

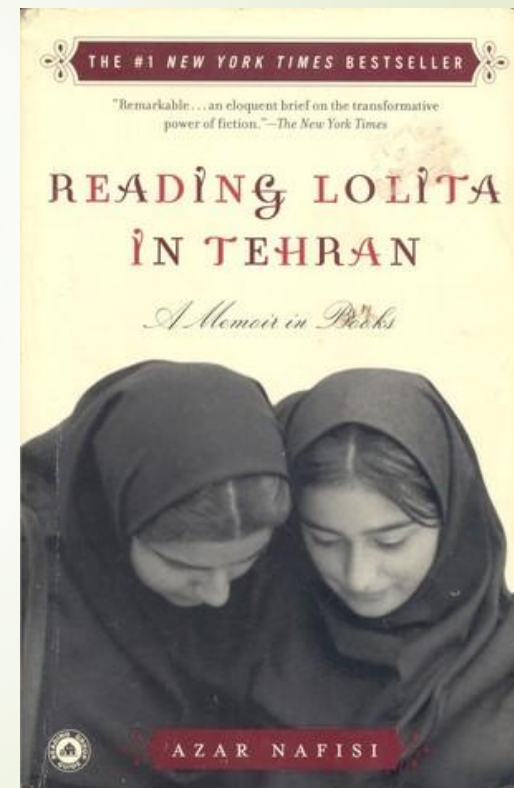
“Reading Lolita in Tehran” by Azar Nafisi


Chinese University of Hong Kong,
University General Education Program
Book Talk

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By Arthur Lau, City University of New York

alau@lagcc.cuny.edu





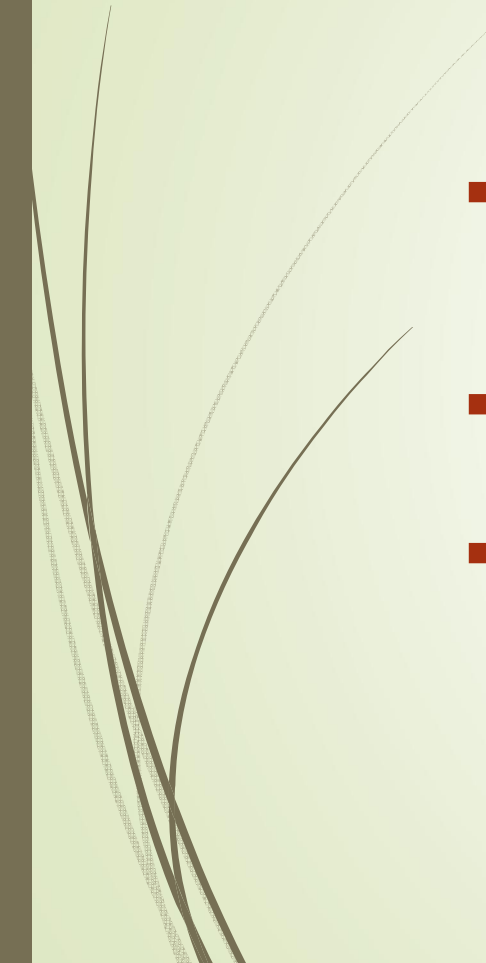
Why study this book?

- in response to City University of New York's Pathways (General Education) requirements

- ▶ - Individual and Society
- ▶ - U. S. Experience in its Diversity
- ▶ - Scientific World
- ▶ - Creative Expression
- ▶ - **World Cultures & Global Issues**



Azar Nafisi and her 7 Students

- ▶ An autobiography of Nafisi's life and work from 1995 to 1997, including flashbacks to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War
 - ▶ Meeting every Thursday to discuss Western literature, including controversial and banned works
 - ▶ A gesture of defiance and self discovery
- 



- ▶ “Reading Lolita in Tehran” has been chosen as one of the 11 Must-Read Books By Muslim Authors
- ▶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/books-by-muslim-authors_us_5695689ee4b09dbb4bacf2de



Timeline of Azar Nafisi, “Reading Lolita in Tehran”


- ▶ 1925 to 1941, 1941 to 1979 – The Pahlavi Dynasty
 - ▶ Coronation HIM Mohamad Reza Shah Pahlavi, HIM Farah Pahlavi
 - ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctyFuumYE5Q>
 - ▶ Iran before 1979
 - ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF47rrHd7wo>
- ▶ January 1978 – Iranian Revolution begins; Shah Pahlavi escapes in exile

