



# The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books

by Azar Nafisi (2014)

## Introduction

A few years ago I was in Seattle signing books at a marvelous independent bookstore called Elliott Bay when I noticed a young man standing by the table, watching me. When the line had dwindled, he finally addressed me. He said he was passing through Seattle, visiting a friend, and he wanted me to know he had lived in Iran until recently. "It's useless," he said, "your talk about books. These people are different from us—they're from another world. They don't care about books and such things. It's not like Iran, where we were crazy enough to xerox hundreds of pages of books like *Madame Bovary* and *A Farewell to Arms*."

Before I had time to think of a response, he went on to tell me about the first time he had been arrested, late at night during one of the usual random car searches by the revolutionary militia. He had been taken into custody with his two friends, more for their insolence than for the contraband tapes found in the car. They were kept for forty-eight hours and then released without explanation, after being fined and flogged. There was no denying that a normal day in the life of a young Iranian is very different from that of most young Americans.

I had heard such stories many times before, but there was something unusual about this young man. He spoke in a casual tone that made what he said all the more poignant, as if he were trying to negate the event by describing it in a nonchalant

manner. He said that during the floggings, it was not just the pain but the humiliation that had made him feel for a few moments as if he were leaving his body and becoming a ghost, watching himself being flogged from a distance. "It made it easier," he added, "as a ghost."

"I know what you mean," I said. "It was a good survival technique."

"It still is," he said, with his knowing smile.

By now there was a line again, patiently and politely waiting, and I made a silly remark to the effect that perhaps America was a land of ghosts anyway. He did not react to that. Instead he handed me a Post-it note and said, "I don't have a book. This is for a friend."

I signed my name on that orange Post-it and gingerly handed him my card. "Let's be in touch," I said. He took both the Post-it and the card and of course he never did get in touch. But I never lost track of him completely, because that young man, with his serene smile and his words, revisits me in strange places and seemingly unrelated encounters. He has stayed with me partly because I felt then, as I do now, that I had disappointed him—something was expected of me that was not fulfilled. When I realized he was going to haunt me for the foreseeable future, I decided to give him a name: Ramin, in honor of another young man I had known in Iran who told me about a similar experience. All these ghosts—how do we fulfill our responsibilities toward them?

Thinking over what Ramin had said, I found it intriguing that he had suggested not that Americans did not understand *our* books but that they didn't understand their own. In an oblique way, he had made it seem as if Western literature belonged more

to the hankering souls of the Islamic Republic of Iran than to the inhabitants of the land that had given birth to them. How could this be? And yet it is true that people who brave censorship, jail and torture to gain access to books or music or movies or works of art tend to hold the whole enterprise in an entirely different light.

"These people," he had said with his inscrutable smile, "are different from us. They don't care about books and such things." Every once in a while, after a talk, during a book signing or over coffee with an old friend, this point will come up, usually as a question: "Don't you think that literature and books were so important in Iran because there was so much repression there? And don't you think that in a democracy there is no such urgent need for them?"

My impulse now, as then, is to disagree. The majority of people in this country who haunt bookstores, go to readings and book festivals or simply read in the privacy of their homes are not traumatized exiles. Many have seldom left their hometown or state, but does this mean that they do not dream, that they have no fears, that they don't feel pain and anguish and yearn for a life of meaning? Stories are not mere flights of fantasy or instruments of political power and control. They link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but as they should be or might become. Imaginative knowledge is not something you have today and discard tomorrow. It is a way of perceiving the world and relating to it. Primo Levi once said, "I write in order to rejoin the community of mankind." Reading is a private act, but it joins us across continents and time.

But perhaps there is another, more personal reason for my

disagreement with Ramin: I cannot imagine myself feeling at home in a place that is indifferent to what has become my true home, a land with no borders and few restrictions, which I have taken to calling “the Republic of Imagination.” I think of it as Nabokov’s “somehow, somewhere” or Alice’s backyard, a world that runs parallel to the real one, whose occupants need no passport or documentation. The only requirements for entry are an open mind, a restless desire to know and an indefinable urge to escape the mundane.

