

**Reader's Guide to**  
***Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than "Lolita" in Tehran***  
**by Fatemeh Keshavarz**

**About the Book**

*Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than "Lolita" in Tehran* is Fatemeh Keshavarz's personal story about growing up with a love of literature and art. It is also a story about Iran told in ways that few American readers have heard before. In *Jasmine and Stars*, Iran is an ordinary country and Iranian people ordinary men and women. They read literature from around the world, East and West, and write their own. They make movies, paint pictures, work for peace and spirituality, and make up funny poems and jokes. The Iran of *Jasmine and Stars* is not, as sometimes characterized by outsiders, a country of religious automatons who threaten the world, but neither is it a country without problems or one that should not be criticized. Shahrnush Parsipur's delightful novella Women without Men (showcased in the fourth chapter), for example, enumerates the patriarchal hurdles that women face. But Keshavarz does not allow political conflict to mask the faces of Iranian men and women or silence their laughter and their stories. Here, the human voice is privileged over the cacophony of ideological accusation and political conflict.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Keshavarz refers to a way of knowing and describing life in the Muslim Middle East as the "New Orientalist narrative" (pp. 2-3). This narrative simplifies the culture of the region and reduces it to religion and politics. Have you read books about other cultures that fit in this category? Discuss one example.

2. What is most interesting about the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad? Do you agree that the poem "Frontier Walls" successfully combines the "sexual, spiritual, and social" elements in the human experience (p. 56)? What is your interpretation of the fact that Farrokhzad's books of poetry have been best-sellers in Iran both before and after the 1979 revolution?

3. In Women without Men, Shahrnush Parsipur criticizes the patriarchal culture in traditional Iran and vividly describes the harshness of conditions that some women were up against. Why is her work not a vilification of Muslims or a New Orientalist approach to the culture (p. 89)? Can you suggest ways of criticizing a culture without stereotyping it or masking its strengths?

4. Which woman protagonist(s) in Parsipur's Women without Men might carry symbolic significance for the Iranian readership in 1979? Why? Which one(s) do you like best?

5. *Jasmine and Stars* criticizes the view expressed in Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran that suggests that the undemocratic social conditions prevalent in the Middle East prevent the genre of the novel from flourishing in that part of the world (pp. 92-93). Do you agree with this criticism? Why?

6. In the last chapter, Keshavarz makes use of the story of the rescue of the kittens by her father to humanize him as a tender and caring person (pp. 148-52). This is a sort of strategy that the book uses in order to counter the stereotype of Muslims as heartless and cruel people. Does she achieve the same goal in relation to her uncle the painter? How?

7. Keshavarz argues (p. 123) that intelligent and active women living in Iran during and after the 1979 revolution are not represented in Reading Lolita in Tehran. Which other major Iranian types are missing from Nafisi's book?

8. Analyzing a dance scene described in Reading Lolita in Tehran, Keshavarz speaks of Nafisi's attempt to please "the Orientalist gaze" (pp. 130-32). What does "gaze" mean in this context? Can you think of ways in which we gaze at other cultures? What are the implications of the act of

"gazing" for the cultures under observation?

9. Why might Keshavarz finish her book with a poem about an uncle suffering from Alzheimer's disease?

10. In regard to developing a real understanding of the complexity of Iranian culture, *Jasmine and Stars* is offered to the reader as an alternative to Reading Lolita in Tehran. Nevertheless, it is written in the same genre: memoir. Why do you think the author makes this deliberate choice?