

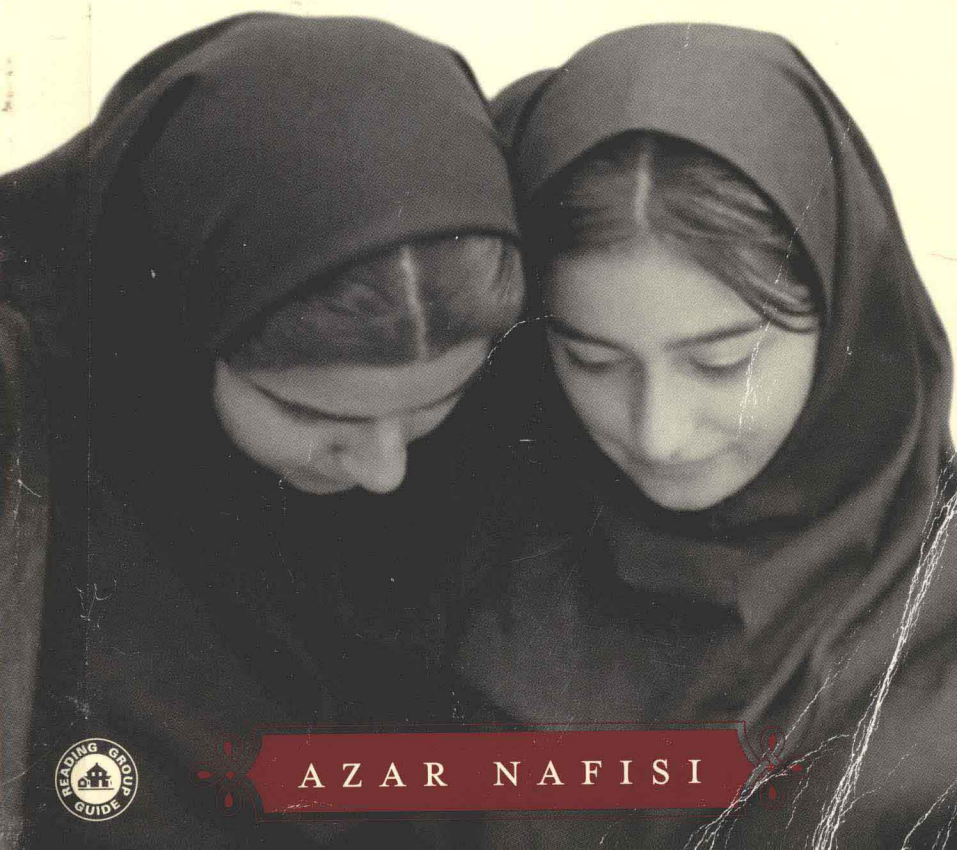


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"Remarkable . . . an eloquent brief on the trans-
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READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN

A Memoir in Books



AZAR NAFISI

Reading Lolita in Tehran

A MEMOIR IN BOOKS

Azar Nafisi



RANDOM HOUSE

TRADE PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK

2004 Random House Trade Paperback Edition
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Published in the United States by Random House Trade Paperbacks, an imprint of
The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York,
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This work was originally published in hardcover by Random House, an imprint of
The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2003.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Reading Lolita in Tehran : a memoir in books / Azar Nafisi
p. cm.

ISBN 0-8129-7106-X

1. Nafisi, Azar. 2. English teachers—Iran—Biography. 3. English literature—Study and teaching—Iran. 4. American literature—Study and teaching—Iran.
5. Women—Books and reading—Iran. 6. Books and reading—Iran.
7. Group reading—Iran. I. Title.

PE64.N34 A3 2003 820.9—dc21 [B] 2002036724

Printed in the United States of America
Random House website address: www.atrandom.com

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

Book design by J. K. Lambert

PRAISE FOR
READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN

"Resonant and deeply affecting . . . An eloquent brief on the transformative powers of fiction—on the refuge from ideology that art can offer to those living under tyranny, and art's affirmative and subversive faith in the voice of the individual."

—MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *The New York Times*

"[A] vividly braided memoir . . . Anguished and glorious."

—CYNTHIA OZICK, *The New Republic*

"Certain books by our most talented essayists . . . carry inside their covers the heat and struggle of a life's central choice being made and the price being paid, while the writer tells us about other matters, and leaves behind a path of sadness and sparkling loss. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is such a book."

—MONA SIMPSON, *The Atlantic Monthly*

"A poignant, searing tale about the secret ways Iranian women defy the regime. . . . [Nafisi] makes you want to rush back to all these books to experience the hidden aspects she's elucidated."

—*Salon*

"A quietly magnificent book . . . [Nafisi's] passion is irresistible."

—*LA Weekly*

“Azar Nafisi’s memoir makes a good case for reading the classics of Western literature no matter where you are. . . . [Her] perspective on her students’ plight, the ongoing struggle of Iranian citizens, and her country’s violent transformation into an Islamic state will provide valuable insights to anyone interested in current international events.”

