

## Things I've Been Silent About

*Azar Nafisi*

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Azar Nafisi, author of the beloved international bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, now gives us a stunning personal story of growing up in a family in Iran, moving memories of her life lived in thrall to a powerful and difficult mother, against the background of Iran during a time of revolution and change. A young girl's pain over family secrets and a mother's lost life, a young woman's discovery of the power of sensuality in literature, the price a family pays for freedom in a country beset by political upheaval—these and other threads are woven together in this beautiful memoir, as a gifted storyteller once again uses her own life to transform the way we see the world and “reminds us of why we read in the first place” (*Newsday*).

Azar Nafisi's intelligent and complex mother, disappointed in her dreams of leading an important and romantic life, created mesmerizing fictions about herself, the past, her rich first husband who died at a young age, and her own family. As she talked to her children, she would disappear into these family stories, narratives of triumph that hid as much as they revealed. Nafisi's father escaped into narratives of another kind—into the classic talks of Persian literature—telling his beloved daughter of the great heroes and heroines in *Shahnamah*, the Persian Book of Kings, and in other Persian classics. As her father began a series of love affairs, his daughter began to lie to her mother about her father's infidelities, and about other events women were supposed to be silent about. Nafisi's complicity in these childhood dramas ultimately led her to resist remaining silent about political, cultural, social, and personal injustices. Part detective story and part portrait of an exceptional woman, marriage, and mother-father-daughter struggle, *Things I've Been Silent About* is also a deeply personal reflection on women's choices, and on how Azar Nafisi found inspiration for a different kind of woman's life, first in stories by Persian writers and then in stories by Western writers, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Reaching back in time to reflect on other generations in the Nafisi family, *Things I've Been Silent About* is also a powerful historical portrait of a family's life that spans the twentieth century in Iran, during many periods of change leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979, which turned Azar Nafisi's beloved Iran into a religious dictatorship. Writing of the strength and intelligence that allowed her mother to serve in Parliament, even while her father, once mayor of Tehran, was in jail, Nafisi also explores the coffee hours her mother held all her life, where at first women came together to gossip, to tell fortunes, and to give silent acknowledgment of things never spoken about, and then evolved to where men and women would meet to openly discuss the unfolding revolution.

This unforgettable portrait of a woman, a family, and of a troubled beloved homeland is a stunning book that millions of readers will embrace, a new triumph from an author who is a modern master of the memoir.

## Things I've Been Silent About Details

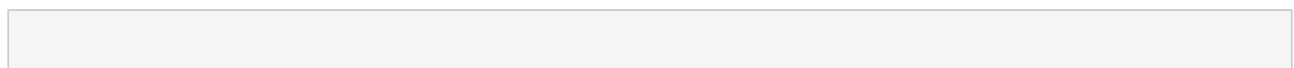
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
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Nafisi is making more universal claims than "Islam is backward" or something equally ridiculous. Her first introduction to literature was to the Persian classics, and she has a profound love and understanding of her nation's literature as well as Islam's. It's married, though, to the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual "adventure." She celebrates the wealth there is to admire in Islam but she's firmly opposed to the repression and hypocrisy of many of its clerics as much as she opposed the same ethos under the Shah, or the same in any society claiming to be civilized.

There *is* some information on contemporaneous events - Nafisi's involvement in student associations in the States during the '70s, when she was getting her degree; her father's imprisonment under the Shah; or the imprisonment and murder of several family members - but this is decidedly of secondary importance except as it impacts her relations with mom and dad. A position which snarks off some critics to a laughable degree. I often check out reviews after reading an interesting and/or difficult book because I find they help organize and articulate my own reactions to a book (even if I disagree). In that spirit, I came across this hysterical overreaction to Nafisi (in this case, to her first book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*):

*That article is part of a larger set of reflections on the nature and function of the US Empire - a chimerical construct much in need of theorization since the groundbreaking work of Negri and Hardt.... In my "Native Informer" essay, the selection of RLT as a case in point is rather secondary to my primary concern at typologizing the formation of the category of "the Native Informers" or "Comprador Intellectuals" at the service of furthering the cause of this empire.*  
Hamid Dabashi, interview in Z Magazine

When I read that my BS alarm blew a fuse. Dabashi appears to have willfully missed the entire point of Nafisi's first book (and he'll probably miss this one's as well). Not caring to engage Nafisi as an individual but as an extension of the "US Empire" that haunts his own ideology.

