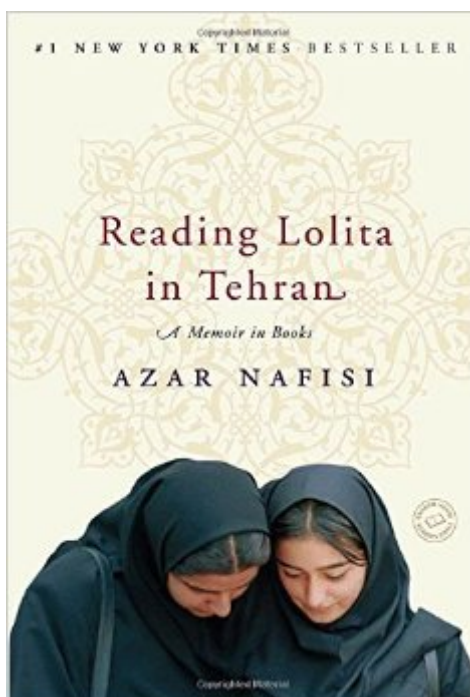


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# Reading Lolita In Tehran: A Memoir In Books



## Synopsis

Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Azar Nafisi, a bold and inspired teacher, secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics. Some came from conservative and religious families, others were progressive and secular; some had spent time in jail. They were shy and uncomfortable at first, unaccustomed to being asked to speak their minds, but soon they removed their veils and began to speak more freely—“their stories intertwining with the novels they were reading by Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, as fundamentalists seized hold of the universities and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the women in Nafisi’s living room spoke not only of the books they were reading but also about themselves, their dreams and disappointments. Azar Nafisi’s luminous masterwork gives us a rare glimpse, from the inside, of women’s lives in revolutionary Iran. Reading *Lolita in Tehran* is a work of great passion and poetic beauty, a remarkable exploration of resilience in the face of tyranny, and a celebration of the liberating power of literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Reading the reviews and the dust jacket, you can get the idea that this is a book about a book club. For this reader, it is more directly about the impact of the Islamic revolution on the lives of educated women in Iran. These women are required at the risk of their lives to wear the "veil," which symbolizes the surrender of their independence to a government that uses fear and intimidation to control them and, in the words of the author, make them "irrelevant." The author, now living in the

US, tells of almost two decades in Iran, as a teacher of English and American literature. She tells of the great hopes for reform after the fall of the Shah and the return from exile of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and with her we watch in horror as the revolution takes Iran by force instead into its medieval past. There are arrests, murders, and executions and those who can, flee to the West. The transformation of Iran is charted by the repressive attempts to make women invisible, by covering them in public from head to toe. It becomes a world in which wearing fingernail polish, even under gloves, is a punishable offense. And punishment, as we learn, is typically brutal. The author escapes from this violence into the imaginative world of Western novels (from Nabokov to Dashiell Hammet) where she finds democratic ideals expressed in fiction's ability to help us empathize with other people. For her, it is the heart that has gone out of the gun-wielding moral police that want to sweep away all but complete submission to their fundamentalist form of Islam. And while she is a teacher, she must deal with classes filled with students who have been polarized by the political forces around them. All, curiously, are in single agreement that the West is corrupt and absolutely evil.

Azar Nafisi has written a brilliant, moving, and frightening book. As a professor of English literature at Tehran University, she provides a unique perspective on the Iranian revolution that changed the world. She considers herself an intellectual. She marched against the west and the USA support of the Shah of Iran. She tells of the joy that she and her colleagues felt at his fall. She tells of the changes in everyday life for intellectuals and for women as the Islamists took over the country. She left her job at the university (a job that she loved) because she refused to wear the veil. She tells of the effects of the eight year long Iraq/Iran war on the women of Tehran, the tyranny of the religious leaders who issue their decrees as though they came directly from God. Nafisi's story is one of change, tyranny, fascism, and the failure in the 20th century to defend women when their identity and their humanity are stolen in the name of religion. It is also the story of personal courage, intelligence, commitment, and love. Nafisi lead a book discussion group for a select group of women in her home in Tehran before leaving Iran. The forbidden fruit that they read was *Lolita*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Daisy Miller*, and *the Great Gatsby*! They risked so much to do this; they risked imprisonment, beatings, rape, and perhaps execution. She tells her story and some of the stories of her students through these group discussions. She has changed the name of the women that are still alive to protect them. She tells one of her student's stories. While in prison she knew of guards who repeatedly raped a young beautiful girl. They justified this punishment because their heinous acts would deny her access to heaven.

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