



Christopher de Bellaigue

In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs
ISBN13: 9780060935368

The personal aspects of this memoir, such as your past and wife Bitá, are tantalizingly few and far between. Why did you decide to focus more on Iranian history and less on your own?

My editors and I had long discussions on whether or not to call the book a memoir. In the end, I think a subtitle that includes the word "memoir" is appropriate; the book is a compendium of memoirs, with me as a kind of general editor, by the people that are the main characters. Yes, my wife Bitá and I come through only fleetingly, but that's the way I wanted it to be. My presence shouldn't overshadow the real purpose of the book, which is to provide a perspective on the Iranian revolution and what happened after it. If readers come away from the book with an image of me, that's fine, and it will have been gleaned largely through the way that I write. But the people that I really want to be remembered are the characters, for their experiences are more extraordinary, and their dilemmas more poignant, than any that I have had to face. They are more interesting than me!

The "betrayal of revolutions" runs thematically through the book, from Iran to Spain to the Soviet Union. Wildly different ideologies, yet very similar problems beset each cause. Are there any alternatives to revolutionary uprising that can act as a force for change?

Of course there are, and it's often the case that incremental, non-revolutionary political development lays the foundations for change that is more profound and long lasting than the sound and fury of toppling governments. What's interesting in Iran is that accusations of betrayal have ended up bringing to power a man, in the form of the new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who claims to want to stop the rot and punish the betrayers. That means a return to economic austerity, an end to perks and kickbacks, a fresh revolutionary impetus. And we're seeing that he's incapable of doing what he set out to do, because the revolution is tragically human in its frailties. It cannot be made pure again, as Ahmadinejad wants.

You write that one can never become spiritually Iranian; that it is a state one is born into. How is the concept of *hess* related to this intrinsically Iranian outlook? Is it possible to explain this concept to a non-Iranian?

The word *hess* or feeling was attractive to me because it was being used by someone, a woman artist called Parastu Forouhar, who was trying to convey the idea of Iranian-ness in her art. Over the course of modern history, many foreigners, like myself, have come to Iran and fallen in love with the place. We infatuated foreigners experience a *hess*, too, but it's a different one. Whether we like it or not, it's bound up in orientalist ideas, in memories of exoticism, and it's intimately connected to the way that Iranians treat us. But the *hess* in my book is code for feelings, a mixture of nostalgia and anger and sadness, and above all patriotism, that many Iranians possess. Maybe there's confusion in there too — how did all this come to pass? Why did everything not work out as we planned? And yes, the feeling is unattainable to us, as foreigners, and we shouldn't try and attain it, for that would be a staged encroachment into something that isn't ours, and can never be ours.

Hassan Abdulrahman (nee David Belfield) embodies so many issues — expatriation, assimilation, religious conversion, etc., he would be fascinating as the subject of a whole other book. Could you elaborate on the contradictions embodied by men like him, the homicidal vileness and brilliant integrity?

Hassan is to be the subject of a forthcoming documentary film that should be fascinating. He and the other characters, those whose motives and actions are shrouded in moral ambiguity, are really the subject of the book. This is where books can be helpful and exploratory in a way that newspaper and magazine articles cannot. In a book, you have the space and license to explore difficult ideas and you don't have to resolve them in a way that can be expressed in a 1,000-word op-ed. You're allowed to throw your hands up at the end and say, "To be honest, I still haven't worked out exactly what I feel about these characters." There is something brilliant and admirable in them, and something dark and intolerant, too. That's not something that the western media, with its obsessive desire to divide the bad guys from the good, does very well. I've been criticized for not taking a hard line in the book on Hassan Abdulrahman, because he murdered a man. But who am I, who grew up privileged and white in a small and stable country, England, to take to task a man who grew up black in 1960s America? That would be intolerably arrogant.

Did your journalistic background aid or hinder the writing of *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*? Are you working on another book?

In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs was conceived as a book, not as a series of articles stuck together. My journalism has taught me to talk to people, and to draw them into talking about difficult subjects. But my approach to the writing is holistic and literary. It's an approach that I will use as I write my current book, about eastern Turkey, a land that is contested by Turks, Kurds, and Armenians.