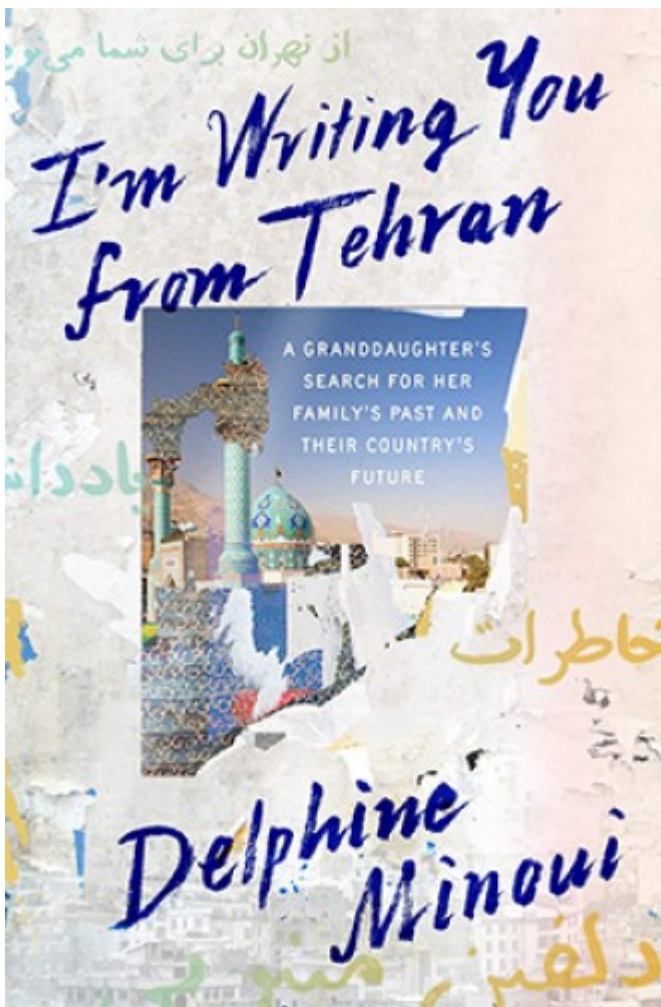


Learning to love Iran

Delphine Minoui planned a weeklong visit to explore her heritage. She stayed for 10 years.

by [Laurina Strikwerda](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue

In Review



I'm Writing You from Tehran

A Granddaughter's Search for Her Family's Past and Their Country's Future

By Delphine Minoui, translated by Emma Ramadan
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Shortly before he died in 1997, Delphine Minoui's paternal grandfather sent her some lines written by the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez:

*He who binds himself to darkness fears the wave.
The whirlpool frightens him.
And if he wants to share our journey,
He has to venture well beyond the comforting sand of the shore . . .*

The next year, Minoui, the daughter of a French mother and an Iranian father, decided to travel to Iran for a week to connect with her heritage and begin working as a journalist. Her weeklong trip turned into a ten-year stay and led to the writing of this compelling memoir, written as a letter to her grandfather.

Minoui's account of her search for her own heritage is gripping. But the book's strength lies in her ability also to look outward, capturing snapshots of contemporary Iranian life as she gains a sense of her own identity.

Upon arriving in Iran, Minoui comes face to face with the realities of life in a theocratic regime, as well as how much the country has changed with the Iranian Revolution. The current climate contrasts sharply with the Iran in which her grandfather came of age. He had worked for Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime as Iran's representative to UNESCO.

At one of the first parties Minoui attends upon arriving in the country, an Iranian friend explains, "Under the shah, we used to drink outside and pray inside. Today, in the Islamic Republic, we drink inside and pray outside." This anecdote highlights both the political change that followed the revolution and the way the resulting regime has forced aspects of once-normal life to become undercover operations.

Minoui deals with similar barriers in trying to be a journalist. She finds her press pass revoked arbitrarily and then reinstated, seemingly on a whim. She deals with government censors and interrogations, and she learns that Iranian friends have disappeared and gone to jail. The book captures the struggle that journalists, writers, and artists face in having to deal with a heavy security apparatus, and the ways it challenges their self-expression and daily life. But Minoui also engages with

Iranians outside of that circle. She interviews students, religious clerics, and a victim of a chemical attack during the Iran-Iraq War.

In one of the book's most intriguing story lines, Minoui gets to know a young couple, Fatemeh and Mahmoud. Both are affiliated to different degrees with the Basiji militia, and Mahmoud is an active volunteer. The Basiji carry out, among other things, searches for alcohol at parties. Mahmoud is a member of the very group that is feared by Minoui's fellow journalists.

Part of what makes the book so fascinating is the way it showcases these sorts of complexities. Minoui offers stories of both those who share her perspective and those who are opposed to it. She shows how radically different those who identify as patriots can be from one another, even as she is clearly sympathetic to those who are struggling for political change.

Minoui's friend Niloufar, for instance, an Iranian intellectual who is arrested for taking a picture at a protest, decides—even after enduring prison—to return to Iran. "My place is over there," she says to Minoui when both are on a short trip to France. Minoui reflects:

Her words were mixing strangely with those of Mahmoud, the Basiji. . . . They would certainly have detested each other had they met. And yet, a profound and invisible thread linked them despite and through everything: an unconditional love for their country, a quasi-carnal patriotism that constitutes the most solid bedrock of Iranian identity, the one that you, [grandfather], handed down to me and that, as the years passed, has settled into my heart.

Although she writes that this kind of patriotism has settled into her heart, she also sees clearly the type of life that is available to her in Iran.

After the government threatens foreign journalists during the protests surrounding Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2009, Minoui and her husband decide that they have to leave. She muses: "Love for a country can't be controlled. On the other hand, the Iranian intelligence service excelled at control. To perfection." They say good-bye to Iranian friends who will continue to demonstrate against the government, report on protests, and write poetry even under the government crackdown.

Minoui appears hopeful about Iran's future. During a brief visit to Tehran in 2014, five years after having left, she writes that, "even the walls of the city were discreetly singing of the new spring." The Iranians who are organizing, writing, and speaking up are Minoui's source of hope. It is their stories, intertwined with hers, that make reading this book so worthwhile.