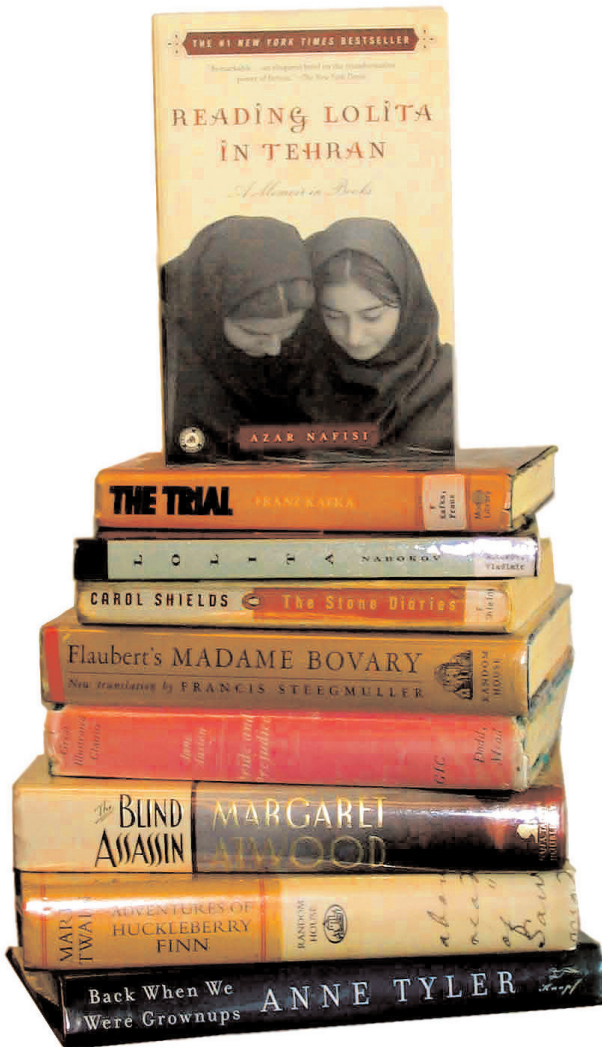


One Book for Greater Hartford



A Reading Resource Guide
Hartford Public Library

A Reading Resource Guide for
One Book for Greater Hartford

Reading Lolita in Tehran

A Memoir in Books

By Azar Nafisi





Hartford Public Library
500 Main Street
Hartford, CT 06103-3075
Telephone: (860) 695-6295
Fax: (860) 722-6900

www.hplct.org

www.onebookforgreaterhartford.org

One Book for Greater Hartford

Four years ago community leaders in the City of Hartford initiated a literary program that would transcend cultural barriers. A coalition was formed, led by Hartford Public Library, to engage a regional audience in a shared experience, the reading of one book. Founding members include the Greater Hartford Arts Council and the Greater Hartford Literacy Council. One Book not only celebrates great literature but also promotes reading in our culturally diverse community.

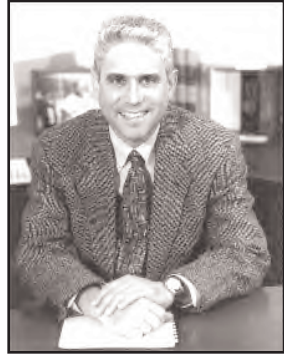
Since its inception, One Book has brought authors Edwidge Danticat, James McBride and Esmeralda Santiago to the people of the Greater Hartford region. This year, we have chosen the remarkable story *Reading Lolita in Tehran, A Memoir in Books*, as the 2005 One Book. Part memoir and part literary criticism, author Azar Nafisi writes of the uniqueness of literature in offering us a deeper understanding of our surroundings and of ourselves.

From its beginning, One Book was, and will continue to be, an accessible, affordable (it's free!) and fun literary event that encourages broad participation and offers opportunities to gather and discuss issues relevant to our community. We will utilize as many avenues as possible to bring people to the One Book project, including book discussions, readings, films, panel discussions, book displays, poetry, puppets and art. This year, One Book culminates on October 22 with an author event featuring Azar Nafisi at our downtown Central Library. I hope you'll join us for this wonderful celebration of reading!

