



In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs

By Christopher de Bellaigue
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Introduction

In a unique blend of history, reportage, travelogue and memoir, journalist Christopher de Bellaigue presents an unnerving view deep into the heart of Iranian culture with *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*. As an Englishman married to an Iranian, de Bellaigue uses his insider's privilege and outsider's perspective to tackle the question of Iran's hostility to the West, the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, and the results of the Iran-Iraq war. History is tragically alive for Iranians -- in every street named after a fallen martyr, every statue, memorial, and death anniversary. Through it all, de Bellaigue gives the reader an intimate look at a complex culture that hauntingly retains its sensuous Persian past while facing an austere, seemingly hopeless present.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the Rose Garden of the Martyrs? How does the title evoke the contradictions present in Iranian culture?
2. Identify some of the social, political and economic weaknesses of the contemporary Islamic Republic. How would the aphorism "the end of innocence is the beginning of politics," apply to Iran, the Soviet Union and George Orwell's account of Barcelona in the late 1930s?
3. From British colonialist oversight to Cold War brinkmanship to CIA involvement in the Iran-Iraq war -- does Iranian paranoia and distrust of the West make sense in the context that, "Iran's sole perceptible gain of the past quarter of a century" is, "the liberty to take important decisions without having to consult a superpower"?
4. Consider the voluptuous displays of grief that surround the mourning ceremonies for Imam Hossein. What other traditional norms enabled young revolutionaries to so freely sacrifice themselves and how did revolutionary leaders use these norms for propagandistic purposes?
5. What does Parastu means by *hess*? How do fables such as *Soo va Shoon* remind de Bellaigue of the beauty and sensuousness of Persia's past? Have these elements survived the ascetic, dogmatic fervor of the revolution?
6. How do Parastu Forouhar and Akbar Ganji illustrate the axiom, "dictatorships are vulnerable to ridicule"?
7. From the "matchsticks marinated in Chanel," to the soldier who discusses Plato and Aristotle, to the conflict between tradition and modernity taking place in all Iranians, how does de Bellaigue avoid showing us the Iran that we've come to expect?
8. How do customs such as *ta'aruf*, or ceremonial insincerity, and the praise lavished on tray-lifters and thick-necks pose insoluble quandaries for de Bellaigue? Why does he want to "curse the Persians" at the memorial service for Mr. Zarif's mother?
9. "If you see something that confuses or upsets you, you put it down to your own ignorance," says de Bellaigue, explaining why Iranians didn't question Khomeini's arms purchases from Israel. Could it also apply to ordinary American's confusion over the Iran-Contra scandal, and perhaps even the decisions of our government today?
10. In what ways does *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs* depart from traditional memoirs? Could the subtitle, *A Memoir of Iran*, be considered an account of a country as much as of a person?

About the Author

Christopher de Bellaigue was born in London and now lives in Tehran with his family. He has spent the past decade working as a journalist in the Middle East and South Asia, and his work appears in *The Economist*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Granta*, and *The New Yorker*.