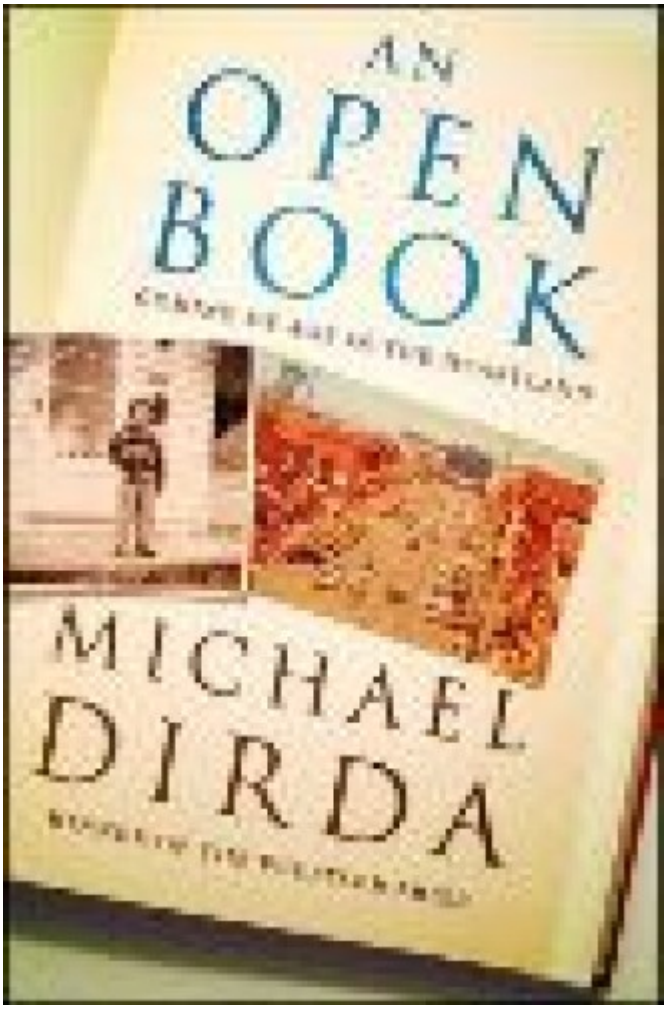
# Bookish lives

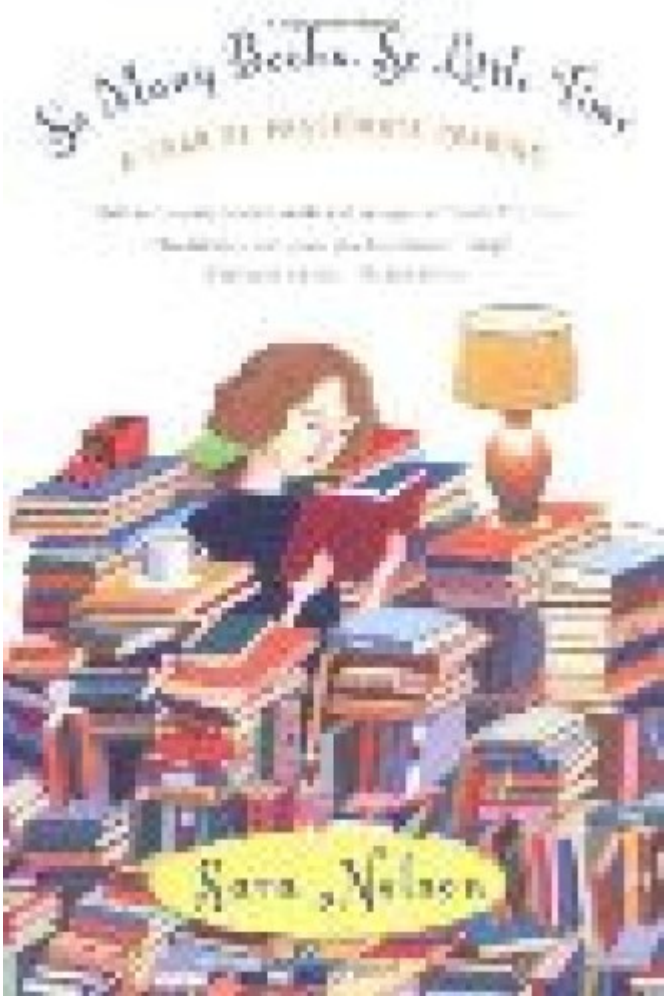
By Trudy Bush in the May 18, 2004 issue

## In Review



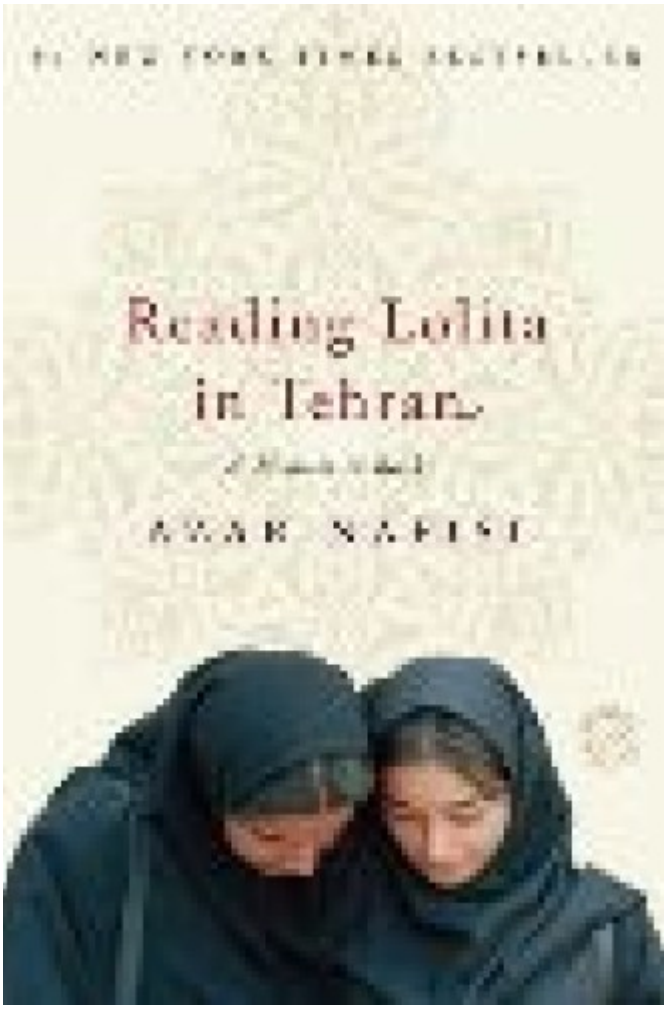

### An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland

Michael Dirda
Norton




**So Many Books, So Little Time: A Year of Passionate Reading**

Sara Nelson
Putnam




## Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books

Azar Nafisi
Random House

Not only have book sales been rising in recent years, but those who love to read are speaking out. A subgenre of the memoir has appeared: the memoir of the reading life. That one of these, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: *A Memoir in Books*, has topped both the *New York Times* and the Amazon.com bestseller lists is astonishing in a culture that supposedly discourages serious reading. Michael Dirda's *An Open Book*: *Coming of Age in the Heartland* and Sara Nelson's *So Many Books*, *So Little Time*: *A Year of Passionate Reading* have also been widely praised for their exploration of the interaction between the imagined life found in books and the everyday life of the reader.

Dirda traces a cultural journey with which I identify. Born into working-class families in rust-belt Ohio, both of us found our way out of the blue-collar world largely through the act of reading. Dirda's father was an embittered steel worker who had had to abandon his own education in order to support a widowed mother and younger siblings. His children suffered from his moodiness and anger, but after Dirda himself spent a summer during his teens working in the mills, "I forgave my father everything. He could be overbearing and worse, but his soul-deadening labor gave me time to read and to know that my life would be privileged compared to his. When writers talk about the 'dark, satanic mills,' I know that they're not just being poetical."