Louise Blalock
Chief Librarian, Hartford Public Library

2005 Honorary Chair

Walter Harrison has served as the fifth president of the University of Hartford since July 1998. Under his guidance, the University of Hartford has begun a major effort to focus its resources on the university's distinctive array of educational programs, revitalize its physical plant, and renew its ties to the Greater Hartford community.



After graduating from Trinity College in 1968, Harrison earned a master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1969 and a doctorate from the University of California-Davis. He taught English and American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University (Mainz, Germany), Iowa State University, and Colorado College. At the University of Hartford, he holds the rank of Professor of English and teaches one course each year.

Consistent with his belief in civic engagement, Harrison serves as a director or trustee of a variety of Hartford area organizations, including the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC), St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, the Hartford Stage, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, Connecticut Center for Science & Exploration (CTCSE), Leadership Task Force, WorldBusiness Capital, Inc., and Suffield Academy, among many others. Nationally he serves on the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Board of Directors and the National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities (NAICU). In the recent past, he has served on the Board of Trustees of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), Fountain Valley School, and the

2005 Honorary Chair

American Council on Education (ACE).

Harrison has had a lifelong love affair with baseball and has written extensively on its history and customs. His doctoral dissertation, "Out of Play: Baseball Fiction from Pulp to Art," was one of the earliest scholarly treatments of baseball and its place in American life. He has also had a long-time passion for literature and drama. Among his personal goals are seeing a major league baseball game in every major league stadium and seeing every Shakespearean play performed live.

Acknowledgements

The 2005 One Book for Greater Hartford is a partnership project of Hartford Public Library, the Greater Hartford Arts Council, the Greater Hartford Literacy Council, *Hartford Advocate*, *Preview Connecticut*, and WDRC's The Talk of Connecticut and The Mary Jones Show. The project receives the continued support of community members who endorse and enhance the objectives of One Book for Greater Hartford.

The One Book partnership acknowledges the 2005 Honorary Chair Walter Harrison for his gracious support.

One Book for Greater Hartford is made possible through the support and expertise of the staff of Hartford Public Library.

Contents

About the Author	1
About the Book	3
Descriptions of the Books Read by Azar Nafisi's Thursday Class.....	4
Discussion Questions for <i>Reading Lolita in Tehran</i>	7
Suggested Reading.....	10
Filmography.....	12
Webliography.....	14
Family / Intergenerational Book Discussion Series.....	16
Discussion Guide for Teen Readers.....	20
Reading Critically.....	22
Leading the Discussion.....	24
Suggestions for Participants.....	26

About the Author

Azar Nafisi is a visiting professor and the director of the Dialogue Project at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (Washington DC). A professor of aesthetics, culture and literature, Dr. Nafisi held a fellowship at Oxford University, teaching and conducting a series of lectures on culture and the important role of Western literature and culture in Iran after the revolution in 1979. She taught at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University and Allameh Tabataba'ii before her return to the United States in 1997 - earning national respect and international recognition for advocating on behalf of Iran's intellectuals, youth and especially young women. She was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the mandatory Islamic veil in 1981, and did not resume teaching until 1987.



Dr. Nafisi conducted workshops in Iran for women students on the relationship between culture and human rights; the material culled from these workshops formed the basis of a new human rights education curriculum. She has lectured and written extensively in English and Farsi on the political implications of literature and culture as well as the human rights of the Iranian women and girls, considering the important role they play in the process of change for pluralism and an open society in Iran. She has been consulted on issues related to Iran and human rights by both the policy makers and various human rights organizations in the United States and elsewhere.

About the Author

Dr. Nafisi has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and her cover story, “The Veiled Threat: The Iranian Revolution's Woman Problem,” published in *The New Republic* (February 22, 1999) has been reprinted into several languages. She is also the author of *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*. She is currently teaching on the relation between culture and politics at SAIS. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, more than 73 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, was published by Random House in April 2003.

About the Book

For two years before she left Iran in 1997, Azar 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 Islamic 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.

