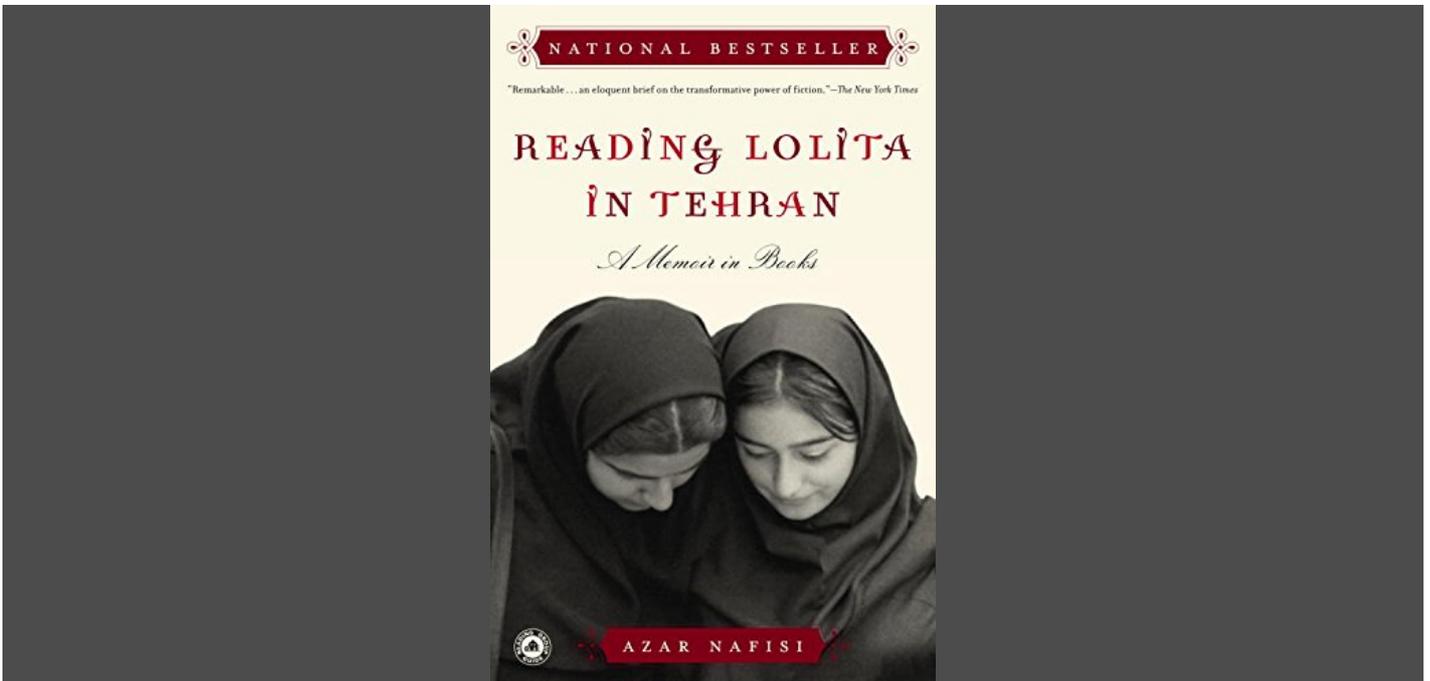


PDF | Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books

by Azar Nafisi



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We all have dreams—things we fantasize about doing and generally never get around to. This is the story of Azar Nafisi’s dream and of the nightmare that made it come true.

For two years before she left Iran in 1997, Nafisi gathered seven young women at her house every Thursday morning to read and discuss forbidden works of Western literature. They were all former students whom she had taught at university. Some came from conservative and religious families, others were progressive and secular; several had spent time in jail. They were shy and uncomfortable at first, unaccustomed to being asked to speak their minds, but soon they began to open up and to speak more freely, not only about the novels they were reading but also about themselves, their dreams and disappointments. Their stories intertwined with those they were reading—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Washington Square*, *Daisy Miller* and *Lolita*—their *Lolita*, as they imagined her in Tehran.

Nafisi’s account flashes back to the early days of the revolution, when she first started teaching at the University of Tehran amid the swirl of protests and demonstrations. In those frenetic days, the students took control of the university, expelled faculty members and purged the curriculum. When a radical Islamist in Nafisi’s class questioned her decision to teach *The Great Gatsby*, which he saw as an immoral work that preached falsehoods of “the Great Satan,” she decided to let him put *Gatsby* on trial and stood as the sole witness for the defense.

Azar Nafisi’s luminous tale offers a fascinating portrait of the Iran-Iraq war viewed from Tehran and gives us a rare glimpse, from the inside, of women’s lives in revolutionary Iran. It is a work of great passion and poetic beauty, written with a startlingly original voice.

Praise for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

“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*

Amazon.com Review

An inspired blend of memoir and literary criticism, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a moving testament to the power of art and its ability to change and improve people's lives. In 1995, after resigning from her job as a professor at a university in Tehran due to repressive policies, Azar Nafisi invited seven of her best female students to attend a weekly study of great Western literature in her home. Since the books they read were officially banned by the government, the women were forced to meet in secret, often sharing photocopied pages of the illegal novels. For two years they met to talk, share, and "shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color." Though most of the women were shy and intimidated at first, they soon became emboldened by the forum and used the meetings as a springboard for debating the social, cultural, and political realities of living under strict Islamic rule. They discussed their harassment at the hands of "morality guards," the daily indignities of living under the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime, the effects of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, love, marriage, and life in general, giving readers a rare inside look at revolutionary Iran. The books were always the primary focus, however, and they became "essential to our lives: they were not a luxury but a necessity," she writes.

Threaded into the memoir are trenchant discussions of the work of Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, and other authors who provided the women with examples of those who successfully asserted their autonomy despite great odds. The great works encouraged them to strike out against authoritarianism and repression in their own ways, both large and small: "There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like *Lolita* we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom," she writes. In short, the art helped them to survive. —*Shawn Carkonen*

Product Description

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