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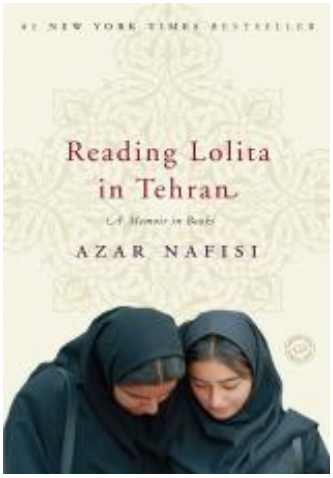
Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books

by Azar Nafisi



About the Book

In this celebrated modern classic, a former teacher in revolutionary Iran tells the extraordinary true story of the women who risked their lives to study Western literature in her living room.

Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Azar Nafisi, a bold and inspired teacher, secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics.

Some of the women came from conservative and religious families. Others were progressive and secular. Some had spent time in jail. They were shy and uncomfortable at first, unaccustomed to being asked to speak their minds. But soon they removed their veils and began to speak more freely --- their stories intertwining with the novels they were reading by Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov.

As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, as fundamentalists seized hold of the universities and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the women in Nafisi?s living room spoke not only of the books they were reading but also about themselves, their dreams and disappointments.

Azar Nafisi?s luminous masterwork gives us a rare glimpse, from the inside, of women?s lives in revolutionary Iran. READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN is a work of great passion and poetic beauty, a remarkable exploration of resilience in the face of tyranny, and a celebration of the liberating power of literature.

Discussion Guide

1. On her first day teaching at the University of Tehran, Azar Nafisi began class with the questions, "What should fiction accomplish? Why should anyone read at all?" What are your own answers? How does fiction force us to question what we often take for granted?

2. Yassi adores playing with words, particularly with Nabokov's fanciful linguistic creation *upsilamba* (18). What does the word *upsilamba* mean to you?

3. In what ways had Ayatollah Khomeini "turned himself into a myth" for the people of Iran (246)? Also, discuss the recurrent theme of complicity in the book: that the Ayatollah, the stern philosopher-king, "did to us what we allowed him to do" (28).

4. Compare attitudes toward the veil held by men, women and the government in the Islamic Republic of Iran. How was Nafisi's grandmother's choice to wear the chador marred by the political significance it had gained? (192) Also, describe Mahshid's conflicted feelings as a Muslim who already observed the veil but who nevertheless objected to its political enforcement.

5. In discussing the frame story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Nafisi mentions three types of women who fell victim to the king's "unreasonable rule" (19). How relevant are the actions and decisions of these fictional women to the lives of the women in Nafisi's private class?

6. Explain what Nafisi means when she calls herself and her beliefs increasingly "irrelevant" in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Compare her way of dealing with her irrelevance to her magician's self-imposed exile. What do people who "lose their place in the world" do to survive, both physically and creatively?

7. During the Gatsby trial Zarrin charges Mr. Nyazi with the inability to "distinguish fiction from reality" (128). How does Mr. Nyazi's conflation of the fictional and the real relate to theme of the blind censor? Describe similar instances within a democracy like the United States when art was censored for its "dangerous" impact upon society.

8. Nafisi writes: "It was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile" (145). How do her conceptions of home conflict with those of her husband, Bijan, who is reluctant to leave Tehran? Also, compare Mahshid's feeling that she "owes" something to Tehran and belongs there to Mitra and Nassrin's desires for freedom and escape. Discuss how the changing and often discordant influences of memory, family, safety, freedom, opportunity and duty define our sense of home and belonging.

9. Fanatics like Mr. Ghomi, Mr. Nyazi and Mr. Bahri consistently surprised Azar by displaying absolute hatred for Western literature ? a reaction she describes as a "venom uncalled for in relation to works of fiction." (195) What are their motivations? Do you, like Nafisi, think that people like Mr. Ghomi attack because they are afraid of what they don't understand? Why is ambiguity such a dangerous weapon to them?

10. The confiscation of one's life by another is the root of Humbert's sin against Lolita. How did Khomeini become Iran's solipsizer? Discuss how Sanaz, Nassrin, Azin and the rest of the girls are part of a "generation with no past." (76)

11. Nafisi teaches that the novel is a sensual experience of another world which appeals to the reader's capacity for compassion. Do you agree that "empathy is at the heart of the novel"? How has this book affected your understanding of

the impact of the novel?

Author Bio

Azar Nafisi is the critically acclaimed author of READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN, a long-running #1 *New York Times* bestseller published in 32 languages that is now a major motion picture, and THINGS I'VE BEEN SILENT ABOUT, also a *New York Times* bestseller. A fellow at Johns Hopkins University?s School of Advanced International Studies, she has taught at Oxford University and several universities in Tehran.

Critical Praise

"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."

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