

کتاب باشکیت

In the Time of Our History by Susanne Pari

Inspired by her own family's experiences as exiles in America following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Susanne Pari explores the tensions between tradition and identity, duty and desire, exile and home, as the prodigal daughter of Iranian immigrants returns to her family's home to honor the One Year anniversary of her sister's tragic death in late 1990s New Jersey...



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Book Setting: Late 1990s, San Francisco/New Jersey

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Dear Reader,

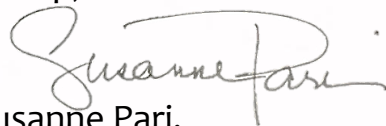
When I was born in this country to an Iranian father and an American mother, Iran was a meaningless word to most Americans, and the term “Iranian-American” hadn’t yet been coined. My family was Shi’ite Muslim and we spent the first two decades of my life going back and forth between Tehran and New Jersey, living in both countries, until the 1979 Iranian Revolution erased that half of our lives.

For various reasons, it has not been safe for me to return to Iran since I last left in August 1978. Because I am a woman, I was downgraded to a second-class citizen when the Shah was exchanged for Ayatollah Khomeini. I am blacklisted by the Revolutionary government. I have written against the regime. I have sued the Iranian government for reparations at the International Court in The Hague.

As a transnational person, I have always viewed and experienced the world from amidst a sprawling family of diverse people. And when I say family, I mean the family we choose, whether these people be blood related or not, whether they are many or few.

In the Time of Our History is one family’s journey to discover how it can evolve and reshape itself to meet the difficult times we live in. I’m grateful to you for spending this time with the Jahani family and *In the Time of Our History*. I am excited to hear your thoughts! If you have a chance to share your reactions on social media, please use the tag **#InTheTimeOfOurHistory** so I don’t miss your posts.

In friendship,



Susanne Pari,
author of *In the Time of Our History*

Praise for *In the Time of Our History*

“This jewel of a novel is a universal tale that naturally leads to self-reflection and conversations about the choices we make, good and bad, early in life and late, which determine our identity.” – **Amy Tan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Joy Luck Club***

“There is so much wisdom and love in this irresistible and assured novel. Susanne Pari understands the complex and flawed thing that is family, and carves right into the center of the human heart.” – **Meg Waite Clayton, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Postmistress of Paris***

“Beautifully written... I’m still thinking about the women who inhabited these pages, the choices they made, and the love between them.” – **Lisa See, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Island of Sea Women***

“A kaleidoscopic look at what it means to be an Iranian-American, what it means to be an American—what it means to be human. Susanne Pari has written a wonderful story that is both unique and universal, a must-read tile in the new mosaic of American novels.” – **Rabih Alameddine, *National Book Award* and the *National Book Critics' Circle Award* finalist for *An Unnecessary Woman***

“A beautifully refined tale of the conflicts, secrets, tragedies, and revelations that many immigrants and their American-born children must live through in order to preserve the fragile fabric of family in the diaspora.” – **Anita Amirrezvani, author of *The Blood of Flowers* and *Equal of the Sun***

“Eloquently captures the complexity of family in this Iranian-American story - defiance in the face of patriarchy, sacrifice, the corrosive nature of secrets, and the satisfaction of finding one's own path.” – **Lalita Tademy, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Cane River*, *Red River*, and *Citizens Creek***

“An enthralling, polyphonic novel of the Iranian diaspora. In the aftermath of tragedy, as secrets unfold, the Jahanis struggle and strive. By turns witty and poignant, this novel lingers in your thoughts long after the last page.” – **Vanessa Hua, bestselling author of *A River of Stars***

Discussion Questions

to spark conversation
and enhance your reading of
In the Time of Our History



1. Mitra and Anahita are first generation Americans, while the rest of the Jahanis are immigrants. What are some of the ways the sisters are different from the others, and do you think the presence of the extended family in their lives influenced their personalities and choices?
2. *In the Time of Our History* tells the story of a secular and educated immigrant family, most of whose members have resettled in the United States because of a Revolution that gave rise to a brutal regime in Iran. Can you imagine yourself in a similar situation? How do you think you would cope with exile and migration to a foreign country? Many of the Jahanis cling to old traditions in order to retain a sense of belonging. Which beliefs and norms would you try to preserve?
3. Mitra and Anahita's childhood relationship was strained, as many sibling relationships are. As adults, however, they have a strong and loving bond. Do you think this would have been the case if Mitra had not discovered Kareem molesting Anahita?
4. Revelation and growth is a theme for many of this novel's characters. Could you relate to Shireen's journey away from stalwart wife toward independent woman? If Anahita and the children hadn't died, do you think Shireen would have taken this path?
5. The romance between Mitra and Julian is complex. While their devotion to each other may run true and deep, there are obstacles that stand in the way of a future for them together. Do you think these obstacles could have been overcome?



