

## **Publishers finding Iran is a hot read Fear? Curiosity? Shelves are full of Persian themes.**

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At Columbia University today, the main course offering will be fireworks - Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is stopping by to speak.

Protesters and security will be everywhere. Debate should be fierce. And the verbal fireworks will be sparked by the question of the "Iranian Bomb."

But an Iranian explosion has already taken place in the United States - just browse through your local bookstore.

There's scare-you nonfiction like *The Iranian Time Bomb: The Mullah Zealots' Quest for Destruction*, by Michael Ledeen and *The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crisis* by Alireza Jafarzadeh; historical overviews such as Mark Bowden's *Guests of the Ayatollah*; novels by Iranians and Iranian Americans such as *Caspian Rain* by Gina B. Nahai and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* by Porochista Khakpour; and a seemingly endless stream of memoirs by Iranian American women, such as *My Name is Iran* by Davar Ardalan and *Persian Girls* by Nahid Rachlin.

"In the last few years there's been an amazing explosion, and it's not surprising," said David Farber, professor of history at Temple University and author of *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam*.

"Iran is at the confluence of so many of the things a lot of Americans care and worry a great deal about. Publishers pick that up quickly."

When Farber approached publishers with his Iran book after 9/11, he recalled, "All of them said, 'Yeah, let's do that.' "

It's "the whole post-9/11 context," said Lila Azam Zanganeh, literary correspondent for *Le Monde* in New York and editor of *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eye: Uncensored Iranian Voices*.

"There's a context of fear, of curiosity, of wanting to know the putative enemy."

Gina B. Nahai, professor of creative writing at the University of Southern California and author of the just-released *Caspian Rain*, remembered how different things were in 1992 when her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, about Iranian Jews, came out. "The whole question back then," she said, "was whether anyone would want to publish a book about Iran. We've come a long way. There's definitely an appetite on the part of the reading public."

A major catalyst of the recent wave of books on Iran was a critically acclaimed 2003 book by Azar Nafisi, a professor at Johns Hopkins University.

"Publishing a lot of memoirs by Iranian women," Nahai said, "has been driven by the success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*."

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Reading Lolita not only drove the appetite for memoirs by women, but had the side effect of pumping the market for all Iran books.

In fact, the volume of Iran-theme volumes now results in some internecine battles among Iranian and Iranian American authors. For instance, Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian studies at Columbia and author of *Iran: A People Interrupted*, has criticized Reading Lolita in Tehran for supposedly giving support to Bush administration policies toward Iran, a view that infuriates Zanganeh.

"Azar Nafisi is not a neocon," Zanganeh said. Iranians, she said, "can be liberals" yet still "violently oppose," as she does, the current Iranian regime and its pursuit of a nuclear weapon.

She is utterly against the decision of her alma mater, Columbia, to grant Ahmadinejad a forum today.

"A university," she asserted, "has some sort of duty not to convey messages of hate. What he represents is an extremely repressive government, violent and authoritarian. . . . It does not respect freedom of speech or human rights. There is a paradox in giving someone who is crushing the student movement and liberal thought in Iran a soapbox in a university."

Thinking of memoirs in their literary rather than political dimension, Zanganeh appreciates some of them, such as Reading Lolita and *Persepolis*, an autobiographical novel in comic-strip form by Marjane Satrapi, but is critical of others.

"What bothers me are two things," she said. "First of all, that there's an obvious desire to cash in on the curiosity for Iran, but in a way that doesn't bring much to the discussion from a literary point of view or intellectually.

"And second, at times I feel there's wild exaggeration, the authors are being disingenuous about how well they know Iran."

In a way, Farber said, the explosion of Iranian books has helped to balance a certain information deficit. In the United States, Farber points out, "there's a thinness of expertise on Iran and that's problematic. I think everyone in the government knows it. It's so many decades now, almost 30 years, since the U.S. was connected to Iran."

Whether the wave of Iranian books will continue is unclear, and may depend on events.

"Most publishers aren't in the business to educate," Nahai said. "They see a market. . . . My fear is that the market's getting a little flooded now . . . and that because of that, there's going to be a backlash on the part of publishers. They tend to do that. They publish a lot of books about India or China and then suddenly they decide, 'Oops - too many!' "

If that happens, Zanganeh will be ahead of the curve. As she suggests, the truly wonderful cascade of books by Iranians and Iranian Americans - the mark, you might say, of a culture's international and political normalization - will flow when those writers are welcome and able to publish books on any subject.

Zanganeh, who was born in Paris and originally came to the United States to teach French literature at Harvard, is working on a book that relates to Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov and the possibility of happiness.

"I joke to friends that I'm consciously trying to avoid the word Iran," she said.

Contact book critic Carlin Romano at 215-854-5615.