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Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (review)

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thing passes as if, in the face of a void of some human experiences, a space of meaning can be generated by language and its poetic dimension” (454).

A drawing that depicts the magic lamp of Aladdin being held by the genie that emanates from its spout may be considered as just a clever cartoon, as a representation of man’s predicament when faced with representations, as an allegory for the power of fiction, as a significant. Dureau’s reasoning suggests that her belief in the supremacy of art over the phenomena of life was a certainty that she shared with Vladímir Nabokov.

“All reality is a mask” wrote Nabokov, and yet, contrary to Dureau, I prefer to take the ontological status of what this mask hides as an open matter—which is something that every reader will have to decide for himself.

Azar Nafisi. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random, 2003. 368 pp. ISBN 0-375-50490-7 (cloth); 0-8129-7106-X (paper).

Review by Suellen Stringer-Hye, Vanderbilt University

Nabokov could not have wished for more attentive students than those who met on Thursday mornings in 1995 at the Tehran apartment of Azar Nafisi to study English literature. Nafisi, who had recently resigned her position as Professor of English Literature at the University of Tehran, expertly guided a group of seven young women in discussions of works such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Daisy Miller*. *Lolita*, however, was the class favorite. To them, the Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and they were like Dolores Haze—controlled by an authority who confiscates their individual identities and replaces them with a cipher of his own imagination. The slightest provocation, a hair out of place, a bared ankle, maddens Humbert just as it does their own tormentors. In the alternative world of Nafisi’s apartment, where not the horrors and humiliations waiting in the street below but the mountains of Tehran were reflected in the antique oval mirror that hung on the far wall of the living room, Nafisi and her group of hand-picked students used literature, as Nabokov had, to transcend the unacceptable realities of a preposterous life and find a place where art, tenderness, and beauty prevailed. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is Nafisi’s account of the years she spent in Iran trying to come to terms with the totalitarian regime that came to power in 1979. By the time the Islamic Republic had so circumscribed the lives of women that attending an all-girl literature class at the home of a professor might require an alibi, “Knowledge nicely browned” was no longer an option.

For these students, reading Nabokov, reading Persian and western classics, reflecting on and being transformed by what they read, was ultimately an act of subversion.

Nafisi, a student in the 1970s at the University of Oklahoma, read with equal passion Nabokov and Mike Gold, the proletarian American editor of the popular literary journal *New Masses*. As at many American universities of the time, Nafisi and her fellow Iranian and American students viewed the Shah as reactionary and Marxism as a means of transforming Iranian society. Once she returned to Tehran, and both Marxist and Islamic fundamentalists struggled for political control of the country, Nafisi began to realize that the small details and gestures of daily existence such as eating ice cream or simply feeling the wind on your skin were not trivial or bourgeois, as many of her Marxist friends insisted, but the essence of life and identity. The more irrelevant the Islamic Republic made her feel, the more devoted to western literature she became. She then rediscovered Nabokov, rereading *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Ada*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and any of his books—all of which were forbidden—that she could find.

Imagine us, we won't exist unless you imagine us, Nafisi—evoking Nabokov—implores the reader. A country fallen to religious totalitarianism and a group of girls seated around a living room to discuss literature. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is both an account of the devastating rise of Islamicism in Iran since the Islamic Republic was established and a textual engagement with the literary works that helped her cope with it. In the introduction to the book Nafisi writes “I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves, changing and interchanging facets of their lives so that their secrets are safe.” Although written as a personal memoir, certain details hint at the borrowed fictions Nafisi uses to illuminate the story. The name for Mr. Forsati, a student in the Muslim Students' Association who uses his position to gain special privileges, suggests, in Persian, opportunism. When Nafisi decides to put *The Great Gatsby* on trial to determine if it truly is an immoral work, as several of the fundamentalist students in her class have claimed, the description seems to borrow as much from the mock trial in *Alice in Wonderland* as it does from the actual facts of the incident as it took place. Once more echoing Nabokov, Nafisi reminds us that the boundary between fiction and reality is porous and fictions can both irradiate and transform everyday life.

Reading Lolita in Tehran is beautifully imagined and affectionately recalled, and many of the details of the story evoke Nabokov. On the first morning of the private class made up of all of Nafisi's best female students, Mashid, a

devout Muslim who had been jailed for five years because her religious affiliations were not sanctioned by the Islamacists in power, arrives first. After she is convinced that there are no men in the house, Mashid agrees to take off her black robe, revealing a white shirt with a huge yellow butterfly embroidered on it. Nafisi asks, "Did you wear this in honor of Nabokov?" The yellow and white shirt repeats the yellow and white daffodils Mashid has already presented to Nafisi as a housewarming gift. Nabokov's butterfly signals the transition from the bleak world outside to the colored interior of the apartment and the radiant gift that Nabokov and other writers will bestow over the course of the many weeks the group is together.

Reading Lolita in Tehran is part literary criticism, part personal memoir, part political commentary. Its popularity of may be a matter of timing: the subject is topical, and the story of rebellious women refusing to succumb to oppression appealing. But the real charm of this book is in the many small details, such as the green gate at the entrance to the university in front of which the women had to be questioned and searched before they could enter, or the adhesive tape stuck to fortify the windows during the bombing in the Iran-Iraq war, which evoke a reality that is both familiar and alien at the same time. Nafisi, while still teaching at the University of Tehran, wrote the full length *Antiterra: A Critical Reading of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*. She has studied Nabokov deeply, understanding that human imagination and curiosity are prepolitical, that the act most subversive to any political system is to think independently and be true to one's dreams, that even the oppressor cannot always be reduced to his caricature. Borrowing from the rhetoric of Mike Gold and others who sought, however unsuccessfully or misguidedly, to overthrow societal unfairness by direct political action, Nafisi posted this directive at the website entrance to the Dialogue Project, an online forum she conducts to discuss Democracy in the Middle East: "Book Lovers of the World Unite!" For Nafisi, and maybe even Nabokov, good readers really can "save the world."

Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds. *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics, vol. 35. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000. 246 pp. ISBN 90-420-0719-2.

Review by Mary Bellino, South Hadley, Massachusetts

Are there individual Nabokov stories to which his readers return again and again, as we do to *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*, seeking to re-enter their seductive fictional universes, to re-engage with their wonders and mysteries? Perhaps