A final thought: While I can't really recommend Qanta Ahmed's *In the Land of Invisible Women: A Female Doctor's Journey in the Saudi Kingdom*, it would be instructive to read it in tandem with *Things I've Been Silent About*.

Both this book and *Reading Lolita* are highly recommended. Nafisi is an articulate writer and an interesting person well worth becoming acquainted with.

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## Kim says

I read Nafisi's best known book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, when it was first published in 2003. While I appreciated the work, it did not leave me with a desire to read anything else by Nafisi. I admired the writing, but I had conceived a dislike for the writer. I cannot easily explain why. However, it seemed to me that there was something unapproachable about Nafisi - an intellectual arrogance, maybe - which made me unable to warm to her.

A few weeks ago I became involved in a discussion about Iran in a GR group which encouraged me to put aside my negative reaction to Nafisi and read this book. Reading it hasn't made me like Nafisi much better. However, it has given an opportunity to analyse why I had that reaction. It has also given me an opportunity to develop some empathy for Nafisi.

There are a number of things that I really like about this book. First, there's its style. Nafisi's prose is beautiful: elegant, lucid, intelligent. She weaves Persian and western literary allusions into her narrative in a way which illuminates and adds to the text. Next, there's the evocation of a past Iran, with every day events and family history woven into the fabric of social and political history. In addition, there's Nafisi's ability to re-create in her writing a child's perspective and reactions to the events going on around her. There's also - I think - a genuine attempt to be honest and to write an account of her life which goes against the cultural imperative to keep family secrets within the family.

What I like less about the book is Nafisi herself: her elusiveness, her brittleness, her remoteness. To me she comes across as rigid, uncompromising and possibly as someone who would deal with opposition – or more particularly with disappointment or the thwarting of her will – in a manner just as unsatisfactory as her mother's. In addition, Nafisi makes a point of saying that this work is about truth-telling. Although I believe that she has written with honesty, there are still some things which I don't think are well-explained. One of them is Nafisi's decision to marry the first time. Escaping home makes sense, but given that Nafisi's family supported her desire for further education, it's not clear why she didn't choose to study abroad without getting married first.

I read lots of books about Iran. It's a country and a culture that I love and with which I am familiar. Eight years after reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I'm glad to have finally acquired a little more understanding of Nafisi and the family dynamics which have influenced her. I also understand what caused my initial negative reaction to her writing. With that understanding, I won't be reluctant to read what she writes in the future.

A post-script: I've noticed something odd. Nafisi's GR biography page states that she was born in 1955. However, given that she was in high school at the time her father was imprisoned in 1963 and was married for the first time when she was in her late teens and her father was still in prison three years later, a 1955 birthdate seems somewhat unlikely.

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## Marina Nemat says

*Things I've Been Silent About* is the second memoir of Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which became an international bestseller in 2003. This new book is a collection of memories of Nafisi's growing up in Tehran as a privileged young girl in an elite family with a complicated, overwhelming mother, who didn't give her children any personal space, and a charming but sad father, who filled Nafisi's childhood with stories from the *Shahnameh* (The Persian Book of Kings) and whose desperate search for a happy family life never seemed to bear fruit. Nafisi is tangled in the web of her dysfunctional family, trying to see herself as the person she truly is and not as her mother and father want her to be, and, eventually, she escapes her troubled family life and gets into a marriage that ends in divorce.

The backdrop to this story is Iran, which is slowly moving toward the devastating Islamic revolution of 1979 that even though succeeds in overthrowing the autocratic Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, eventually, instead of delivering its promises of democracy, results in the loss of even the basic personal freedoms of Iranian citizens.

Nafisi's mother, whose first husband—the son of a prime minister—dies a couple of years after their marriage, never seems to be able to move on and love her second husband—Nafisi's father—and lives in a fictional world she has created, which she regularly reinvents depending on circumstances. By doing so, she destroys her relationship with all of the members of her family and drives them further and further away from her.