This father, who never himself read anything but the newspaper, introduced his children to the neighborhood library and installed bookshelves in the family's small living room. These shelves soon began to be filled with the first volumes of a variety of encyclopedias. His mother would purchase the first volume at the introductory price and then cancel the order. "When the time comes to write reports, in geography or English or social studies, make sure your subject starts with the letter 'A'," she admonished her children.

Not a reader herself, Dirda's mother did find time to read to her son. As an adult, daydreaming about the perfect environment for reading, Dirda realizes that the images he conjures up are "all merely displacements, sentimental attempts to replicate the warmth and snugness of my mother's lap." His mother made reading "a sensual transport . . . that I have yearned to feel each time I pick up a book." So even nonreading parents can sow the seeds of a love of reading.

Dirda's literary education, like mine, began with newspaper comics and drugstore comic books. It progressed haphazardly through whatever books chance put in his way. He remembers the excitement of the TAB Book Club in elementary school, and recalls the monthly "breathtaking joy of holding in my hands four bright new paperbacks." The family had little money, but Dirda discovered that Goodwill and other secondhand stores often sold dusty boxes of books for little more than the price of a candy bar. Often the boxes contained mysteries and adventure stories—genres for which he developed a deep affection. Sometimes treasures like H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* or the complete works of Sir Walter Scott lay buried in those boxes. "To be an indiscriminate reader—as the luckiest young often are—means that the right books are all around you," Dirda writes.

It was a good era for the upwardly mobile reader. Terry Teachout, born like Dirda in the early 1950s, describes these growing-up years as the “Age of the Middlebrow, that earnest, self-improving fellow who watched prime-time documentaries and read the Book of the Month.” TV programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show* moved between presenting schlock and great vocal artists; *Life* magazine might contain a full-color spread of Renoir’s paintings followed, on the next page, by pictures of a roller-skating horse. This, writes Teachout, was all to the good. For all its flaws, middlebrow culture “nurtured at least two generations’ worth of Americans who . . . went on to become full-fledged highbrows—but highbrows who, while accepting the existence of a hierarchy of values in art, never lost sight of the value of popular culture” (*The Terry Teachout Reader*, Yale University Press).

Dirda couldn’t afford to join the subscription book clubs that flourished during his youth, but he could—and did—check their selections out of the library. He read his way through Mortimer Adler’s Great Books series. With the help of his library card and a number of outstanding teachers he won a scholarship to Oberlin College. Eventually he became—what else?—a book reviewer and senior editor for the *Washington Post Book World* and a Pultizer Prize–winning critic.

Dirda writes his memoir as a middle-aged man who now prefers his art “cool, controlled and finely milled, witty instead of touching, artful or even artificial rather than realistic.” He wishes that he “had sat down with pen and paper more often than with an old paperback, had tilted my days more toward being a Writer than a Reader.”

Unfortunately, the reader at times may agree with him. As his memoir moves away from childhood (it concludes with his graduation from Oberlin), it becomes more of a synopsis of books read and less an account of the life lived. The parents who were vivid figures in the early chapters drop out of the story, and Dirda gives no clue that his reading gave him insight into his relationship with his difficult father. Friends and attractive girls are briefly described, but few come alive. His tone of ironic amusement at his young self is finally too distancing. Dirda sees his life according to a venerable script—the Horatio Alger story. But focusing on the development of his skill as a reader and his progress in reading taste doesn’t give that script much drama.

Sara Nelson’s approach would not seem likely to be more gripping, but it is. She set out to read a book a week for a year, and to record her experiences with those

books. Is this a Benjamin Franklinesque attempt at self-improvement? Will it yield a year of book reports?

No, says Nelson. “What, I am doing, I think, is trying to get down on paper what I’ve been doing for years in my mind: matching up the reading experience with the personal one and watching where they intersect—or don’t.” The result is a lively, stimulating work that not only introduces us to the pleasures of books of all kinds, but tells us a great deal about Nelson.

