

NOVEMBER 08 - SUMMARY – READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN BY AZAR NAFISI

Stacie led our group of 12 through the interesting discussion of Reading Lolita in Tehran last night. We also welcomed two new members, Phil and Ellen, and hope to see them again.

Stacie started us off with three of her favorite quotes from the book. She feels that this is why we read literature, to see another groups of people living their lives to learn more about them. This is why we all travel, to see another land/culture for ourselves to understand them and in the best cases, come away hopeful and empowered.

On page 111, about how to properly read a novel it says “If you don’t enter the world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is the heart of the novel. This is how to read a novel: you inhale the experience.”

Then on page 44, the question from one of her students “Why is it the stories like Lolita and Madame Bovary – stories that are so sad, so tragic- make us happy? Is it not sinful to feel pleasure when reading about something so terrible? Would we feel this way if we were reading about it in the newspapers or if it happened to us? If we were to write about our lives here in the Islamic Republic of Iran, should we make our readers happy?”

And finally, on page 47 and the discussion of fairy tales “Every fairy tale offers the potential to surpass present limits, so in a sense the fairy tale offers you freedom that reality denies. In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance. This affirmation lies in the way the author takes control of reality by retelling it in his own way, thus creating a new world. Every great work of art, I would declare pompously, is a celebration, an act of insubordination against the betrayals, horrors and infidelities of life. The perfection and beauty of form rebels against the ugliness and shabbiness of the subject matter. This is why we love Madame Bovary and cry for Emma, why we greedily read Lolita as our heart breaks for its small, vulgar, poetic and defiant orphaned heroine.”

While there was much discussion about why the author selected her books to be discussed, Stacie felt that Nafisi chose these classic Western books to inspire hope in her students, to offer them another view of life that they were denied access to and at times, to give them an escape from their present reality. Nafisi herself escaped during some of the most traumatic events she describes in the book (the bombs falling close to her house and she in the hall way), by reading one of these novels. The irony was that at the time a character in the book was asking questions about was someone all right, the same thing was happening to the author in her life.

Stacie in her research began to read *Lolita*, but ended up not finishing the book. Many of us had not read or completed the book by the meeting. Some of us felt that in order to truly appreciate the book and the detailed discussions with her students, we needed to have read all the books mentioned. Many of us found ourselves skipping the passages about the book discussions, which had we known more about the books, could have increased our enjoyment.

Sam was the greatest fan of the book, in fact he said, it is the best book he has read in over 10 years. What he appreciated most was the risk that she took over those years by teaching “subversive Western literature” in a suppressive society. He felt it gave her freedom and at times resolve and the stamina to maintain her stand on the veil. She also offered this freedom to her students and other women with an alternative reality and means to escape in the books. Sam did not feel that a man could have written this book. While she focused mainly on the women, I personally felt that her discussions about her male students and men in her life were done with a level hand.

Some of our group were frustrated in that she did not share much about herself, her husband and family. Similar to Deborah Rodriguez in *Kabul Beauty School*, there were threads of the story that seemed to be dropped, possibly to cover her tracks and not put others at risk. Threads that did not seem to be explained were what was the level of her college students, were they all literature majors, or was this the obligatory literature class to all majors? How did she select the women for her reading group and why was Zarrin not included? Nafisi’s discussion about the “magician” puzzled many of our group. We could not tell if he really existed or if he was an imaginary person.

Similar to other books read previously by the TLBC, the suppression of women was one of the most pronounced themes. We questioned whether she had let her students down by leaving the country, and yet it was mentioned that several of her select reading group also left. There was much discussion about the chadors and how they were used both for cultural and religious reasons. Stacie and Phylliss both brought up the segment in the book about the body searches of the women. The women in the book said that during these searches they appeared to leave their bodies and detach. Some of the Iranian women did not appear to be able to accept themselves as women and sexual at the same time. Everything about sex was dirty and shameful, while they liked and adorned their bodies. Stacie mentioned that this distancing and detachment is documented and is a common phenomenon by those working with abuse victims, especially women.

While the author left Iran in 1997, in the epilogue she mentions that while there was a feeling of progression and openness, there were still arrests going on. Several of our group had visited Iran; in fact David as recently as 3 years ago. POST MEETING INPUT FROM DAVID – the currency in Iran is the RIAL (11/08 exchange rate is 10,242 - \$1). During David’s recent trip he visited Afghanistan before Iran. He found the Afghanistani women covered head to foot followed by the Iranian women in shin length chadors and faces exposed with makeup. While he could not see or speak to the women in Afghanistan and only had conversations with the men in the open, the Iranian men and women were both open and discussed potentially controversial topics freely.