Nafisi is sent abroad when she is about 12 or 13 years old and spends years in England, Switzerland, and the United States, visiting her family in Iran in between her studies, returning to the country shortly after the success of the Islamic revolution in 1979. In about 1961, Nafisi's father becomes the mayor of Tehran, and later her mother is elected as one of the first female members of the Iranian parliament. But her father is arrested in 1963—when he is still the mayor—and remains in prison, without trial, for four years on alleged charges of corruption. However, the truth is that he is the victim of a conspiracy by his political rivals, who have accused him of sympathizing with Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters.

Nafisi tells her family story with a sure, steady hand; for me (I was born and raised in Iran), *Things I've Been Silent About* is a vivid collection of familiar images and emotions, but for the Western reader, it would be an interesting journey through Iran's history from mid 1900s to a few years after the success of Islamic revolution of 1979, intertwined with family tension and drama.

When reading a memoir that is set against a serious and important historical background, I usually create a "time line," marking the date and place of every notable event in the book. This helps me remember things and put them into perspective. However, I found creating the "time line" of *Things I've Been Silent About* quite challenging, if not impossible. Even though this book is about Ms. Nafisi's life, I couldn't find her date of birth in the book, not even on the copyright page. It is important to know the age of the heroine of a memoir: how old is she when she moves away from home to a distant and strange country, falls in love for the first time, or marries? At the end, I had to Google Ms. Nafisi and found that only Wikipedia had her date of birth, which it stated at 1955. However, after spending a long time studying the book's photos and events, I realized that this was basically impossible: Ms. Nafisi must have been born in 1948 or 49 – so I hope that she would clarify this.

Many Iranians, including myself, couldn't truly relate to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, because we had not read most of the novels that Ms. Nafisi had discussed and analyzed in it. This was the main downside of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* for me, and I was surprised when all the members of my book club, who are all very well-read Canadian-born women, felt the same way – but I'm glad to report that in *Things I've Been Silent About*, Ms. Nafisi speaks mainly of family relations and Persian literature and keeps referrals to Western novels to a minimal. In a book about Iran, which has a very rich history and culture, it might be to the advantage of the reader if the author remains – as much as it is humanly and circumstantially possible – within the realm she is trying to describe.

It is very difficult to fairly critique a memoir or a person's memories of certain events and especially of family life, as how we see the world depends largely on our perspective. It is a fact that Ms. Nafisi's privileged social status naturally affects the images she creates in her works, but this in no way diminishes their value. Ms. Nafisi's long periods of absence from Iran create fragments in the book that come together to paint a complex mosaic that is both Eastern and Western. Ms. Nafisi is an Iranian English professor, and it can be argued that it is her job to discuss *Lolita*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Anna Karenina*, etc. and to draw parallels between them and the world. Regardless of whether from the East or the West, both good fiction and narrative non-fiction have carried the human experience through hundreds of years of war, revolution, and turmoil, making history real and tangible, and even if they do not exactly correspond with our personal view of the world, they deserve our respect and attention.

*Things I've Been Silent About* is a great read, but reading 2 or 3 books on Iran would not give an individual who has never lived in that country a complete understanding of its complexities and paradoxes. Iran is a huge puzzle, and each book written on it is merely a small part of the whole image. (THIS REVIEW WAS PUBLISHED IN THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

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## Chris says

This book isn't about Iranian politics. It's about an Iranian daughter and her family. This isn't a bad thing.

Nafisi is a fascinating woman, and this book, written in chronological sequence, is in many ways a meditation on family which makes it strangely compelling. It is as if you are watching Nafisi walk back through her memories.

Yet despite its very personal feel, the book also is a good way to show the differences and similarities of culture. Nafisi family is warped but in much the same way that many American families are warped. Showing that while culture might affect us differently, some things are human, not cultural.

Of course, some things are cultural, like when Nafisi is forced to veil when she goes to work. And this is important too, because people are amazingly alike while being amazingly different.

