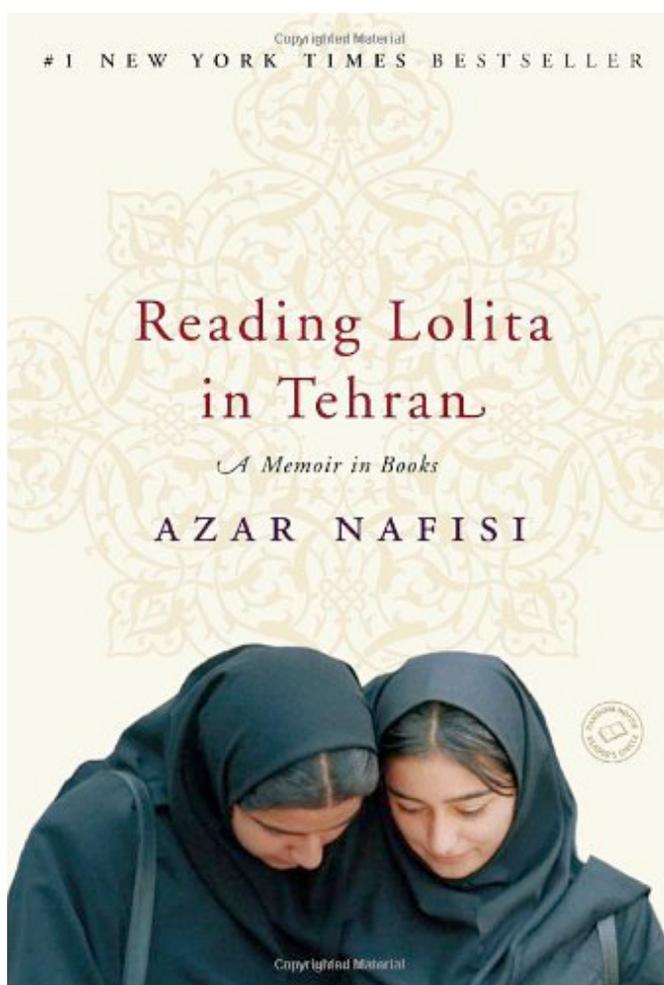


Understanding Azar in Tehran...

10:12 PM PDT, May 3, 2009

Occasionally you can become very excited about something that you've found, particularly when it comes as a total surprise to you, just a chance discovery, and it's not something that you had dreamt about, pursued or even fought for. Azar Nafisi's 2003 memoir, [*Reading Lolita in Tehran*](#), is such a find and I must remind you that a 67-year-old engineer is writing this commentary. I choose to categorize myself in this way because it only broadens and deepens how richly Ms. Nafisi's words have affected me.

I found her memoir among the resale items in Lois's Book Place; I hadn't researched recommended reading lists for it but



I had seen the title before. My interest in reading and writing about Iran and the Middle East came some thirty-five years after I'd lived and worked in Tehran, when my memories of people there were being assaulted by the stereotypes of prejudice after 9/11. At the time, I wasn't sure for whom I was writing a novel or why but her book has just provided me with the answer. This is a memoir of a Muslim woman, who was educated in Europe and the United States from 1968 to 1979. She then returned to the Islamic Republic of Iran as a professor of Western

Literature at the University of Tehran, where she bravely advocated on behalf of Iran's intellectuals, its youth, its women and especially its young women. What she taught me about writing is that *"the best fiction always forced us to question what we took for granted. It questioned traditions and expectations when they seemed too immutable."*

Using her skills as both teacher and writer, Professor Nafisi took me through a complete course in Western literature with Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen in tow, authors that I had never read, and I found this experience to be quite delightful. She has given me insight into the talents of these writers that made their works universal and timeless. I was taken in by her sense of understanding across cultures and her desire to illuminate issues still needing resolution in the Middle East. In her hands, these literary tools have proven to be remarkable indicators of the human condition beyond any political or religious measures. I have already bought my copy of [The Great Gatsby](#) and copies of [Lolita](#) and [Invitation to a Beheading](#) are on their way. [One Thousand and One Arabian Nights](#) will most likely be next. I find her perspectives to be extremely exciting. Her personal stories are all about genuine people dealing with fundamental human rights issues. Mind you, Professor Nafisi did this exceptional feat as she was updating us to the realities of a revolutionary Iran, using the collective skills of these authors to bring understanding of their words to both her Persian students and to me. The relevancy of each author's words to the human rights issues that she, other teachers and the other women faced each day in Iran was profound. In 1981, she was expelled from Tehran University for refusing to wear the mandatory Islamic veil, with obstinacy that was similar to her grandmother's refusal to take off the veil when Reza Shah mandated its removal in 1936 as a sign of a reduction in clergy power. The re-imposition of this controversial symbol of modernization now signified the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the revolution and was [a step backward for all](#)

[women](#). Nafisi wouldn't return to teaching until 1987 but the cruelties of the War with Iraq and the Islamic regime's holy battle against its internal enemies would continue to add to her sense of loss and isolation.

She continued to write and work within the system for another ten years and earned national respect and international recognition in the process. In 1997, she was able to return to the US to make her home here and to teach courses on the relation between culture and politics, a subject that she has lived and deeply understands, at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. While she left Iran, Iran did not leave her. Visits to [her web pages](#) will provide you with details of her current activities and other information that will add to your understanding of the Muslim world and her personal journey. There is tremendous depth in what she writes and in everything that she has to say. Her recently published family memoir, [*Things I've Been Silent About: Memories*](#), will give you even more insight into the origins of this remarkable woman.

Bob

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