

HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY



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*Book Club
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Nadine Bjursten





Dear Reader,

You will soon meet Amineh, a creative, brilliant young woman studying Persian literature at Tehran University on the brink of the Iranian Revolution.

Amineh is not like her peers, who are willing to risk their lives for a say in the future of their country. She is desperate to bring another time to life: when her loving, generous parents celebrated the rose harvest and recited ancient Sufi poetry under the desert sky.

Over a picnic, Amineh agrees to accompany her best friend, Ava, to an underground meeting. There she meets Farzad, an opposition leader with a plan to hold the shah accountable for his actions and to rid the world of the nuclear threat that hangs over them all. Despite her hesitation, Amineh will soon find her life inextricably linked with Farzad's. As the revolution unfolds, she will be tested by a country she doesn't recognize, by her husband's activism she fears is putting their family at risk, and by the burden of the guilt she carries from her childhood.

She will use her mother's extraordinary recipes to create the loving home for her children she remembers well, but it won't be long before her husband's dangerous work follows him home.

Forced to give up everything, Amineh will have to come to terms with the tragedy that claimed her parents' lives, and ultimately, she will be given one more chance to choose love.

I hope you enjoy the journey and inspiration in Amineh's story.

Warm regards,

Nadine Bjursten

READING GROUP QUESTIONS & *Topics for Discussion*

1 How does the novel explore themes of female identity? What does family and home mean to Amineh? Discuss her struggle for approval. How does her view of herself evolve over the course of the novel?

2 The desert village, Qamsar, where Amineh spent her childhood, has long been known for rose oil production. How does this setting shape Amineh as a character? What impact does it have on her life? How does location and history shape the narrative arc of the novel?

3 Discuss how the ever-changing politics of Iran affects each of the characters in the novel. Were you familiar with Iran's political history prior to reading this book? What were you surprised to learn? Are there any

parallels with the political history of the United States? Another country?

4 Consider the novel's depiction of Islam, including that of the pious character of Jalalod-Din and his discussion of *jehād* at the end of Chapter 75. Is the novel's portrayal of Islam different from or similar to how you feel it is portrayed in Western movies and other media? Did it surprise you that mystic poets are so much a part of Iranian culture?

5 What is the significance of cooking for Amineh? Consider the idea of *letāfat*, the tender touch. What does it mean as far as preparing a meal goes, and does there exist a similar notion in the West? Was there a meal scene that you particularly enjoyed?

6 How much did you know about nuclear arms control and disarmament activism before reading this book? Did anything surprise you? How does Amineh's view of Farzad's activism change over the course of the novel?

7 How does Amineh's guilt over her parents' death shape her vision of the world or her actions? Would her character be different if she had not lost her parents? How did other characters experience loss in the novel? Does guilt enter into their experience? How did the loss change them?

8 Did you highlight or bookmark any passages from the book? Did you have a favorite quote or quotes? If so, share, and explain why it caught your attention.

9 Who was your favorite character? What character did you empathize with the most, and how did they change by the end of the novel? Were there any characters you disliked? Why?

10 What is different about Amineh's relationship with Farzad and her relationship with Patrik? In your opinion, were Amineh and Farzad suited to each other? Why or why not? How do you feel about the choices Amineh made?

11 How did you feel about the ending of the novel? Do you have any lingering questions about the novel?

12 Would you recommend this book to someone? Why or why not (or with what caveats)? What kind of reader would most enjoy this book?



A
Conversation
with
NADINE
BJURSTEN

What inspired you to write *Half a Cup of Sand and Sky*? Why Iran?