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- ▶ February 1979 – Iranian Revolution ends; new regime headed by Ayatollah Khomeini
 - ▶ Iranian Revolution 1979 (Imam Khomeini Arrived in Iran)
 - ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ipse9sPfvC>
 - ▶ November 4, 1979 – January 20, 1981 – U. S. Embassy hostage situation (movie Argo)

- ▶ 1981 – Nafisi expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil

- ▶ Hijab, niqab and burka



- 
- 1994 – Wins Teaching Fellowship at Oxford University (Study/Work/Research in England)
 - 1995 – Nafisi resigns from U of Allameh Tabatabai, and starts the secret reading group
 - 1997 – Leaves Tehran; packing, looking at the two photographs (p. 4)
 - Now teaching at Johns Hopkins University
 - Nafisi interviewed, talking about her feelings of being forced to wear the veil



Techniques of writing autobiography –

- ▶ Factual recollection of historical events
 - ▶ Linear or non-linear sequence of narration
 - ▶ Usually from 1st person p o v
 - ▶ Sometimes using diaries or journals to take notes
- ▶ Creative reconstruction of dialog
- ▶ Emotional, critical commentary
- ▶ Artistic, literary enrichment of the language

How to read biography?

- 1. Apply historical background knowledge
- 2. Write notes in the margin, highlight, underline, etc.
- 3. Identify the story arcs and decide what to focus on
- 4. Visualize the sights and sounds of the characters, scenes and the events



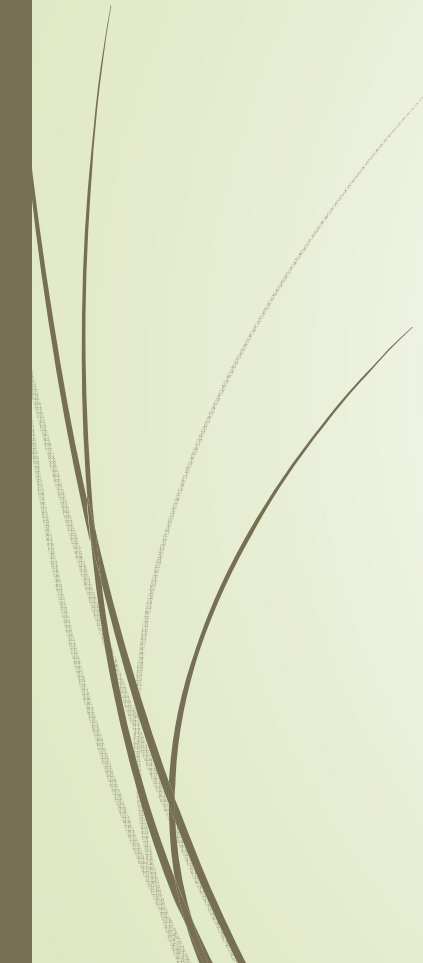



“Reading Lolita in Tehran” – Story Arcs

- ▶ Historical, political events in Tehran
- ▶ The lives of the teacher and her 7 students, and how they relate to the books that they read
- ▶ Nafisi’s analysis and critique of various literary works



Structure of the Book – 4 Chapters

- ▶ “Lolita,” published in 1955, by Vladimir Nabokov (Russian American writer)
 - ▶ “The Great Gatsby,” published in 1925, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (American writer)
 - ▶ Henry James (1843 – 1946), American writer, famous for imaginative use of point of view, interior monologue and unreliable narrators
 - ▶ Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), English writer, e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*. A pioneering author in woman’s literature
- 



The author's motivation:

Nafisi wants to bring the monumental works in Western literature to her students, to encourage them to find ways to relate to these works.

Feminism in the Muslim world?



