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The Septembers of Shiraz

by *Dalia Sofer*

REVIEW BY TOVA MIRVIS

One minute, Isaac Amin is at his desk in Tehran, presiding over his lucrative rare-gem business. The next minute, he is confronted by men with rifles and forced into a car, for reasons no one is required to name.

This is the terrifying, gripping world of *The Septembers of Shiraz*, Dalia Sofer's highly acclaimed first novel, which takes places in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in a country where "once-dapper men and women have become bearded shadows and black veils."

Sofer, who was born in Iran and fled to the United States with her family when she was a child, renders Isaac's plight in an Iranian prison, from multiple interrogations to solitary confinement, in excruciating, heart-wrenching detail. "In this room, stripped of their ornaments and belongings, they are nothing more than bodies, each as likely as the next to face a firing squad or to go home, unscathed, with a gripping tale to tell family and friends."

Outside the walls of the prison, Isaac's family waits and worries. His wife Farnaz tries to put up a strong front, for the sake of her daughter, but becomes increasingly distraught as she is unable to learn her husband's fate. In addition to mining the terror set in motion by his arrest, Sofer explores the increasing estrangement that arose previously between Farnaz and Isaac. The passing years, Sofer writes, have turned "her husband into the kind of man who could offer her the rarest luxuries, but little else, and herself into the kind of woman who had come to accept these terms."

Their eighteen-year-old son Parviz is in New York, where he has been sent to avoid "the war, the draft, the revolution, all of it." Their nine-year-old daughter Shirin, who witnesses the family's trauma with the partial understanding of a child, must navigate

the dangers of the times even in her own classroom, as her friend's father is a member of the Revolutionary Guard. Equally affecting are Sofer's portraits of the Amin extended family, especially her depiction of Isaac's sister Shahla, a woman so in love with her material wealth and status that she won't consider the prospect of leaving Iran. "If we leave this country without taking care of our belongings, who in Geneva or Paris or Timbuktu will understand who we once were?"

The family's wealth and luxurious lifestyle loom large in the book as a source of envy, with a corrupting power of its own. Even the family's trusted servant Habibeh, with whom they have enjoyed a longtime closeness, becomes newly awakened to the inequities of class and privilege, and along with this resentment comes the ever-present possibility of betrayal.

Sofer also situates the Amin's story within the larger context of Jewish history, demonstrating the recurring tropes of Jewish experience, across a range of centuries and continents. Even Isaac, who does not have beliefs for which he would be willing to die and who describes himself as a "businessman who happens to be a Jew," finds himself ensnared in this historical web. For Parviz, these questions of Jewish identity become more pressing as well. In Brooklyn, he rents a room from Zalman Mendelson, the father of a growing Hasidic family. At first he is reluctant to enter their apartment, which would be like "relegating himself to a ghetto, where the memories of all the wrongs committed against Jews simmer year after year after year in bulky indigestible stews." But out of a growing loneliness, Parviz is eventually pulled into the Mendelson family and feels a growing affection for the daughter Rachel. It is Zalman who, in detailing his own father's oppression in a Russian prison, finds the common ground between them. Parviz confides that his father is in prison and claims that "it's different with my father. He is not a practicing man. He is not like your father." "Yes, yes, it's different." Zalman nods. "But in the end, it's the same."

What makes this novel so extraordinary is Sofer's ability to both articulate these larger themes of Jewish history and identity and yet to so skillfully render one family's suffering with such specificity of vision, such careful precision of language. To read the prison scenes is to feel a sense of impending dread, as Sofer lays bare the psychological effect of day-to-day life under such conditions. Isaac "sees his world in black and white: Filthy snow, a hollow sky, the gray cement of the walls – water stains, like giant ink spills, eating into them – and his own skin, an ashy patina enveloping his body. Even the wounds on his feet, hardened and crusted, have lost their red. He has come to think of color as something fantastic that exists only in his mind."