Long before I made America my home, I inhabited its fiction, its poetry, its music and films. My first fictional journey to America took place when I was about seven, when my English tutor in Tehran introduced me to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Our main text was a book with simple stories about a pair of American siblings, predictably a girl and a boy. One peculiar feature of these two fiercely clean and well-groomed urchins was that no matter what happened to them, their expressions were fixed in a perpetual smile. I knew their names (was it Jack and Jill? Dick and Jane?), their last names (the Smiths? the Joneses? the Partridges?), where they lived, their daily routine, their school. None of these small and essential details have stayed with me. There was little in their world that made me want to know these smiling, immaculately groomed children any better. The only thing I remember about that book, the one thing that was slightly interesting, was its cover: gritty to the touch, with an image of the two siblings foregrounded on a dark green background.

Near the end of each session, my tutor would close our

exercise book and make her way to the kitchen, from which she would emerge with a glass of cherry sherbet and a worn copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. She read only a few pages each time, keeping me in suspense, impatient for our next meeting. Sometimes she would tell me stories from the book or have me read a short passage. I was mesmerized by the orphan Dorothy, who lived in the middle of a flat gray landscape somewhere in the middle of nowhere with her dour and hardworking aunt and uncle and whose only cheerful companion was her dog, Toto. What would happen to her when a cyclone lifted her up with her house, with Toto trapped inside, and landed them in a magical place called Oz? Like millions of children, I impatiently followed Dorothy and her growing group of friends in search of the mighty Wizard of Oz, the only person who could give the Scarecrow a mind, the Tin Man a heart and the Lion courage, and make possible Dorothy’s journey home.

Had I been able to formulate my first impressions of the United States, I might have said that there was a place in America called Kansas, where people could find a magic land at the heart of a cyclone. Because that was the first time I had heard the word “cyclone,” I can honestly say that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* taught me both its real and imagined meanings. Kansas and Omaha were soon followed by a river called Mississippi and many more cities, rivers, forests, lakes and people—the orderly suburban households of Nancy Drew, the frontier towns of *Little House on the Prairie* and stormy plantations of *Gone with the Wind*, the Kentucky farm of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the dusty, sultry southern streets of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where justice was as embattled a notion as it would soon be in Tehran. Later, these were

joined by Faulkner's Mississippi, Fitzgerald's St. Paul, Edith Wharton's New York and then Richard Wright's and Ralph Ellison's very different New York, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles and the southern towns of Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Even now I feel there are so many geographical and fictional terrains left to discover. Perhaps this was the main reason why I could not agree with Ramin: America, to my mind, cannot be separated from its fiction.

When they were young my parents were not wealthy, but all through their lives the one thing they never hesitated to give my brother and me was books. They would entrust friends who traveled abroad with long lists of titles they couldn't find for us in Tehran. As I grew up and wanted the things my friends had, my father would tell me time and again in different ways that I should not focus on things. Possessions, he would say, can't be relied on—they're easier to lose than to obtain. You should value what you can carry with you until the day you die.

One of the first books my father brought home for me to read in English was *Tom and Jerry*. I still remember when he gave me *The Little Prince* and *Charlotte's Web*, which taught me that something as fragile and forgettable as a spider's web could offer up a hidden universe. When I first read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, I was intrigued by Tom's seductive charm but did not really like him—maybe his bag was too full of tricks. In time, books and the world of the imagination they unlocked would become the portable possessions my father had hoped I would always carry with me.

Every Thursday evening, he would take me to a movie house in the fun part of town and I looked forward to our private time together all week. I remember walking hand in hand with him

down Naderi Avenue, itself like a scene in an impressionist movie, with its chaotic shops selling nuts, spices, coffee, pirashki and ice cream. Alongside Iranian films, we saw ones starring Ismail Yasin, Fernandel, Norman Wisdom and Vittorio De Sica and the romantic dramas of the Indian superstars Raj Kapoor and Nargis. And, of course, we saw American films: *Spartacus* and *Ivanhoe*, *Mogambo*, Laurel and Hardy, *South Pacific* and one of my favorites, Danny Kaye's *Hans Christian Andersen*. I was not sure what to make of American musicals, where characters suddenly started gyrating in the middle of a meal or while walking down the street, as if overtaken by a mischievous genie, bursting into song only to calm down the next minute and resume eating or talking or kissing. Ever since, I have thought of America as a land of song and dance. From an early age I nurtured an idea of America that I believed in even if I knew that its reality, like any reality, was certain to fall short in some way and disappoint.