Use the **Reader's Guide** at the End of
the Book to Preview

Knowing what questions to ask


Knowing what to look for



Examples of Nafisi's writing, getting to have a "taste" of her language




Part 1 - Lolita



Nafisi is nervous about her book club (p. 3)

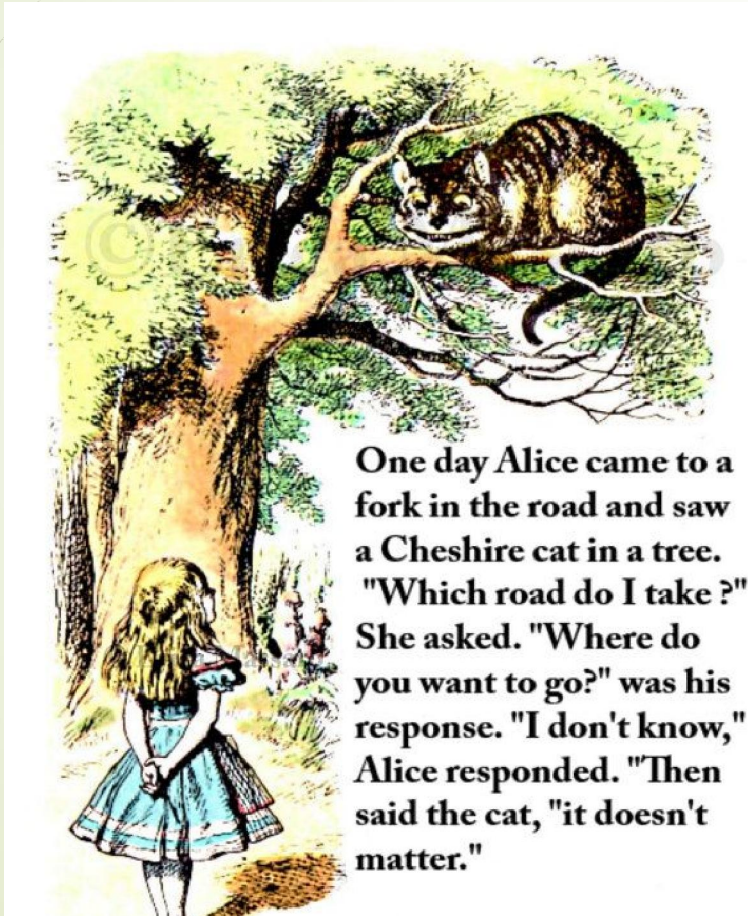
- ▶ I often teasingly reminded my students of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and asked, Which one of you will finally betray me? For I am a pessimist by nature and I was sure at least one would turn against me. Nassrin responded mischievously, You yourself told us that in the final analysis we are our own betrayers, playing Judas to our own Christ.



Why the book club? Why study fiction? (p. 3)


- ▶ Do not ... 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 (頓悟) of truth. ... If I were to 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 Nabakov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or better yet, *Lolita*.

Reference to classical literature (p. 5)

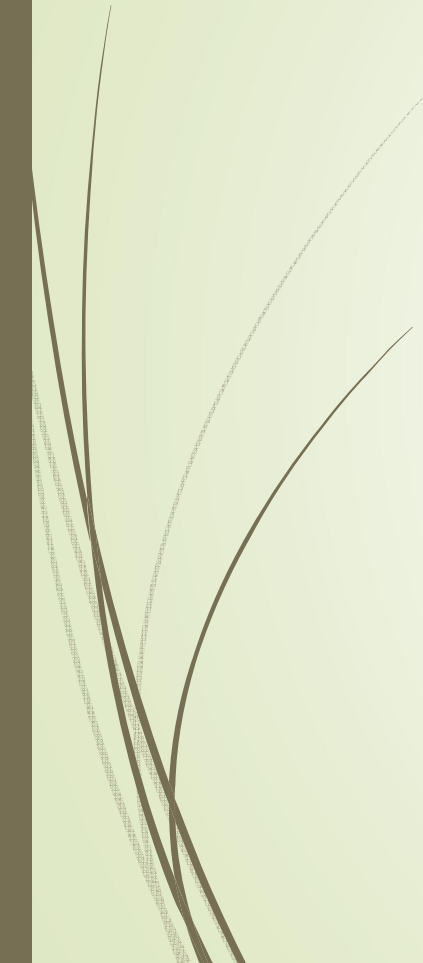



One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. "Which road do I take?" She asked. "Where do you want to go?" was his response. "I don't know," Alice responded. "Then said the cat, "it doesn't matter."

- How can I describe Nassrin? I once called her the Cheshire cat, appearing and disappearing at unexpected turns in my academic life.



The study group reads both traditional Persian literature and western literature

- ▶ The theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality. We read Persian classical literature, such as the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from *A Thousand and One Nights*, along with Western classics. (p. 6)
 - ▶ The symbolic significance of Scheherazade ... (later)
- 



Nafisi says she doesn't seem to belong in her own country (p. 7).