Even as this world becomes increasingly dark and ominous, Sofer manages to inject a shard of humanity into all her characters, even the prison guard and interrogator Mohsen, who was once held as a prisoner in this same jail, under the prior regime. In fact, all of Sofer's portraits of the complicated interactions between husband and wife, father and son, guard and prisoner, are psychologically nuanced and deeply affecting. Even the less ominous aspects of life – domestic arrangements, family interactions, descriptions of food and objects – are captured in evocative, striking language, endowing *The Septembers of Shiraz* with the qualities of both gorgeous dream and harrowing nightmare.

EXCERPT

Isaac rests his head against the wall. How odd that he should get arrested today of all days, when he was going to make up his long absences to his wife and daughter by joining them for lunch. For months he had been leaving the house at dawn, when the snow-covered Elburz Mountains slowly unveiled themselves in the red-orange light, and the city shook itself out of sleep, lights in bedrooms and kitchens coming on one after the other, languidly at first, then gaining momentum. And he had been running from the office long after the supper dishes had been washed and stored away and Shirin had gone to bed. At night, walking up the stairs to his two-story villa, he could already hear the television buzzing, and in the living room he would find Farnaz, in her silk nightgown, cognac in hand, soaking up the chaos of the evening news. The cognac, she said – its stinging vapors, its roundness and warmth – made the news more palatable, and Isaac did not object to this new habit of hers, which, he suspected, made up for his absences. In the living room he would stand next to her, his briefcase an extension of his hand, neither sitting beside her nor ignoring her; standing was all he could manage. They would say little to each other, a few words about the day or Shirin or some explosion somewhere and he would retire to the bedroom, exhausted, trying to sleep but unable, the television's drone seeping into the darkness. Lying awake in bed he would often think that if she would only shut off the news and come to him, he would remember how to talk to her. But the television, with its images of rioting crowds and burning movie theaters – with its wretched footage of his country coming undone, street by street – had taken his place long before he had learned to find refuge in his work, long even before the cognac had become necessary. (PAGES 4–5)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

For a novel that is set primarily in Tehran, *The Septembers of Shiraz* seems like a confounding title. What does the title mean? Why do you think Sofer chose to use this title?

2) How much information about the Iranian Revolution do you learn from the novel? What questions about the historical situation do you still have? What are novels that make use of particular moments in history able to show, as opposed to non-fiction works about those eras?

3) Consider the various ways that wealth is described in the book. In portraying Isaac's sister, Sofer focuses on her obsessive, foolish love of material goods. In what ways does her materialism blind her to the dangers at hand? Is Isaac's family similarly blinded by their wealth? Is a fellow prisoner correct when he says of Isaac: "Who cares what kind of regime it is, as long as I make money"? Consider too Isaac's own statement, as the family makes their escape and his family receives better treatment because they have paid more. "Why is it, he wonders, that wealth must always be accompanied by guilt, if not shame."

4) When Isaac discovers that he is able to buy his freedom, he worries: "How will my money be used? To build more prisons, to buy more bullets? In buying back my own life, will I facilitate the death of others?" Is Isaac right to worry about this? What are the moral implications of buying his freedom? In these situations, how do you define heroism?

5) Shirin makes a choice to steal files from her friend's father, risking her own safety. Is this a wise, heroic decision, or one made out of a childlike naiveté? In a novel, what is a child's point of view able to convey that an adult perspective cannot?

6) Consider the way Sofer portrays her characters' pursuits of personal pleasure and individual happiness. When Zalman learns that Parviz has feelings for his daughter Rachel, he warns him off, by telling him that there are issues larger than personal happiness. "Ah, but you see, that's the difference between your world and mine. I look at myself not as an individual, but as a piece of a whole, as a brick in the house." For Isaac too, there is a question about the larger value of happiness. To a skeptical fellow prisoner, he says that his belief is that "life is to be enjoyed." Is Sofer arguing for or against any of these points of view?

7) Compare *The Septembers of Shiraz* to Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*, in which a young Jewish Argentinian man is arrested. Compare this book as well to *Wedding Song: Memoir of an Iranian Jewish Woman* by Farideh Goldin and to *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi.

8) In a biographical note at the end of the paperback edition, Sofer describes the many similarities between her own family and the one portrayed in the book. How does knowing this about Sofer's own life affect your reading of the book? When is it helpful, and when is it not helpful, to know more about the author's personal background?

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