6. Yusef is depicted mostly as a ruthless and narcissistic patriarch, not to mention a cold and unfaithful husband. And yet, he also has a traumatic history. Did this history of trauma excuse any of his behavior? And does he achieve some redemption in your mind in the end?
7. Both Salimeh and Zoya are refugees. How are they similar? How are they different? If they wound up on your doorstep, would you help one or both or neither?
8. Do you think Kareem was let off too easily? If so, how do you think he should have paid for his actions?
9. What was your reaction to this sentence at the beginning of Part 3? "He understood that in all but a few earthly societies, rebellion in women is the same as insanity."
10. Child sexual abuse in families is widespread across ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. Each incident is unique, and each victim is affected uniquely. In what ways do you think Anahita's trauma played a role in her decision to pursue a relationship with Aden? How do you think the story would have been different if Anahita hadn't kept so many secrets from Mitra?
11. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the US Embassy Hostage Crisis, Iran and its society have been closed to most Americans. *In the Time of Our History* gives us a peek into that world through several characters' eyes. Were you surprised by the unconventional shape of Olga's life? Were you sympathetic to Zoya's plight? Could you relate to Golnaz's discomfort in visiting her birth country? Did reading *In the Time of Our History* alter your view of Iran and/or Iranians?
12. Autocracies survive when they can control the substance and flow of information to their citizens. This requires a ruthless vigilance to silence intellectuals and creatives. Have you ever been in a situation where you were afraid of writing or saying something you believed?

Q&A with **Suzanne Pari**



Q: You were raised in a large Iranian-American family. How similar are the Jahanis to your extended family?

A: The people in my family aren't as interesting as the Jahanis, at least not that I know of. (Sorry, Family.) That's not to say that my fiction isn't influenced by real life people, events, or observations. But those are only the first bits and pieces that, over a very long and often frustrating and sometimes fun period of musing, daydreaming, spacing out, and drafting finally become the story's characters. For me, it's the characters who create and move the story, so I have to know them far better than I could ever know a person in real life. But I have to admit that I *do* engage in some minor thefts of reality. For example, the Jahani patriarch's office is an exact replica of my own father's; the decor was so perfectly indicative of the mid-century vibe that I couldn't resist. But the father who sits behind that massive desk is nothing like my straight-laced and playful dad.

Q: Motherhood, in its many manifestations, is a theme in this novel. For some characters, motherhood doesn't require that they bear children, only that they love and nurture them. Why did you decide to explore this idea?

A: I grew up, both in the US and in Iran, surrounded by women (in addition to my mother) who played mothering roles in my life. When I became a mother myself, I was living far away from my extended family and this made me painfully aware of the downsides of the nuclear family. It made me sensitive to the women in my life who'd either chosen not to have children or couldn't have them, but who had nurtured and advised me in ways my mother couldn't. I wanted to clarify these women's decisions and to honor them.



Q: You were raised a Moslem, but now call yourself secular. Can you tell us about that process? How influential were your maternal family's Jewish and Christian beliefs and traditions on you as a person and as a writer?

A: My American mother, who was the product of a Jewish-Christian marriage, converted to Islam to please my father's devout Shia parents. Her belief was in God, she said, not a specific religion. My father, who was actively, but not strictly, religious, taught me and my siblings the basic tenets of Shia Islam and we identified as Moslems (this spelling is based on the Persian pronunciation). After the Ayatollah Khomeini wrenched power away from the Shah in 1979 and turned Iran into a theocratic dictatorship with a convoluted interpretation of Sharia Law, my father and my family stopped identifying as Moslem. We aren't unusual. Even inside Iran, only about 30% of people say they're Moslem. So, not all Moslems or Muslims (or Christians or Jews) are the same. Personally, I don't view these three major religions as very distinct, and the stereotypical ways in which we, as a society, depict them has always frustrated me. In their extreme, they breed the same kind of fanatics down to the costumes they wear. So I find it comforting to reject religion as tool to control people, obtain power, and make money.

