What does family and home mean to Amineh? Discuss her struggle for acceptance and love. How does her view of herself evolve over the course of the novel? How does the book she is writing reflect her struggle?

2. The desert village, Qamsar, where Amineh spent her childhood, has long been known for rose oil production. How does this setting shape Amineh as a character? What impact does it have on her life in Tehran and her subsequent homes? What does the rose symbolize?

3. Discuss how the ever-changing politics of Iran affects each of the characters in the novel. Were you familiar with Iran?s political history prior to reading this book? What were you surprised to learn? Are there any parallels with the political history of the United States? Another country?

4. Consider the novel?s depiction of Islam, including that of the pious character of Jalalod-Din and his discussion of jeh?d at the end of Chapter 75. Is the novel?s portrayal of Islam different from or similar to how you feel it is portrayed in Western movies and other media? Did it surprise you that mystic poets are so much a part of Iranian culture?

5. What is the significance of cooking for Amineh? Consider the idea of *let?fat*, the tender touch. What does it mean as far as preparing a meal goes, and does there exist a similar notion in the West? Was there a meal scene that you particularly enjoyed?

6. How much did you know about nuclear arms control and disarmament activism before reading this book? Did anything surprise you? How does Amineh?s view of Farzad?s activism change over the course of the novel?

7. How does Amineh?s guilt over her parents? death shape her vision of the world or her actions? Would her character be different if she had not lost her parents? How did other characters experience loss in the novel? Does guilt enter into their experience? How did the loss change them?

8. Did you highlight or bookmark any passages from the book? Did you have a favorite quote or quotes? If so, share, and explain why it caught your attention.

9. Who was your favorite character? What character did you empathize with the most, and how did they change by the end of the novel? Were there any characters you disliked? Why?

10. What is different about Amineh?s relationship with Farzad and her relationship with Patrik? In your opinion, were Amineh and Farzad suited to each other? Why or why not? How do you feel about the choices Amineh made?

11. How did you feel about the ending of the novel? Do you have any lingering questions about the novel?

12. Would you recommend this book to someone? Why or why not (or with what caveats)? What kind of reader would most enjoy this book?

Author Bio

Nadine Bjursten grew up north of New York City in Garrison and now lives in Lund, Sweden, with her husband and twin daughters. She is the former editor of the Washington, DC-based journal *Arms Control Today*. HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY, a finalist of the Pen/Bellwether Prize for Fiction, is her first novel.

Critical Praise

?Brilliantly layered and beautifully written, this PEN America finalist is both a searing character portrait and an incisive examination of Iranian history, which is at once moving and illuminating.?

Half a Cup of Sand and Sky

by Nadine Bjursten

Publication Date: October 13, 2023
Genres: Fiction, Women's Fiction
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: Alder House Books
ISBN-10: 9198861611
ISBN-13: 9789198861617