

To Keep the Sun Alive

Rabeah Ghaffari

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An intimate yet sprawling chronicle of life in Iran before and during its revolutionary years in the late seventies, Rabeah Ghaffari's *To Keep the Sun Alive* presents the nation's monumental changes from the perspective of a small village.

Through the daily lives of two brothers—a secular judge and an ambitious mullah—and their families, we glimpse the different strata of Iranian society, from the powerful to the downtrodden: farmers, men about town, radical firebrands, midwives, and prostitutes. Mostly the focus is on Shazdehpour, a diffident dandy immersed in Western culture (particularly classical music) and his son Madjid, a university student seeking to create a brighter future for his nation and planning for marriage with his girlfriend and cousin Nasreen.

For much of the book, Ghaffari paints an engrossing portrait of a long-lost, idyllic way of life through small details: the accidental execution of a family chicken, fables of heroes battling oppression, the tug-of-war between Western values and radical Islam, Madjid and Nasreen's innocent romance. But any momentary contentment soon gives way to extremism and tragedy. A young Muslim rebel kills a local merchant's son, setting off a chain of events that divides the family and leads to a modern Iran in which not everyone receives a happily-ever-after.

Ghaffari orchestrates her narrative with confidence, and passages in which Madjid is imprisoned by revolutionaries are vivid and harrowing. Less convincing are interstitial passages set in Paris three decades later, in which Shazdehpour must arrive at a reckoning with past events. Too slight to be effective as a framing device, these segments don't approach the intensity Ghaffari brings to the rest of her tale. Nevertheless, the stories she tells of Iran are rendered in authoritative fashion—only fitting for a book that is about the persistence of memory. They fulfill *To Keep the Sun Alive*'s mission of capturing a specific place and time.

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