Q: In the novel, one of your characters says that patriarchy cannot exist without the collusion of women. What do you mean by this?

A: Patriarchy happens to be the predominant societal structure in this world, and since women comprise half the population, it must be supported by us to survive. That doesn't mean we're aware of all the ways in which we prop it up. From how we raise our children to the stances we take in our marriages to the responsibilities we take on at work—our decisions are subtly influenced by our individual and familial histories. If our mothers deferred to our fathers and spoiled our brothers, many of us will do the same without thinking; it's what we consider 'normal,' even if we believe in gender equality. I wanted my characters to discover these points of collusion in their own lives. The behaviors, secrets, and silences that we may think are protective to our loved ones, but in reality are forms of collusion that can perpetuate a damaging norm.

Additional Resources from Susanne Pari on **Iranian Culture and History**

- **The Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies**
at San Francisco State University (cids.sfsu.edu)

This is an especially great organization for people with Iranian heritage or interest in Iranian culture who don't read or speak Farsi. The Center also organizes some excellent intimate events, both in person and virtually.

- **Hostages on HBO**

This four-part HBO documentary series presents a very fair and nuanced take on an episode that still haunts both my countries to this day: the Iran Hostage Crisis. In addition to examining the 444 days of the crisis itself, the series explores the geo-political history that led up to it and the impact it's had on the last four decades.

- ***Our Summer in Tehran***

Filmmaker Justine Shapiro's 2009 documentary is an intimate and honest look into the middle class lives of three Iranian mothers with young children.

You can watch the trailer at:

rocofilms.com/films/our-summer-in-tehran/

Additional Resources from Susanne Pari on Iranian Culture and History



Taken in my backyard in Northern California, this is a photo of a unique and much-loved Persian dish. The crispy golden crust is called *tahdig*, which translates to “bottom of the pot” – a fitting name for a food that’s baked in a pot and then flipped over to look like a cake.

This dish can be made out of lavash bread or sliced potatoes or even a tortilla. When I made the dish you see in the photo, I simply used rice and cooked it slowly on the stove over a low-to-medium heat.

To serve, you slice into the dish like you would cut a cake or pie. Inside, the rice is soft, but not mushy; if you’re lucky (or an expert), the grains are long and separate from one another. It has taken me many years to be lucky.

Do you see how the Coca-Cola bottle behind the rice dish shows the logo in Persian script?



I brought back this bottle back to the US during one of the many visits my family made to Iran before the 1979 Revolution, when Coke was still producing their product in Iran. I don’t know what prompted me to carry an empty soda bottle in my suitcase across half the world, but it probably had something to do with proving to my friends in America that Iran wasn’t as backward as they assumed. That I kept it for all these years and suddenly had the urge to bring it to life again is one of those heartbreaking reminders that the wounds of exile never really heal completely.

Additional Resources from Susanne Pari on

Iranian Culture and History



A few facts about Persian tea...

We call it chai, but it's nothing like the Indian chai that has become so popular in the US.

Persian tea is never made with milk. It's a black tea usually spiced with cardamom and always served in a glass so that the color can be appreciated.

It's steeped much like Russian tea, atop a samovar or on a pot of boiling water on the stovetop.

To watch a good video about the history and details of brewing Persian tea, visit this link:

<https://bit.ly/PersianTeaInfo>



Or scan this QR code.

Since Mitra, my main character, is devoted to architecture and restoration, here is a glimpse of two very different, but very Persian, homes in Tehran today, one traditional and one very modern (with moving sections!):





Susanne Pari is an Iranian-American novelist, journalist, essayist, and reviewer whose writing spotlights stories of displacement and belonging, of identity and assimilation, of trauma and resilience. Born in New Jersey to an Iranian father and an American mother, she grew up both in the United States and Iran until the 1979 Islamic Revolution forced her family into permanent exile. Her first novel, *The Fortune Catcher* has been translated into six languages and her non-fiction writing has appeared in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Boston Globe*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *National Public Radio*, and *Medium*. A former Program Director for Book Expo, she is a member of the National Book Critics Circle, the Author's Guild, the San Francisco Writers' Grotto, and the Castro Writers' Cooperative, she serves on the board of the Lakota Children's Enrichment Writing Project and is an alumna of the Hedgebrook Writing Residency. She blogs occasionally for the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies and divides her time between Northern California and New York.

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