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### **Kefaya Al Mubarak says**

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### **Irwan says**

Reading a memoir, at worst, satisfies us the way gossip shows do. We peep into other people's life and see things similar or different from ours. We take pleasures from mistakes and failures that others do - we learn the lessons or just secretly be thankful that it doesn't happen to us.

At best, reading a memoir is like being a confidant to a close friend. She opens up her life, her intricate relationship with her parents, and her experience as an individual citizen in the political, religious context of her country. And this book is the second one for me.

If I ever become a writer, I guess what she is doing with this book is the scariest thing for me. I would imagine it is not a simple thing for her either. The personal part of the book is mainly about her parents' relationship — a father desiring to be loved and approved and a dominant mother who denied it — and how the children are affected by the dramas it created. This is summed up beautifully in the first paragraph of the prologue.

*"Most men cheat on their wives to have mistresses. My father cheated on my mother to have a happy family life. .... He later claimed that most of his relations with these other women were not sexual, that what he*

*yearned for was the feeling they gave him of warmth and approval. Approval! My parents taught me how deadly that desire could be."*

That paragraph hooked me. Nafisi's fluent writing shows clearly how she deals with the problems. I suspect that writer's sensibilities of hers somehow help her as well. She described the people in her life the way novelists would probe their characters.

Her literary references among details of the story being told is natural and even poetics. One of my favorites is when she talks about a birth certificate of the wife of her cousin. They are devout muslims, as opposed to her secular lifestyle, who feel betrayed by the atrocities entailing the Islamic revolution. They joined the Mojahedeen organization and thus become fugitives. "Objects have tears in them", she referred to Virgil's Aeneas. The birth certificate (shown in picture) shows her cousin's wife photo with her dark scarf and no smile, fake name and personal data. The couple has long gone in their escape from the Islamic regime. She wonders how she ended up with this birth certificate alongside piles of diaries and notes: "what tears are hidden in its pages?"

This is probably an example how knowledge of literature can enrich one's life: rich ways to withdraw wisdoms and beautiful renditions of our seemingly mundane lives. This is my main attraction to this book.

Another interesting aspect is the personal accounts of the historical moments of her country, Iran. How the atrocities of the Islamic regime encourage some of its citizens to relive the pre-islamic, zoroastrian past to withdraw identity and romanticism as a way to disconnect themselves with the present. She presented this point through literature: Shahnameh (Books of Kings). Interestingly, this is also the way she disconnects or escapes from the pains inflicted by the dysfunctional relationship of her parents. Her father told her stories when she was upset by the verbal abuse of her dominant mothers.

As a woman she also experiences the intrusiveness of the regime in the personal space, i.e.: telling women what and what not to wear. She once stopped by a young man shouting "Hey, hejabeto dorost kan!" (hey, adjust your veil!). The simple shouting soon turned ugly when ignored, the young man abused her verbally "We don't want sluts in this country. Haven't you heard, there has been a revolution!".

I am secretly thankful that I was not in her shoes, but I get the message that we should be aware of this kind of atrocities from its earliest symptoms, before it's too late.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that this is a very well written memoir, balanced in its elements and heartwarmingly depicting a life in the context of a family as well as a country. Oh, how similar the two contexts can sometimes be!

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## Simona says

Dopo "Leggere Lolita a Teheran" ritorno ad assaporare, a vivere il mondo di Azar Nafisi. Il mondo raccontato dalla Nafisi è un mondo affascinante per certi versi, in quanto ci permette di conoscere meglio Teheran, la sua terra natia, ma è allo stesso tempo un mondo difficile e particolare in quanto vi sono leggi e divieti incomprensibili e deleteri per una donna.

"Le cose che non ho detto" è un viaggio che racconta cosa significa essere donna a Teheran dove tutti i tuoi diritti sono violati. E' una autobiografia alla quale si intreccia la storia di 40 anni di lotta, la guerra tra Iran e Iraq sino all'ayatollah Khomeini che ha reso difficile la vita alle donne e a tutti gli altri abitanti.

Ad ogni pagina, capitolo ci innamoriamo di Azar Nafisi, dei negozi nei quali era solita andare, dei bazar che ama frequentare, respiriamo i sapori, i profumi, gli odori di una terra lontanissima da noi per cultura,

