

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 Allameh Tabatabai University 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*, 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.

(litlovers.com)

Author Interview by Barnes and Noble

Q. What was the book that most influenced your life?

A. Nafisi: This is an almost impossible question! If I have to answer it, I would say *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, especially its frame story about the cuckolded King whose kingdom is on the verge of annihilation by his decision to wed a virgin every night and kill her in the morning, thus avenging himself on womankind. His murderous hand is finally stayed by the wise and beautiful Shahrzad, who offers herself as his bride and keeps him entranced for one thousand and one nights by her stories until he is finally cured.

To me -- as to many of my nationality and age -- this is one of those stories one seems to have been born with. I think I heard it first when I was about four, and my father each night would choose to tell me a story from the treasure trove of Persian Classical literature, and the last time I read it was for a private class I had with seven of my female students in 1995.

I love Shahrzad's tale, because like all great works of imagination, it is simple and yet profound, opening so many windows to the luminous worlds hidden in the depth of what we call everyday reality. To me this story contains a hidden theme -- old and timeless -- about the power of stories to reshape and redefine reality. It reminds me of what Vladimir Nabokov called the third eye of imagination, helping us to see and envision the world and ourselves through fresh and new eyes.

(barnesandnoble.com)

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Reviews

“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*

“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

(*randomhouse.com*)

Further Reading

Things I've Been Silent About by Azar Nafisi

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

Falling Leaves : The Memoir of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter by Adeline Yen Mah

Midnight's Children : A Novel by Salman Rushdie

Infidel by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Reading Lolita in Tehran

By Azar Nafisi

Possible Discussion Questions

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?

(randomhouse.com)