My father translated the tales of La Fontaine for my brother and me, doing all of the drawings himself, and wrote simplified versions of the classic Persian poets Ferdowsi and Nezami. More than anything when I think of him, this is what I remember: his sharing of his time and pleasure with me, as if I were his equal, his companion and co-conspirator. There was no moral lesson to be drawn; it was an act of love, but also of respect and trust.

Eleven years have now passed since I met Ramin at that bookstore in Seattle, and since then I have traveled thousands of miles over thirty-two states, conversing mainly about the subject he and I talked about that day. And he did have a point. Between my first

book tour, in 2003, and the next one, in 2009, many of the places I visited had undergone a significant transformation or vanished: Cody's in Berkeley, seven branch libraries in Philadelphia, twelve of the fourteen bookstores in Harvard Square, Harry W. Schwartz in Milwaukee and, in my own hometown of Washington, D.C., Olsson's and Chapters. At first it was the independent bookstores, then came the bigger chains: Borders (I wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran* at the Borders on Eighteenth and L, now a Nordstrom Rack) and, more recently, the Barnes & Noble in Georgetown, replaced by a cavernous Nike store—and the list goes on.

It is not just bookstores and libraries that are disappearing but museums, theaters, performing arts centers, art and music schools—all those places where I felt at home have joined the list of endangered species. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe* and my own hometown paper, *The Washington Post*, have all closed their weekend book review sections, leaving books orphaned and stranded, poor cousins to television and the movies. In a sign of the times, the Bloomberg News website recently transferred its book coverage to the *Luxury* section, alongside yachts, sports clubs and wine, as if to signal that books are an idle indulgence of the super-rich. But if there is one thing that should not be denied to anyone rich or poor it is the opportunity to dream.

Long before that extremely cold, sunny morning in December 2008 when I took a loyalty oath at an Immigration Services office in Fairfax, Virginia, and finally became an American citizen, I had often asked myself, What transforms a country from a place you simply live in or use as a refuge into a home? At what point do “they” become “us?” When you choose to call

a place home, you no longer treat it with the episodic curiosity of a guest or a visitor. You are concerned with the good and the bad. Its shortcomings are no longer merely topics of conversation. You wonder, Why are things this way and not another? You want to improve the place, to change it, to make your complaints known. And I had done enough complaining by then to know it was time I became an American citizen.

When the founding fathers conceived of this new nation, they understood that the education of its citizens would be essential to the health of their democratic enterprise. Knowledge was not just a luxury; it was essential. In those days, men who worked for a living were not thought to be fit for public life and a liberal arts education was essential for anyone aspiring to join the political class of the new republic. Over time, politics became a more contentious enterprise, and a new political class was born that had little time for cultivated gentleman farmers who read Cicero and Tacitus for pleasure. Of course, the founding fathers' hope was that one day all Americans, regardless of their wealth or station, would have an opportunity to read Tacitus and Cicero. The point of their new democracy was not just to vote but to make accessible to most citizens what had until then been enjoyed by only a few. Museums, libraries and schools were built to further this democratic ideal. Jefferson, who spent his life collecting books, many of which he donated to the Library of Congress, boasted that America was the only country whose farmers read Homer. “A native of America who cannot read or write,” said John Adams, “is as rare an appearance . . . as a Comet or an Earthquake.”

I have often wondered whether there is a correlation between

the growing lack of respect for ideas and the imagination and the increasing gap between rich and poor in America, reflected not just in the gulf between the salaries of CEOs and their employees but also in the high cost of education, the incredible divide between private and public schools that makes all of the fine speeches by our policy makers—most of whom send their children to private schools anyway, just as they enjoy the benefits and perks of their jobs as servants of the people—all the more insidious and insincere. Those who can afford private schooling need not worry about their children being deprived of art, music and literature in the classroom: they are more sheltered, for now, from the doctrine of efficiency that has been radically refashioning the public school curriculum.

American students, we are told, are falling behind in reading and math; on test after test, they score below most European students (at the level of Lithuania), and the solution, rather than seeking to engage their curiosity, has been testing and more testing—a dry and brittle method that produces lackluster results. And so resources are pulled from the “soft” fields that are not being tested. Music teachers are being fired or not replaced; art classes are quietly dropped from the curriculum; history is simplified and moralized, with little expectation that any facts will be learned or retained; and instead of reading short stories, poems and novels, students are invited to read train schedules and EPA reports whose jargon could put even the most committed environmentalist to sleep.