Descriptions of the Books Read By Azar Nafisi's Thursday Class

One Thousand and One Nights

(also known as *The Arabian Nights*):

The collection of ancient Persian-Indian-Arabian tales is set within the frame story of a king who avenges the betrayal of his queen by marrying a virgin each day, who is then killed the next morning. Scheherazade stops the deaths by offering herself as his bride and entrancing him with her stories for one thousand and one nights until he is cured of his hatred. "To me this story contains a hidden theme --old and timeless-- about the power of stories to reshape and redefine reality," Nafisi said in a 2003 interview.

Invitation to a Beheading by Vladimir Nabokov:

Cincinnatus C. has been sentenced to death for the basic illegality of his nature: "in a place where all citizens are required to be transparent, he is opaque." (p. 22, RLIT, 2004 trade paperback ed.) The one right he has is to know the day of his execution. His jailers continue to keep this from him so every day is possibly his last. "What Nabokov creates for us in *Invitation to a Beheading* is not the actual physical pain and torture of a totalitarian regime but the nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread." (p. 23 *ibid*)

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov:

Humbert Humbert marries a lonely widow in order to take control of his obsession: her pre-teen daughter. He tells his story from his jail cell where he awaits trial for the murder of the man who interrupted his possession of the girl. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Nafisi observed, "Of all the novels we read, *Lolita* was the most metaphorical of the situation in Iran. I felt the regime was imposing its dream on us. As women, it confiscated our reality."

Descriptions of the Books Read By Azar Nafisi's Thursday Class

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert:

An ordinary woman, whose romantic beliefs are squashed by the realities of marriage, embarks on a path scandalous to Flaubert's mid-nineteenth century readers. In order to continue discussing this groundbreaking novel, Nafisi's home class extended its usual session and stayed for lunch. "*Madame Bovary* had done what years of teaching at the university had not: it created shared intimacy." (p. 58 *ibid*)

Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

The novel that goes on trial in Nafisi's university class is defended thusly: "Careless is the first adjective that comes to mind when describing the rich in this novel. The dream they embody is an alloyed dream that destroys whoever tries to get close to it." (p. 131 *ibid*). Fitzgerald tears the sheath of glamour off 'The Jazz Age' even as he creates its perfect representation with his language and indelible characters.

Daisy Miller by Henry James:

An unsophisticated American girl runs headlong into the conventions of the Europeanized American community she joins for one fateful season. She is the character the clandestine students most wish to emulate, for they see her as courageous.

Washington Square by Henry James:

The life of Catherine Sloper, the shy and devoted daughter of a successful father, twists and turns under the pressures of convention, the opportunism of her suitor and her father's obdurate notions of who and what she is. "These women [the heroines of this and the above James novel] create the main complications of the plot through their refusal to comply." (p. 195 *ibid*)

Descriptions of the Books Read By Azar Nafisi's Thursday Class

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen:

Known as a comedy of manners in which Mrs. Bennet, a country gentlewoman, works vigorously to marry her five daughters to suitable gentlemen, *Pride and Prejudice* evokes a “democratic imperative” for Nafisi. Thus it perfectly fits her definition of a good novel as “one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic – not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so.” (p. 132 *ibid*)

The Dean's December by Saul Bellow:

A journalist professor and his Rumanian-born wife arrive in Bucharest to be with her dying mother. To do so, they must diligently battle with the colonel of the secret service who wants to strictly limit their visits as she is in a Communist Party hospital. The trial, heavily influenced by corrupt Chicago practices, of a black man accused of killing a university student also holds the academic's attention. Nafisi wishes to read the story with her students for it grapples with “the ordeals of the East and those of the West.” (p. 283 *ibid*)

Discussion Questions for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

1. Did you find this book difficult?
2. On her first day teaching at the University of Tehran, Azar Nafisi began class with some questions: “What should fiction accomplish? Why should anyone read at all?” What are your answers to these questions? How does fiction force us to question what we often take for granted?
3. Nafisi’s memoir brings us back into contact with major works of fiction – *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square* – and others. As you revisited these books through the experience of Nafisi and her students – where were their surprises? Discomfort? New engagements?
4. Nafisi prefaces her memoir with this passage written by Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosz: “To whom do we tell what happened on this earth, for whom do we place everywhere huge mirrors in the hope that they will be filled up and will stay so?” How do you interpret this passage?
5. Nafisi loves her homeland, but feels conflicted. Should she have remained in Iran? 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’s 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.
6. What characters are most memorable? Curious? Complex? Do you relate to the author? Or to others?
7. Nafisi, more than once in her narrative, claims that she too

Discussion Questions *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

had a hand in the ruination of Iran. As the “cultural revolution” began to take hold, she and others fought it yet she still believes herself to be part of the problem. Why does Nafisi feel she has played a role in the destruction of Iran? 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" (p. 28).

