



The Septembers of Shiraz

By Dalia Sofer
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Introduction

Winner of a 2007 Whiting Writers Award, this accomplished literary debut set in Tehran during the aftermath of the 1979 revolution follows the Amin family as they cope with the father's false imprisonment for being a spy, watch their formerly peaceful world collapse, and flee their homeland.

When Isaac Amin disappears, wrongly accused of being a Zionist spy, his household is transformed from a serene, sun-drenched villa into a crumbling stack of cards. His wife, young daughter, and son (who was sent to New York before the rise of the Ayatollahs) all live in private sorrow as they are forced to reconcile the new world around them with the collapse of their own. Eventually they decide they must flee, but with members of their own household acting as potential informants for the revolutionaries, they fear discovery and face a journey of impossible danger.

Loosely based on Sofer's own experience, *The Septembers of Shiraz* is beautifully told, simmering with questions of identity, alienation, religion, ideals, friendship, and above all love, not just for a spouse, a child, or a friend, but also for the smells and colors of the places where one has lived and in whose soil one's ancestors are buried.

Questions for Discussion

1. Indifference: As Isaac Amin is arrested, he notices the indifference of the items on his desk "witnessing this event." The following morning, his wife Farnaz thinks: "That the city is short by one man this morning makes so little difference." Does one man's suffering or misfortune really affect those around him, or are we essentially alone in the world—whether we are experiencing pain or joy? While we may feel compassion for someone undergoing a difficulty, can we ever truly understand what that person is experiencing?
2. Isaac and Farnaz (as well as Isaac's sister and her husband) are very attached to their belongings. To what extent do the objects that we collect over the years come to define us?
3. The story is told from the points of view of the four family members. How does this affect your experience as a reader?
4. In prison Isaac is picked on because of his materialistic pursuits. His response—that life is to be enjoyed—and his recitation of a poem by Hafez manage to unite the group's opinion in his favor. What do you think of Isaac's philosophy?
5. Are you familiar with the poetic form—the ghazal? If so, where have you encountered this form? Do you have a favorite ghazal that you could share? What do you think of the idea of the ghazal as a symbol for Isaac's situation?
6. Isaac is persecuted because he is Jewish—even though he has led an essentially secular life. His son Parviz, renting an apartment from a Hassidic family in Brooklyn, is denied the love of his landlord's daughter because he is not Jewish enough. What do you think of the ways in which people classify and categorize one another—and set boundaries and differences? Do you think these boundaries are sometimes justified?
7. Isaac's nine-year-old daughter, Shirin, steals files from the basement of a friend whose father is a Revolutionary Guard. How do you understand her actions?
8. What role does memory serve in this novel? As a young man Isaac was a memorizer of poetry, and in prison he memorizes lines from the Koran—a partially calculated act that helps him when faced with his interrogator. But it is the involuntary memory (a term famously coined by Marcel Proust) of each of the characters that surfaces in much of the book. How do these recollections serve the characters, the story, and the reader?
9. Has this book changed your understanding of Iran—its history, its culture, and its people? If so, does this new understanding affect how you perceive the current stand-off between Iran and the United States?

About the Author

Dalia Sofer was born in Iran and fled in 1982, at the age of 10, to the United States with her family. She received her MFA in Fiction from Sarah Lawrence College in 2002 and has been a resident at the Yaddo artists' community. She currently lives in New York City.