Unlike Dirda, Nelson grew up in a home in which books were as common as furniture. She wasn’t much interested in them. As a teenager she preferred watching movies and dancing to reading. But when she began her first job and started living alone in New York, she found that “books were cheaper than movies, and easier to find than suitable human dates. And they could take me with them to fabulous places.”

Whereas Dirda’s tastes were eclectic when young and became more and more Mandarin as he grew older, Nelson’s began and stayed wide-ranging. As an editor for *Glamour* magazine and the publishing columnist for the *New York Observer*, she has had many books and manuscripts come her way. Yet she tends to resist reading anything that has gotten a lot of hype. Like most of us, she finds her books in a variety of ways, often on the recommendation of friends.

Nelson confesses to judging people by what they read, even to choosing friends on that basis. She makes an exception for her husband, a determined nonreader, and the friend who loved Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie*. She can’t understand how a book that for “192 artless pages extols wisdom that boils down to a) stop and smell the roses, b) don’t sweat the small stuff, and c) concentrate not on money or status but on love of family and community” has been so successful.

The book does prompt her to wonder whether she and her husband are imparting enough wisdom to their son. Since they aren’t religious, she thinks, they “might need to work harder to make sure he gets at home the basic messages he’d get at church or temple.” With characteristic wit, she concludes: “We’d better start soon, before Charley grows up to be a forty-year-old man content to seek out and be satisfied with the easy lessons in this book.”

We learn about Nelson’s relationship with her sister through her discussion of the books her sister recommends—especially Kate Manning’s novel *Whitegirl*, which

sparks Nelson's reflections on her own interracial marriage (her husband is Japanese). When she visits her mother in Florida, she finds privacy and quiet by rereading Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*, a book her mother had given her when she was a teenager. She remembers that reading was the perfect way, in her talkative family, "to protect myself from too much attention and unwanted noise," and reflects that many people need such a place of escape—actual or mental.

Everywhere Nelson goes she reads—in taxicabs, in restaurants, in bed and, once, in a movie theater in the middle of a film. She tells us a great deal not just about specific works (mostly fiction) but also about the book industry (including why we should carefully read acknowledgment pages). Nelson's personality and way of life come through at every point—her love of fashion, her sophistication, her wide circle of friends, her discussions with colleagues. Her book is a convincing demonstration of the ways that reading and life enrich each other. And it doesn't hurt that both her actual and her reading lives are more varied and privileged than most.

While Dirda's memoir is a straightforward, chronologically ordered coming-of-age story, and Nelson's has the intimacy of a diary, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reminds one of the complex structure of a 19th-century novel—with a large cast of characters. It's both the most demanding of the three books and the most rewarding. This is partly because it has the widest focus, encompassing the personal, social and political—and, of course, the literary.

Educated in the West, Azar Nafisi returned to her native Iran near the beginning of the Islamic revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. Eighteen years later she and her family left for the United States. She begins and ends her book with the story of the literature class she taught in her home during her last two years in Iran, after she had given up teaching in Iran's universities. She invited seven young women to the class (to mix the genders in a private home would have been politically dangerous), chosen from the brightest and most dedicated of her university students. Varying in background and experience, they formed a dynamic and not always harmonious mix.

While the Morality Police patrolled the streets of Tehran to make sure that no woman allowed a strand of hair to escape from beneath her veil, wore makeup, moved "provocatively" or spoke or walked with any man not a member of her family, the women discussed Western novels ranging from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. "The room, for all of us, became a place of

transgression," Nafisi writes—a place where the women could take off their enveloping robes and veils, move and speak freely and, perhaps, discover who they really were.

"What a wonderland it was! Sitting around the large coffee table covered with bouquets of flowers, we moved in and out of the novels we read. Looking back, I am amazed at how much we learned without even noticing it. We were, to borrow from Nabokov, to experience how the pebble of ordinary life could be transformed into a jewel through the magic eye of fiction."