—HEATHER HEWETT, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“An intimate memoir of life under a repressive regime and a celebration of the vitality of literature. . . . As rich and profound as the novels Nafisi teaches.”

—*The Miami Herald*

“An inspiring account of an insatiable desire for intellectual freedom.”

—*USA Today*

“Transcends categorization as memoir, literary criticism or social history, though it is superb as all three. . . . Nafisi has produced an original work on the relationship between life and literature.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Nafisi’s passion for books is infectious, and her description of the effect of the revolution on its people is unforgettable.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“[A] sparkling memoir . . . A spirited tribute both to the classics of world literature and to resistance against oppression.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Nafisi artfully intertwines her own coming-of-age in pre-Revolutionary Tehran with the daily frustrations of her pupils. . . . [She] relates her girls’ moving stories with great sympathy.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"[Nafisi] reminds us why we read in the first place."

—*Newsday*

"As timely as it is well-written. . . . As the world seems to further divide itself into them and us, Nafisi reminds her readers of the folly of thinking in black and white."

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Readers will have a new appreciation for the worn Nabokov and James titles on their bookshelves after reading Nafisi's engaging memoir."

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Nafisi's writing has painterly qualities. . . . She is able to capture a moment and describe it with ease and melancholy. . . . *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is much more than a literary memoir; it becomes a tool for teaching us how to construe literature in a new, more meaningful way."

—*Library Journal*

"Brilliant . . . So much is right with this book, if not with this world."

—*The Boston Globe*

"I was enthralled and moved by Azar Nafisi's account of how she defied, and helped others to defy, radical Islam's war against women. Her memoir contains important and properly complex reflections about the ravages of theocracy, about thoughtfulness, and about the ordeals of freedom—as well as a stirring account of the pleasures and deepening of consciousness that result from an encounter with great literature and with an inspired teacher."

—SUSAN SONTAG

"A memoir about teaching Western literature in revolutionary Iran, with profound and fascinating insights into both. A masterpiece."

—BERNARD LEWIS, author of *What Went Wrong?*

"Anyone who has ever belonged to a book group must read this book. Azar Nafisi takes us into the vivid lives of eight women who must meet in secret to explore the forbidden fiction of the west. It is at once a celebration of the power of the novel and a cry of outrage at the reality in which these women are trapped. The ayatollahs don't know it, but Nafisi is one of the heroes of the Islamic Republic."

—GERALDINE BROOKS, author of *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Year of Wonders*

"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."

—JACKI LYDEN, author of *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*



PHOTO: LILI IRAVANI

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AZAR NAFISI is a professor at Johns Hopkins University. She won a fellowship from Oxford and taught English literature at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University and the University of Allameh Tabatabai in Iran. She was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil and left Iran for America in 1997. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Republic*, has appeared on countless radio and television programs, and is the author of *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and two children. Visit her website at <http://dialogueproject.sais-jhu.edu>.

READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN

IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER, NEZHAT NAFISI

FOR MY FATHER, AHMAD NAFISI,

AND MY FAMILY: BIJAN, NEGAR AND DARA NADERI

To whom do we tell what happened on the
Earth, for whom do we place everywhere huge
Mirrors in the hope that they will be filled up
And will stay so?

Czeslaw Milosz, "Annalena"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Aspects of characters and events in this story have been changed mainly to protect individuals, not just from the eye of the censor but also from those who read such narratives to discover who's who and who did what to whom, thriving on and filling their own emptiness through others' secrets. The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful, but I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves, changing and interchanging facets of their lives so that their secrets are safe.

ABOUT THE TYPE

This book was set in Bembo, a typeface based on an old-style Roman face that was used for Cardinal Bembo's tract *De Aetna* in 1495. Bembo was cut by Francisco Griffo in the early sixteenth century. The Lanston Monotype Company of Philadelphia brought the well-proportioned letterforms of Bembo to the United States in the 1930s.

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PART I

Lolita

I

In the fall of 1995, after resigning from my last academic post, I decided to indulge myself and fulfill a dream. I chose seven of my best and most committed students and invited them to come to my home every Thursday morning to discuss literature. They were all women—to teach a mixed class in the privacy of my home was too risky, even if we were discussing harmless works of fiction. One persistent male student, although barred from our class, insisted on his rights. So he, Nima, read the assigned material, and on special days he would come to my house to talk about the books we were reading.

I often teasingly reminded my students of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and asked, Which one of you will finally betray me? For I am a pessimist by nature and I was sure at least one would turn against me. Nassrin once responded mischievously, You yourself told us that in the final analysis we are our own betrayers, playing Judas to our own Christ. Manna pointed out that I was no Miss Brodie, and they, well, they were what they were. She reminded me of a warning I was fond of repeating: *do not*, under *any* circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth. Yet I suppose that if I were to go against my own recommendation and choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would not be *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or even *1984* but perhaps Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or better yet, *Lolita*.

A couple of years after we had begun our Thursday-morning seminars, on the last night I was in Tehran, a few friends and students came to say good-bye and to help me pack. When we had deprived the house of all its items, when the objects had vanished and the colors