8. 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? (p. 192) Also, describe Mahshid's conflicted feelings as a Muslim who already observed the veil but who nevertheless objected to its political enforcement.

9. Explain what Nafisi means when she calls herself and her beliefs increasingly "irrelevant" in the Islamic Republic of Iran. What do people who "lose their place in the world" do to survive, both physically and creatively?

10. The theme of the class was the relationship between fiction and reality. During the Gatsby trial Zarrin charges Mr. Nyazi with the inability to "distinguish fiction from reality" (p. 128). How does Mr. Nyazi's conflation of the fictional and the real relate to the 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.

11. Do you, like Nafisi, think that people like Mr. Ghomi attack Western literature because they are afraid of what they don't understand? Why is ambiguity such a dangerous weapon to them?

Discussion Questions *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

12. 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." (p. 76)

13. Nafisi wants her magician to take more action than he does. What do you think of this man's hermit-like response to living in an oppressive society? At one point she refers to him as a "beloved parent." (pg. 283) Who is he to her? What is their relationship?

14. It seems that Nafisi herself is a "magician" of sorts to her "girls." Have you ever been a "magician" to anyone? Had a "magician" figure in your own life who mentored and sustained you?

15. How potent a weapon is humor in a world like this one? Have you had experiences in which humor helped you cope with a desperate situation?

16. Anyone who has ever belonged to a book group must read this book – would you agree?

17. Nafisi, who is working on a new book with freedom as its theme, believes Americans and Iranians share a love of freedom. How do you respond to that?

One Book for Greater Hartford extends its appreciation to Lauri Burke, community services librarian, Barrington Public Library, Barrington, Rhode Island, for her contribution in developing the discussion questions for the 2005 Reading Resource Guide.

Suggested Reading

Baghdad Diaries Nuha al-Radi

The Blind Assassin Margaret Atwood

Pride and Prejudice; Emma; Mansfield Park Jane Austen

The Dean's December; More Die of Heartbreak Saul Bellow

Wuthering Heights Emily Brontë

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Lewis Carroll

Under Western Eyes Joseph Conrad

Shamela; Tom Jones Henry Fielding

Madame Bovary Gustave Flaubert

The Great Gatsby F. Scott Fitzgerald

The Diary of Anne Frank Anne Frank

The Ambassadors; Daisy Miller;

Washington Square Henry James

In the Penal Colony; The Trial Franz Kafka

Address Unknown Katherine Kressman Taylor

The Confidence Man Herman Melville

Lolita; Pnin; Invitation to a Beheading Vladimir Nabokov

The Country of the Pointed Firs Sarah Orne Jewett

My Uncle Napoleon Iraj Pezeshkzad

The Language Police Diane Ravitch

The Net of Dreams Julie Salamon

Persepolis Marjane Satrapi

A Thousand and One Nights Scheherazade

Suggested Reading

The Emigrants W.G. Sebald

The Stone Diaries Carol Shields

The Engineer of Human Souls Joseph Skvorecky

Loitering with Intent;

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie Muriel Spark

Confessions of Zeno Italo Svevo

A Summons to Memphis Peter Taylor

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain

Back When We Were Grownups; St. Maybe Anne Tyler

Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter Mario Vargas Llosa

Filmography for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

1. *Lolita*. (1962)

Based on the 1955 novel by Vladimir Nabokov which tells the tale of a middle-aged man's obsession with a young girl.

UK/USA. Dir. by Stanley Kubrick. Available from Warner Home Video.

2. *The Great Gatsby*. (1974)

With a screenplay written by Francis Ford Coppola, this film, based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 classic, unfolds the story of self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby's love affair with married socialite Daisy Buchanan. USA. Dir. by Jack Clayton.

Available from Paramount Home Video.

