



## STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

### *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi

#### About This Book

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.

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#### 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?
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#### Author Biography

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*, 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.

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