*Lolita* is a provocative choice for reading in the context of a fundamentalist Islamic republic. (It was officially banned.) But Nafisi found it particularly apropos. This book about a man who keeps a 12-year-old girl as his mistress goes "against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives." Humbert, Lolita's rapist, is a monster because he has no sympathy, no empathy for others. He robs Lolita of her childhood and identity by forcing her to live out the fantasy he imposes on her. Denying her any reality of her own, he makes her a creature of his dream and will. As the women discuss the novel, its relevance to life in Iran, whose rulers impose their own constricting dreams—especially on women—becomes clear.

The highlight of the book's two middle sections, about Nafisi's years of teaching in Iran, is her account of a university controversy over the value of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Nafisi has her class put the novel on trial. Is it a celebration of American imperialism and decadence—an incitement to dishonesty and adultery, as the fundamentalist students claim? Or something more complex? Nafisi and some of her students underscore what *Gatsby* shows: the necessity of dreams and illusions in enabling us to live fully, and the dangers of trying to impose those dreams on the actual world and on others.

Books help Nafisi survive the horror of the bombings of Tehran during the eight years of the Iraq-Iran war. A superstitious sense that she can protect her children by staying awake makes her spend long nights reading—always fiction, and often mysteries by Dashiell Hammett and Dorothy Sayers—in the hall outside their bedroom. Nafisi vividly portrays the effects of those bombings and the long war on her family, her students and the people of Tehran. Amid the fear and chaos, she and her students discuss Henry James with a fervor seldom found in an American classroom. After a steady diet of propaganda, they find James's complex, even difficult, fiction immensely attractive.

Near the end of the book the class in Nafisi's home discusses *Pride and Prejudice*, which leads them to considerations of male-female relations, marriage and sex in the Islamic Republic. During this time Nafisi and several of her students gradually make the decision to leave Iran—a decision which, for the young women, partly comes from what they see as the corruption of the relations between men and women under the fundamentalist regime. For Nafisi this becomes a metaphor for how Iranian women feel: "Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loath. If you're forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That's what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else."

Like good fiction, Nafisi's book is peopled by fully realized characters and presents a complex social reality. A further element gives the book its tension and interest—Nafisi's relationship with a man she calls her "magician." A writer, filmmaker and teacher who has dropped out rather than compromise with the regime, he insists that his identity be kept secret. For a select group of friends he is mentor and adviser—the person with whom they talk about their lives and ideas, their projects, their love affairs. In Nafisi's words, he evokes "the hidden conjuror in us all, bringing out the magical potentials and possibilities we did not know existed."

His power is benign, unlike the regime's deadening grip. "I stopped growing up in relation to him because it suited and even pleased me to do so, absolving me of certain responsibilities," Nafisi writes. "While he had created around himself the illusion of a master, of someone always in control, he may not have been quite so much in control as I thought him to be—and I was not quite such a helpless novice." Their relationship is playful, imaginative and freely chosen—an elaborate and nurturing fiction.

She sees him twice a week, for lunch or coffee, and her conversations with and references to him run like a leitmotif throughout the book. Yet despite their close bond, her magician tells her that he does not want to communicate with her after she leaves Iran. "Respecting his wishes, I have not talked or written to my magician, but his magic has been so much a part of my life that sometimes I ask myself, Was he ever real? Did I invent him? Did he invent me?" Nafisi writes. The idea for her book came from him, and one feels she has written it for him. Some of the magic and mystery he brought to her life infuses her memoir.

These three books demonstrate the place one’s social location may play in the reading life. Dirda’s book focuses on his childhood and youth. For him, the dramatic intersection of reading and life in childhood led him to an adulthood at odds with his origins. Nelson and Nafisi, the first born into the New York Jewish intelligentsia and the second into the secular Persian literary upper class, found a lifeline in books later, in adulthood, when books became their refuge and help in dealing with complicated or politically difficult lives.