Bjursten: Looking back, I think I was always going to write this novel. I grew up with Persian poets Hāfez, Sa'di, and Rumi and am drawn to subtle Iranian concepts such as *ta'ārof* and *letafat*, which underscore caring for the person in front of you, whether you are just meeting or cooking a meal. The Iranians in my life seemed to take that way of living and being to heart. That's why later when I was managing editor of the foreign policy journal *Arms Control Today* during the presidency of George W. Bush, I found it jarring when Iran was labeled a member of the axis of evil. There is little nuance in the word evil, and it rarely stays with the leaders who commit the crimes. Instead, it sweeps over its citizens, religion, culture, and

history. When I went to the bookstore to read some contemporary fiction based in the country, I found books depicting Iranians as backward, religious extremists. So, this single story was not just in the news. It was in the novels being read, and soon I found it popping up in conversations with friends and colleagues. A single story cements our perception of the other. It is devastating, not just because it makes the step to war so much easier, but because it increases misunderstandings and hate.

So, it sounds like your novel was a reaction to the social and political environment you found yourself in.

Bjursten: Absolutely. As much as social engagement is undervalued in fiction writing, I felt compelled to explore this othering that is so common in the West. I started my journey as a series of essays, but after deep diving into Persian culture, reading more than sixty translated works of fiction, and traveling to the country, a novel started to take form. Maybe this extraordinary literary journey made a novel the only path open to me.

What is the message you are conveying about female identity?

Bjursten: Amineh tries to remake herself into what the people around her want. She is seeking approval, and that journey will always be doomed to heartache. As her best friend, Ava, tells her, “Unless we love ourselves, our hearts are as good as a black hole all the love in the world can’t fill.” In the end, when she accepts herself, when she learns that mistakes and failings are just part of the human experience, she is able to finally land.

She has found love, true love, the kind that is not warped by need. This new strength is also the power source for both empathy and compassion.

We have all read about the current plight of women in Iran. Can you speak to the relevance of your book at this time?

Bjursten: My novel is deeply researched, so the reader will come away with a historical context to the current issue. The 1979 revolution was interesting in the sense that all classes of society rose against the shah. They were tired of the shah's arbitrary policies and secret police that reduced the populace to subjects rather than citizens. Ayatollah Khomeini won the revolution, but instead of addressing the cause of the revolution, he simply gave Iranians another government dependent on the whims of one individual. What's more, he gradually stripped rights from Iranians, particularly women, so they were soon left with a worse situation than what they had under the shah. Iranians and the world are still living with this terrible irony.

You mentioned *letafat*. Can you explain what that term means?

Bjursten: It is a Persian concept that encompasses grace and tenderness. When Amineh cooks a meal for her family, she does not simply satisfy their hunger. Instead, each dish is pleasing to the eye, provides balance to

the body, and warms the soul. This concept is also alive in Iran's cultural, literary, and even religious history—and in *Half a Cup of Sand and Sky*, I try to do justice to this sensibility.

What do you say to those who ask why you, as a non-Iranian, are writing this story?

Bjursten: It is such an important question, and I will have to answer by asking my own question: do I perpetuate the single story about Iranians and Muslims, or do I offer another story? I hope the reader will see that I do the latter. My background in nuclear arms control and disarmament diplomacy enabled me to write the Iranian character of Farzad, who is trying to rid the world of nuclear weapons. His character is inspired by real people, and it is important to show that side of things. My Sufi background also gives me fluency in Sufi poetry and concepts, which is important to this story. I will add that I think that the larger point within the cultural appropriation issue is disrespect and disregard. I hope my novel is the opposite of that.

How did September 11, 2001, impact your writing about Islam?

Bjursten: Islam is as diverse as Christianity, and its central tenet is the same: treat others as you wish to be treated. The Iranians take this further with *ta'ārof*, treating others better than yourself. After 9/11, New Yorkers went out of their way not to condemn the religion for the actions of the few, and that soothed many hearts. It was different on talk shows and in much

of the media. Like other religions, Islam contains guidelines for how to be good and have compassion for others. Fasting, for instance, helps you understand how it feels to be without food so that you feel compelled to do what you can to feed someone regardless of that person's class, religion, or race. What I have always found so interesting is that the people in the different religions who take the central tenet of their religion to heart (to treat others as they wish to be treated) are more similar to each other in their different faiths than they are to others in their faith who take the extremist view of their religion. An extremist Christian also behaves and speaks very much like an extremist Muslim or Hindu.