3. *The Heiress*. (1949)

Based on Henry James' 1881 novel *Washington Square*. Olivia de Havilland won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Catherine Sloper, the daughter of a wealthy doctor in mid-19th century New York, who is being pursued by a fortune hunter.

USA. Dir. by William Wyler. Available from Universal Studios Home Video.

4. *Washington Square*. (1997)

More recent effort to bring James' novel to the big screen, this time starring Jennifer Jason Leigh as the heiress. USA. Dir. by Agnieszka Holland. Available from Walt Disney Video.

5. *Daisy Miller*. (1974)

The film stars Cybill Shepherd in the title role of this adaptation of Henry James' 1958 classic. USA. Dir. by Peter Bogdanovich. Available from Paramount Home Video.

6. *Emma*. (1996)

Based on the 1815 novel by Jane Austen. This romantic comedy stars Gwyneth Paltrow as the matchmaking Emma

Filmography for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Woodhouse. USA/UK. Dir. by Douglas McGrath. Available from Touchstone Home Video.

7. Pride and Prejudice. (1995)

Popular adaptation of Jane Austen's 1813 classic, in the form of a five hour television mini-series, produced by the BBC and starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle. UK. Dir. by Simon Langton. Available from A&E Home Video.

8. The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. (1969)

Maggie Smith won an Academy Award for her portrayal of the title character, a controversial teacher at a girls' school in 1920s Scotland. Based on the 1961 work by Muriel Spark. UK. Dir. by Ronald Neame. Available from Fox Home Entertainment.

9. Tom Jones. (1963)

Bawdy, fast-paced Academy Award-winning adaptation of the 1749 comic epic by Henry Fielding. Albert Finney stars as the dashing playboy, Tom Jones. UK. Dir. by Tony Richardson. Available from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Home Entertainment.

10. Madame Bovary. (1991)

French adaptation of Flaubert's 1856 classic detailing a crumbling marriage. France. Dir. by Claude Chabrol. Available from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Home Entertainment.

Most audiovisual materials (videos, DVDs, etc.) purchased or borrowed are for home use only. Be aware that if you use them for a public program you must first get permission, called Public Performance Rights, from the copyright holder. A reference librarian can assist you. Most titles are available at Hartford Public Library.

Webliography for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

About the Author:

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers>

Barnes & Noble Meet the Writer.

<http://dialogueproject.sais-jhu.edu/index.php?PageName=nafisi>

The author is the Director of The Dialogue Project:

The Culture of Democracy in Muslim Studies.

<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum139.php>

Interview.

http://www.iranian.ws/bio/women/azar_nafisi.htm

Biography.

http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript_nafisi.html

PBS interview.

About the Book:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375504907&view=excerpt>

Read an excerpt.

Read an excerpt.

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/reading_lolita_in_t

[ehran1.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/reading_lolita_in_t_ehran1.asp)

Reading Group Guide.

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/081297106X/ref=dp_proddesc_0/002-6946542-](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/081297106X/ref=dp_proddesc_0/002-6946542-7943201?%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155)

[7943201?%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/081297106X/ref=dp_proddesc_0/002-6946542-7943201?%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155)

Editorial reviews.

Editorial reviews.

Webliography for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

About Iran:

<http://web.mit.edu/isg/>

Iranian Studies Group at MIT

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/irtoc.html>

Library of Congress Country Studies: Iran

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html>

World Fact Book: Iran

Sites Related to One Book Projects, Book Groups and Reading

www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html

Library of Congress One Book Reading Promotion Projects listing by state.

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebookbyauthor.html>

Library of Congress One Book Reading Promotion Projects listing by author.

www.readinggroupguides.com

The Online Community for Reading Groups.

www.bookmuse.com

Materials, support, and guidance for the reading and discussion of books.

<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/WDIRN?locID=22520&finalAuth=true>

Readers advisory tool "What Do I Read Next?" made available by Connecticut Digital Library.