Input from Curt Nelson, our Maryland contingent

I wonder how many of us have "magicians" we consult once in awhile. If this includes people whose judgments I respect then I have a couple I guess. I have not read Gatsby since college and never read Lolita and doubt I would after Azar Nafisi's plot description. Maybe I am missing something but the control of a 12 year old--too much like bad news we read about these days. I have the fortune of knowing friends on both sides of the veil question, some here at my office. One woman I know is now in Lebanon and she still struggles with that issue. I think, therefore, the part of this book that kept my attention the most was the author's observations on how her students dealt with the Iranian rules and the rule of men. It is hard to accept that and the banning of literature.

Has anyone read My Uncle Napoleon by Iraj Pezeshkzad, mentioned by Nafisi.

All in all, a lively discussion and very well led by Stacie. Thank you to every one who attended and contributed. Thank you Stacie for bringing us a book that most of us might not have picked up on our own.

NEXT MEETING

Because our proposed book, *Jungle Child* by Kuegler, for our Dec 8 is not available in the US and will have to come from England, it has been moved to next year, currently slated for June. With no book for December, I suggested and the group agreed to have a very informal meeting next month including favorite travel books and cookies.

For December 8, please bring travel books that you love, no matter the age or cover style, to pass around after a brief summary. To celebrate the end of another year and the holiday season, each member is asked to bring 1 dozen cookies to share among the group. With only a dozen each, we should have enough to share and not feel too bloated!

I am also soliciting additional books for the group to consider through next July. Please see below and if you have a book to suggest, please email me by December 5 so I can prepare the list for the December meeting.

	BOOK	BY	LEAD BY
Dec 8 2009	Bring favorite books to share	??	Everyone
Jan 12	Travels with Charley	Steinbeck	Paula
Feb 9	Embarrassment of Mangoes	Vanderhoof	Barb
Mar 9	Take Me With You	Newsham	Phylliss

Apr 13	OPEN		
May 11	My Path Leads to Tibet	Tenberken	Willie
Jun 8	<i>Jungle Child</i>	<i>Kuegler</i>	<i>Keith???</i>
Jul 13	OPEN		

If you would like to suggest a book for either April or July, please research your suggestion and indicate the month you would like to lead and include the title and author. ***PLEASE MAKE SURE THE BOOK IS IN PRINT AND AVAILABLE FROM A US DISTRIBUTOR IN PAPERBACK.*** The entire group will be asked to vote before December 31st and the TLBC book list through July will be announced at the January meeting and via email.

Here is a summary of the books read by the TLBC to date. We have read books by 9 women and 8 men. During our reading, we have visited Wales, (Italy, India and Indonesia), (Pakistan & Afghanistan), Australia, China, Morocco, Africa, Afghanistan, the UK, Iran, India, the US, Italy and 4 books that covered the globe. Add to that, we currently have books scheduled about Tibet, the Caribbean, Indonesia, the US and another global book. I for one have loved the eclectic mix we have read so far.

I hope that we continue this trend and can include books about countries not currently represented. While the number of countries on the earth may be debated, with 193 different countries to chose from, I look forward to happy reading for years to come. I also hope we can soon visit South America and possible Antarctica in our reading, the two continents not included so far.

UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS

Thursday, November 13 - Lakewood Cultural Center

www.Lakewood.org -

Inside the Tuscan Hills:

A travelogue narrated live by filmmaker, John Wilson

\$10 Adult

Originally filmed as a PBS documentary, this show presents a vivid portrait of a place where ancient traditions have never disappeared and gives an insider's look at the rich rural culture of Tuscany. With exclusive access to the workshops, kitchens and homes of the Tuscan people, the show is a journey into one of the world's most beautiful places.

Thursday, November 20, 2008 - Peter Greenberg, 5 pm

Join us on that Thursday night at 5 for a special session with the Today Show's travel editor, Peter Greenberg at the **Denver Woman's Press Club, 1325 Logan Street**. We have free parking to the north of the house, free drinks and snacks, and a chance for a closer view of Peter before he

heads to the Tattered Cover on Colfax for a 7:30 signing.

His new book is: Don't Go There: The Must-Miss Places of the World... is a terrific look at all the places that usually end up disappointing travelers (and tourists alike!). His Travel Detective Bible will also be for sale that night.

FREE to all but please call Sally and let her know you are coming. Sally at 303-366-6310 or sallyk@ecentral.com.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT AND INTEREST.

I look forward to seeing each of you at our December meeting.

Until then, Travel in Safety!

Jane Stanfield