



## Between Two Worlds

By Roxana Saberi  
ISBN: 9780061987656

### Introduction

On the morning of January 31, 2009, Roxana Saberi, an Iranian-American journalist working in Iran, was forced from her home by four men and secretly detained in Iran's notorious Evin Prison. The intelligence agents who captured her accused her of espionage—a charge she denied. For several days, Saberi was held in solitary confinement, ruthlessly interrogated, and cut off from the outside world. For weeks, neither her family nor her friends knew her whereabouts.

After a sham trial that made headlines around the world, the thirty-one-year-old reporter was sentenced to eight years in prison. But following international pressure by family, friends, colleagues, various governments, and total strangers, she was released on appeal on May 11, 2009. Now Saberi breaks her silence to share the full account of her ordeal, describing in vivid detail the methods that Iranian hard-liners are using to try to intimidate and control many of the country's people.

In this gripping and inspirational true story, Saberi writes movingly of her imprisonment, her trial, her eventual release, and the faith that helped her through it all. Her recollections are interwoven with insights into Iranian society, the Islamic regime, and U.S.-Iran relations, as well as stories of her fellow prisoners—many of whom were jailed for their pursuit of human rights, including freedom of speech, association, and religion. Saberi gains strength and wisdom from her cellmates who support her throughout a grueling hunger strike and remind her of the humanity that remains, even when they are denied the most basic rights.

*Between Two Worlds* is also a deeply revealing account of this tumultuous country and the ongoing struggle for freedom that is being fought inside Evin Prison and on the streets of Iran. From her heartfelt perspective, Saberi offers a rich, dramatic, and illuminating portrait of Iran as it undergoes a striking, historic transformation.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the book is titled *Between Two Worlds*?
2. Discuss the ways Roxana deals with being in solitary confinement. How do you think you would cope with solitary confinement? What would you do to keep your sanity?
3. While in captivity, the author makes a false confession under duress. In a book review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Susanne Pari writes that when faced with similar circumstances, many of us would have done the same: "When you are threatened with torture and death, when you are made to sleep on a concrete floor in a cell that never grows dark, when you are interrogated to exhaustion in a language that is not your mother tongue, and when everything you've done or said is twisted to prop up a preconceived idea of your criminality, you grasp at anything that promises to set you free."

Examine the author's decision to make a false confession. What are her feelings after having "confessed"? What would you do under similar circumstances?

4. During her time in Evin Prison, Roxana is helped and inspired by many other women prisoners. She writes, "The women I most admired had used the challenges they faced for their own improvement while setting examples for others, both in and out of prison" (p. 209). We are introduced to Zohreh and her mother, Roya, (p.118); Nargess, an accused spy (p.143); humanitarian worker Silva (pp.131-32); Samira, detained after publicly shouting, 'We want bread!' (p.135); Parisa, the diabetic, who like Samira, supported the We Exist civil disobedience movement (p.203); college student Sara (p.153); Baha'i leaders Mahvash and Fariba (p.197); and Mahshid, the spokeswoman for Iran's El-Yasin Community (p.261). Which of these women touched and inspired you most and why?
5. List some of the basic human rights that Roxana and her cellmates are denied by their captors. How does the way she values freedom change during her imprisonment? How well are these rights observed in your country?
6. How important do you think human rights' violations by a government such as Iran's should be in other governments' interactions with it? What do you think governments and individuals can do to help address these violations?
7. On page 34, the author speaks of anger: ". . . anger at the people who had put me here, anger at U.S. policies that gave my captors a pretext to accuse people like me of plotting against the Islamic regime. Anger at God . . . I was also angry at myself. I had been such an idiot to think that my research wasn't that risky, that I would at most be interrogated and not land in prison, that Iranian intelligence agents would be rational enough to see the harmless nature of my work, and that they would believe me if I told the truth."

Explore the author's feelings of anger toward her captors, U.S. policies, God, and herself. How justified do you think her anger is? Would you react in the same way? Discuss the difference between anger that feeds feelings of victimization and anger that is channeled into a positive force.

8. Contrast Roxana's above statement about anger toward her captors with the response that her Baha'i cellmates, Mahvash and Fariba, give when she asks whether they feel anger or hatred toward their captors (p.259).

9. At first, Roxana tends to deny the reality of what is happening to her. For example, she writes on page 10, "This had to be a very, very bad dream, worse than any nightmare I could remember." Later, she comes to accept that she cannot change her circumstances.

How does this acceptance help her better deal with prison? Although she couldn't control her environment, what could she still control?

10. Discuss the turning point in Roxana's life from fearfulness and the decision to lie for self-preservation to fearlessness to stand up for the truth even if it cost her life. What do you think led to this decision? Do you think she made the right decision?

11. After recanting her false confession and while on a hunger strike, Roxana states: "I highly doubted that my captors would let me die. If they did, however, after all I had seen in this place, I had come to believe that death under these circumstances would not be meaningless. At least it might bring attention to the injustices of this system. . . ."

How did Roxana's sense of purpose change from the hours just before her arrest to this point? What do you think brought about this change, and how did it affect her views of life and death?

12. On page 177, Roxana writes that she believes what she had witnessed during the first several weeks of her imprisonment "boiled down to an issue of power" and, "Certain people in power were exploiting that power to suppress individuals who they feared were threatening it." What do you think of her assessment?

13. On page 88, Roxana writes that Iran seemed to have been part of her destiny, and on page 139, she wonders whether her imprisonment was, too. Yet later, she asks her Baha'i cellmates, "But if you leave everything up to God and fate, what room is left for a person's choice of action?" (p.200) Mahvash responds: ". . . we do what we think is right. By doing so, we are taking one step toward God, and we believe He will then take ten steps toward us."

How much of what happens to you do you think is your destiny, and how much depends on your own decisions and actions?

14. What roles do faith and religion play for the different individuals, such as Roxana's interrogators, the women guards, and her cellmates? What roles does faith have for Roxana, and how does her faith evolve during her imprisonment?

15. What role does suffering have for Roxana and her cellmates? Is it always negative, or is it sometimes positive? What has caused suffering in your life, and what purpose do you think suffering can serve?

16. Examine Roxana's relationship with her parents and their actions to aid their daughter in prison.

17. Roxana writes in the epilogue, ". . . we all have our own prisons in life." What are yours? How does Roxana suggest breaking free of them? What do you think "real freedom" means to her? What does it mean to you? What have you done or what could you do to try to break free of your prisons? What does the quote by Saeb Tabrizi, "When a bird realizes that it is other than the cage, it is already free," mean to you?

18. How has this book affected the way you view Iran? The author professes to love Iran even after her imprisonment. How is this possible?

### **About the Author**

Saberi moved to Iran in 2003 to work as the Iran correspondent for the U.S.-based Feature Story News. She filed reports for organizations such as NPR, BBC, ABC Radio, and Fox News, and was working on a book about Iranian society when she was arrested on January 31, 2009. She was released on May 11, 2009.

Saberi grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, the daughter of Reza Saberi, who was born in Iran, and Akiko Saberi, who is from Japan. She was chosen Miss North Dakota in 1997 and was among the top ten finalists in the Miss America Pageant in 1998. She graduated from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, with degrees in communications and French.

Saberi holds her first master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University and her second master's degree in international relations from the University of Cambridge.