

Home Is a Stranger

Parnaz Foroutan

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Parnaz Foroutan's *Home Is a Stranger* is a personal and political memoir about being a woman, and an Iranian American, in both the US and Iran.

Foroutan left Iran when she was six, during the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. She grew up in suburban Los Angeles. Her book follows her as she returns to Iran during her intense twenties, in the era just before, and then after, September 11th, 2001. With a heart condition and in fear for her life, and facing a taut combination of repressed sexual desire and the near constant threat of sexual violence, she explores both countries, juxtaposing memories of California with observations about Iran.

Sensual descriptions of Iran's people and countryside include repeated and melodramatic flirtations that come to characterize the first half of the book. Foroutan's upper-middle class American upbringing led to struggles in Iran, which she considered repressive of women's agency. She chafes at restrictions, from the hijab to the suppression of laughter; those decisions elicit ire and fear from her hosts. But as her relationships grow more serious and world events intensify, the book's relaxed, cyclical rhythm shifts to a tight, controlled whirl. When Foroutan returns to Los Angeles, that rhythm becomes both poetic and dizzying.

Great and dark as it conveys American assumptions about the freedoms and joys of women in the US and Iran, the book suggests that what are perceived as advantages in the US have a spiritual cost. The happiness and vivacity that Foroutan experiences in Iran's homes, markets, and wilderness are expressed in poetic terms; her ambivalence about returning to the US is understandable, and the return itself proves to be a devastating loss.

Home Is a Stranger is a thought-provoking memoir about the challenges of personal and national relations.

LISA ALEXIA (March / April 2020)

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