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

*Kan ya makan, fee kadeem azazeman...A long time ago there was and there was not a noble king, Shahryar. Shahryar was betrayed by his wife. He assured himself of the loyalty of the wives he took thereafter by beheading each one on the morning after the wedding. Shahrazad, the brave, the beautiful, and the very clever, stepped forward and asked to marry this man. Every night she told him a fabulous story, and every morning he was so intent on hearing the ending, or another, that he spared her for one more day. After 1,000 nights of story-telling, Shahrazad had won the trust and love of the king; the next night was a night of no stories, and no threat of execution. Her stories live on to this day as *Alf Layla wa Layla* (1,000 nights plus one night), or *The 1,001 Nights*, or *The Arabian Nights*.*

India, China, Europe, and various cultures of the Middle East have been identified as sources for particular tales in *The Arabian Nights*. A number of central tales and the “frame story” of Shahrazad are, however, Persian, and the work has a history of great popular (if not scholarly, religious, or governmental) esteem in the area that is now Iran. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi’s first assignment to her class is the *Nights*, which is as difficult to obtain as foreign works. Nafisi asks her students to look to the *Nights* to see “how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation,” and then notes that Shahrazad “fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection” (p.19). Shahrazad can be seen, then, as a presiding genius of *Reading Lolita*, in which literature is a path of resistance and transformation. The storyteller’s inspiration is also acknowledged implicitly, in the organization of Nafisi’s work as series of stories, and stories-within-stories, bound together by the “frame story” of the author’s thought and action.

Renewed familiarity with the *Nights* can enrich the experience

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

of adults who are reading Nafisi's work. The popularity of the *Nights* with children is practically a legend in its own right. An intergenerational program based on the *Nights* is therefore an appropriate adjunct to this One Book for Greater Hartford celebration. One possible agenda would include a reading of selected tales, a discussion period with tea and snacks, and a hands-on activity that reinforces a cultural element found in the stories.

There are many versions of the tales which have been selected and retold for children. Geraldine McCaughrean's *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (Oxford University Press, 1996) is recommended by the *Children's Literature Review* for ages 8 and up, and reads aloud well. The frame story, which begins with the *The Marriage of Shahrazad* and concludes in *The Night Empty of All Stories*, can be read or paraphrased. Presenters will wish to select their own favorites, or stories particularly suitable for the age of the children attending, from the work. *The Tale of the Anklet* and *The Prince and the Large and Lonely Tortoise* are relatively short, if time is a constraint; *The Tale of Ala al-din and his Wonderful Lamp* and *The Tale of the Ebony Horse* are longer, but are representative of the "cliff-hanger" technique Shahrazad used; *The Wonderful Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Bandits* has gore, but also centuries of popularity behind it.

Discussion topics could include:

1. Think about Shahrazad. Why did she start telling her stories? What are some words you would use to describe her as a person? What are some words you would use to describe her as a storyteller? Can you think of another way she or someone else could have stopped the powerful King Shahryar?

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

2. People who study the *Arabian Nights* think that some stories were based on real events. Can you think of a real event that might have been at the start of the story you just heard? What in the story seems real, and what seems magical?
3. The people who first listened to and told these stories thought that it was very important to treat guests well, or to show hospitality. Is someone a guest in the story? How is he treated by the people who own the house? How are people who come to your home welcomed? How are people who come to our country welcomed?
4. The people who first listened to and told these stories also thought that helping and standing by your friends and relatives was very important. Is someone in the story loyal to a friend or relative? How does he or she show that loyalty? Have you shown your loyalty to a friend or relative?
5. Who are the women in the story, and what are some words you would use to describe them? Who are the men in the story, and what are they like? Did you use the same words, or different words, to describe the women and the men? Would you want to be a woman in that time and place?
6. The people in these stories use phrases like, "It is the will of Allah....This is my fate....This is meant to be." What do they mean by that?
7. Is there a moral to this story?
8. Many people love these stories because of the descriptions in them. They feel like they can taste the delicious food, smell the gardens, hear the birds sing, touch the silk robes, and see the magical beings. What did you feel like you could taste, smell,

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

hear, touch, and see in the story?

While discussing the book, serve mint tea and snacks. Fresh fruit, dates and sherbet are mentioned frequently in the stories; candied orange peel, pistachios, almonds, and sweets such as halva and baklava would also be appropriate. Lush gardens are also a common element in the tales, presented as counterpoints to harsh, dry landscapes or dusty city streets. Finish the program by mixing a hand cream with the scent of a Persian garden.