The crisis besetting America is not just an economic or political crisis; something deeper is wreaking havoc across the land,

a mercenary and utilitarian attitude that demonstrates little empathy for people’s actual well-being, that dismisses imagination and thought, branding passion for knowledge as irrelevant. Shrill posturing in the media and among policy makers fosters a boxing-match mentality as we, the citizens, become spectators whose emotions and sensations must be kept high in a sort of adrenaline rush that turns us into passive onlookers, addicted to the game.

In a recent CNN interview, Mark Zuckerberg suggested, with every good intention, that scientists should be treated as celebrities, remarking that Einstein had been one in his own time. What does the word “celebrity” even mean? We imagine Einstein with his eyes turned inward and not toward the camera, a beautifully absentminded genius with ruffled hair and sandals. But Einstein was articulate and well-read, a lover of classical music, and it was he who said, “I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

The truth of the matter is that scientists do not need to become celebrities. What they need is respect and support for endeavors that might not make money but are important to human knowledge and therefore to humanity. The first favor one could do for both scientists and artists would be to stop pitting them against one another, remembering the words of a great writer and scientist, Nabokov, who used to advise his students, “You need the passion of a scientist and the precision of a poet.”

I object to the notion that passion and imagination are superfluous, that the humanities have no practical or pragmatic

use or relevance and should thus be subservient to other, more “useful” fields. In fact, imaginative knowledge is pragmatic: it helps shape our attitude to the world and our place in it and influences our capacity to make decisions. Politicians, educators, businessmen—we are all affected by this vision or its lack. If it is true that in a democracy, imagination and ideas are secondary, a sort of luxury, then what is the purpose of life in such a society? What will make its citizens loyal or concerned about their country’s well-being, and not just their own selfish pursuits? I would argue that imaginative knowledge is, in a very practical sense, indispensable to the formation of a democratic society, its vision of itself and its future, playing an important role in the preservation of the democratic ideal. At some point this state of affairs became an obsession with me, and I began to think that there must be some connection between the demise of the idealistic or moral aspects of the American dream and its material side. I started collecting newspaper accounts and statistics on the state of the humanities, alongside articles on education, health care, social mobility and all the other component parts of the material aspect of the American dream. Parallel to works of poetry and fiction, biography and history, my office and my home gradually became filled with cuttings from newspapers and magazines and printouts of Internet articles. I began reading blogs on education and books about the Internet or the state of the economy, surprising my friends with references to Joseph Stiglitz and Jaron Lanier. In my notebooks I copied down statements by policy makers and media pundits. My husband routinely complained about the many programs I had

taped—PBS, *60 Minutes*, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert—leaving little room for him to record his soccer games. Words that I had never paid attention to now made frequent appearances in my notes, alongside phrases like “income inequality” and “upward mobility.” After the fashion of my student days, I pasted a few sentences on a piece of paper and wrote underneath, in red ink, “The American dream?” Later, I added: “The way we view fiction is a reflection of how we define ourselves as a nation. Works of the imagination are canaries in the coal mine, the measure by which we can evaluate the health of the rest of society.”

And yet I was not unaware that the current state of affairs was partly due to the fact that many of our dreams had been fulfilled. America is far more inclusive now than it was even four decades ago, when I was a student at the University of Oklahoma. Technology has opened many different vistas; it has connected us to the rest of the world in unimaginable ways and created possibilities for education and knowledge on a vast scale. In Iran, it has allowed students and people of all ages who are opposed to theocratic rulers and their oppressive ways to find a voice that cannot be censored, to form a community of people sharing the same ideals and passions.

The current crisis is in some respects the outcome of an inherent contradiction at the heart of American democracy, one that Tocqueville so brilliantly anticipated. America’s desire for newness and its complete rejection of ties and traditions lead both to great innovations—a necessary precondition for equality and wealth—and to conformity and complacency, a materialism that invites a complete withdrawal from public and civic spheres and disdain for thought and reflection. This makes it all the more urgent, in this time of transition, to ask new questions, to define not just who we are but who we want to be.