- ▶ More than any other place in our room, the living room was symbolic of my nomadic and borrowed life. Vagrant pieces of furniture from different times and places were thrown together, partly out of financial necessity, and partly because of my eclectic taste.



Her mother scolded her for not covering up the windows (p. 7).

- ▶ My mother would go crazy each time she saw the paintings leaning against the wall and the vases of flowers on the floor and the curtainless windows, which I refused to dress until I was finally reminded that this was an Islamic country and windows needed to be dressed. I don't know if you really belong to me, she would lament.
- ▶ (Her mother lived on the first floor; Nafisi and her husband lived on the second; her brother had a vacant apartment on the third.)



Introducing the 7 students (p. 12 to 18)


The women who took part in Nafisi's study group have colorful personalities and powerful life stories.

- 1. Mahshid
- 2. Manna
- 3. Yassi
- 4. Azin
- 5. Mitra
- 6. Nassrin
- 7. Sanaz

(SEE SEATING CHART) A sample by a female Pakistani student

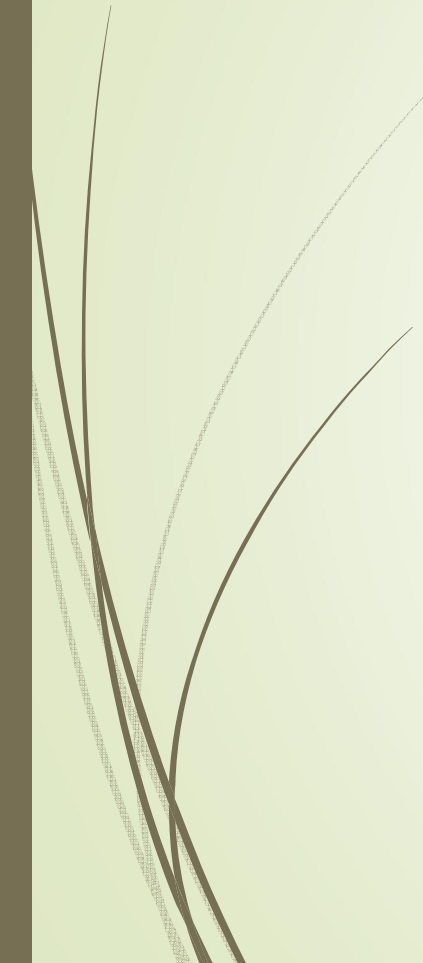



The Colors of My Dreams (p. 11)

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- ▶ I was reminded of a painter friend who had started her career by depicting scenes from life, mainly deserted rooms, abandoned houses and discarded photographs of women. Gradually her work became more abstract, and in her last exhibition, her paintings were splashes of rebellious color. ... Reality has become so intolerable, she said, so bleak, that all I can paint now are the colors of my dreams.
 - ▶ This class was the color of my dreams. It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality that had turned hostile.



The Color of Paradise (p. 14)

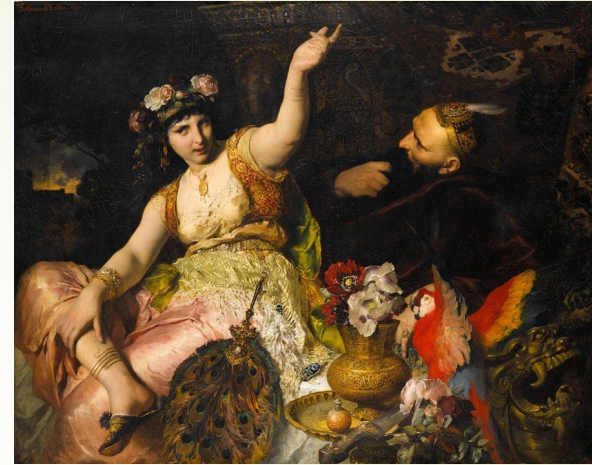
- ▶ The Islamic Republic coarsened my taste in colors, Manna said, fingering the discarded leaves of her roses. I want to wear outrageous colors, like shocking pink or tomato red. I feel too greedy for colors to see them in carefully chosen words of poetry.
 - ▶ When I (Nafisi) was very young, I was obsessed with the colors of places and things my father told me about in his nightly stories. I wanted to know the color of Scheherazade's dress, her bedcover, the color of the genie and the magic lamp, and once I asked him about the color of paradise. He said it could be any color I wanted it to be.
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- [Then Nafisi proudly pointed to Manna] a small oil painting in an old wooden frame: a green landscape of lush, leathery leaves with two birds, two deep red apples, a golden pear and a touch of blue.
 - My paradise is swimming-pool blue! Manna shot in, her eyes still glued to the painting. We lived in a large garden that belonged to my grandparents, she said, turning to me. ... My best memories are of swimming in our huge irregularly shaped swimming pool. I was a swimming champion at our school, ... About a year after the revolution, my father died of a heart attack, and then the government confiscated our house and our garden and we moved into an apartment. I never swam again. My dream is at the bottom of that pool.