Arabian Nights Hand Cream

Ingredients:

8 drops essential oil - jasmine, rose, lavender, lilac, almond, orange, or other

Juice of one lemon

3 tablespoons rubbing alcohol

1/3 cup glycerin

Preparation:

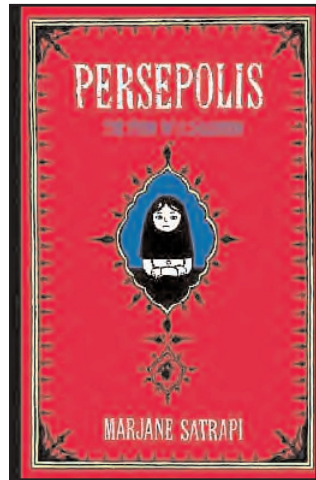
Measure ingredients into a small bottle. Shake well. Shake before every use.

Use within two to three weeks.

Discussion Guide for Teen Readers

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

In her comic-book style memoir *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi tells the story of her life from the age of 10, growing up under the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The reader follows the tumultuous history of Iran during those years, told from the viewpoint of this young, irresistible narrator.



Discussion questions:

1. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis* both tell stories and comment on the importance of stories in our lives. Discuss the importance of family stories to Marji—her grandfather’s story, Uncle Anoosh’s story, Nilofar’s story.
2. Marji’s family are the main characters in *Persepolis*; Nafisi also describes many different Iranian families in her own book. What is Marji’s family like? How do they protect her from the turbulent politics of their country and the brutal war?
3. Satrapi writes in *Persepolis*, “Every situation has an opportunity for laughs.” Many scenes in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* make the reader laugh as well. What scenes in *Persepolis* were funny to you? Why is humor important to her story?
4. Both *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* discuss the themes of captivity and freedom. What is keeping Marji’s family from being completely free? What types of rebellion do they participate in? Is Marji just being a typical teen by rebelling?

Discussion Guide for Teen Readers

5. Satrapi and Nafisi are both writing about women in Iran. What is the role of women in *Persepolis*? Compare and contrast the different women in Marji's life: her mother, her grandmother, her teachers, the maid, her neighbors, the guardians of the revolution.

6. Both *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are written as memoirs. Is *Persepolis* more powerful than if the author had fictionalized her story? Compare this books to other autobiographies or memoirs you have read. What are the benefits and the drawbacks to a memoir?

Reading Critically

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience. They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepen the reader's appreciation of the book.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

1. *Make notes and mark pages as you go:*

Reading for a book discussion - whether you are the leader or simply a participant - differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, "Is this significant?" or, "Why does the author include this?" Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

2. *Ask tough questions of yourself and the book:*

Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book more meaningful.

3. *Pay attention to the author's message:*

As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing

Reading Critically

about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective.

4. *Analyze themes:*

Try to analyze the important themes of a book and to consider what premise the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, "what if... " questions.

5. *Get to know the characters:*

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

6. *Notice the structure of the book:*

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? If so, how do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the order the author chose make sense to you?

7. *Make comparisons to other books and authors:*

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by other authors that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

Leading the Discussion

Research the author using resources such as *Current Biography*, *Contemporary Authors*, or *Something About the Author*. Find book reviews in *Book Review Digest* and *Book Review Index*. The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* gives biographical and critical material. These resources are probably available at your local library. The Internet is often another good source for reviews of the book and biographical information about the author.

1. Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Remember, questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion quickly.
2. Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.
3. Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.
4. Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "I just didn't like it" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of another book that you liked or disliked?
5. Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Of course, every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his or her background, upbringing, experiences, and view of the world. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was killed. That's interesting, but what's

Leading the Discussion

more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim.

Reading Critically and Leading the Discussion were prepared by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library.

Suggestions for Participants

A good discussion depends in large part on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions:

1. **SPEAK UP.** Group discussion is like a conversation: everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

2. **LISTEN** thoughtfully to others. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.

3. **BE BRIEF.** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible. Be ready to let someone else speak.

4. **SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE.** Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comments of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

5. **COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND.** As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

Suggestions are based on New York Public Library's book discussion program.

**HARTFORD
PUBLIC
LIBRARY**