Scheherazade as their heroine (p. 19)

- ▶ What had most intrigued me about the frame story of *A Thousand and One Nights* were the three kinds of women it portrayed – all victims of a king's unreasonable rule. Before Scheherazade enters the scene, the women in the story are divided into those who betray and then are killed (the queen) and those who are killed before they have a chance to betray (the virgins). The virgins, who, unlike Scheherazade, have no voice in the story. ...




- Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection. This gives her the courage to risk her life and sets her apart from the other characters in the tale. (p. 19)


The Irony of the Blind Film Censor

(p. 24 to 25)





Part II - Gatsby


- ▶ Nafisi uses these techniques:
 - ▶ Third person, all-knowing point of view (an omniscient narrator) talking about her return to Iran in 1979
 - ▶ Flashbacks – remembering her first teaching job in Tehran
 - ▶ Flashbacks within flashbacks – remembering her days as a Ph.D. student in Oklahoma
- 



Returning to Iran after 17 years; Islamic Revolution just broke out

- ▶ Going back in time (when she was 30 years old); looking at herself in a detached way (p. 81) –

A young woman stands alone in the midst of a crowd at the Tehran airport, backpack on her back, a large bag hanging from one shoulder, pushing an oversize carry-on with the tips of her toes. She knows that her husband of two years and her father must be somewhere out there with the suitcases. She stands in the customs area, teary-eyed, desperately looking for a sympathetic face, for someone she can cling to ...



The walls of the airport have dissolved into an alien spectacle, with giant posters of an ayatollah staring down reproachfully. Their mood is echoed in the black and bloodred slogans: DEATH TO AMERICA! DOWN WITH IMPERIALISM & ZIONISM. AMERICA IS OUR NUMBER-ONE ENEMY!

Not having registered as yet that the home she had left seventeen years before, at the age of thirteen, was not home anymore, she stands alone, filled with emotions wriggling this way and that, ... I try not to see her, not to bump into her to pass by unnoticed. Yet there is no way I can avoid her. (who is I? who is she?)



The Revolutionary students complained about *The Great Gatsby* being too corrupt and too westernized.

Nafisi organized a mock trial of the book, the characters and the author, giving the students (both male and female) a chance to debate.




Part III - James

- ▶ “The war came one morning, suddenly and unexpectedly. It was announced on September 23, 1980, the day before the opening of schools and universities. (p. 157)
- ▶ “The war with Iraq began that September and did not end until July 1988. (p. 158)
- ▶ Nafisi lived through the Iran-Iraq War.
- ▶ Strict policies about women wearing the veil.




Part IV - Austen



The students play with a famous quote (p. 258)

- ▶ “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife.” So declared Yassi in that special tone of hers, deadpan and mildly ironic, which on rare occasions bothered on the burlesque.
- ▶ “Or is it a truth universally acknowledged,” Manna shot back, “that a Muslim Man must be in want not just of one but many wives?” She glanced at me conspiratorially, her black eyes brimming with humor, knowing she would draw a reaction.



The above sentences are an intentional twist of Jane Austen's famous beginning line in "Pride and Prejudice" -

- ▶ "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."
- ▶ Nafisi's students are mocking the Iranian/Islamic society by using Jane Austen's language.



Let's look at the quotes side by side -

- ▶ Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* - "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."
- ▶ Yassi says - "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife."
- ▶ Manna says - "Or is it a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim Man must be in want not just of one but many wives?"



In closing:

The beautiful, poetic ending on p. 339

Azar Nafisi talking about her
relationship with the 7 students

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8JxUMqcH1s>