Why would a woman today be looking for this novel?

Bjursten: I think this novel will hit a raw note in women who pressure themselves into being best in all areas of life. They fall short in their own eyes and seek approval in so many different ways, and social media has only exacerbated this. Aminah is an Iranian woman who has lost herself. She turns to others for approval and love but finds instead only more reasons to believe that she is flawed and insufficient, that she is not worthy of being loved. The devastation happening to her country mirrors her own feelings of inadequacy and inner turmoil. But one day a small act of love shakes her just enough to make her see something else. What follows is a challenging and intimate journey back to herself.

What Iranian writers would you recommend to readers wanting a better understanding of the country?

Bjursten: Oh, the list is long. Probably the most delightful novel I read was *Uncle Napoleon* by Iraj Pezeshkzad. You will understand once you read it. You cannot read a Molla Nasrod-Din story without laughing. Other novels that will leave a lasting impression are *Women without Men*, *The Blind Owl*, *Missing Soluch*, *Savushun*, *Her Eyes*, *The Cannon*, *By the Pen*, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*. The epic poem by Ferdowsi called *The Shahnameh* tells the mythical and historical past of Persian Empire. One has to read *The Conference of the Birds* by the poet Farid od-Din Attār, Rumi poetry translated by Coleman Barks, any poem by Hāfez or Sa‘di. This is not even going into the contemporary works, of which there is a wonderful selection. To start the reader off though, I would direct them to nonfiction works: Shrin Ebadi’s *Iran Awakening*, Kamin Mohammadi's *The Cypress Tree*, and Trita Parsi’s *a Single Roll of the Dice*. In fiction I would read *The Blood of Flowers* by Anita Amirrezvani, *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* by Sahar Delijani, *In the Walled Gardens* by Anahita Firouz, *Rooftops of Tehran* by Mahbod Seraji. There are so many more.

Who is your favorite character?

Bjursten: That's hard. That's like asking a mother which child of hers she

loves most. The character that I am closest to is Amineh. She is frustrating at times because she can't seem to get out from under herself. She keeps going there to that thing that holds her back. I think though that there is a little of her in all of us: we struggle to get out of the way of our own potential, we repeat the same pattern, but when we do release ourselves, well, it's magic. Her best moments are when she has someone to take care of, when she is trusting herself and creating.

What do you want readers to take away from this novel?

Bjursten: I'd like readers to step outside of their ideas of the country in the headlines and feel a little of the love in these pages. There are no individuals or countries or religions out there that can be reduced to just one story. Most importantly, however, I'd like readers to feel like they have gotten to know Amineh and company and have been enriched.



How to Brew a Persian Cup of Tea

The silk road brought tea to Iran in the 15th Century, replacing coffee as the social drink of choice, and Iranians have never looked back. Their coffee houses, ghahveh khaneh, are that in name only as they serve tea not coffee.

Tea sets the mood for any Persian gathering, so it is a natural choice to accompany your book club meeting. The best Persian tea is a vivid reddish-brown with a fragrance to match.

For the best recipe for this particular brew, I defer to the lovely Homa of Persian Mama, <https://persianmama.com/>. If you do not have access to high-quality loose-leaf Persian tea, Homa suggests Ceylonese tea, which has a rich flavor, aroma, and strength. Alternatively, choose English Breakfast or Irish Breakfast, or make your own blend by mixing equal parts of English Breakfast, Irish Breakfast, and Earl Grey.

Although Persian tea is traditionally brewed in a samovar, you don't need it to brew a good cup of tea. You need a kettle, a teapot, and preferably a cup warmer.

Choose glass cups so you can enjoy the beautiful color of the tea.

Recipe

Yield: Book club with 5-6 guests

Brew Time: 10-15 minutes

What you need:

- 1) 1 ½ tablespoon loose tea leaves
- 2) 2 cups freshly boiled water for steeping tea leaves
- 3) Extra 6-8 cups of freshly boiled water

Optional: Add a pinch of rose petals or crushed cardamom pods to the loose tea leaves before you add boiling water.

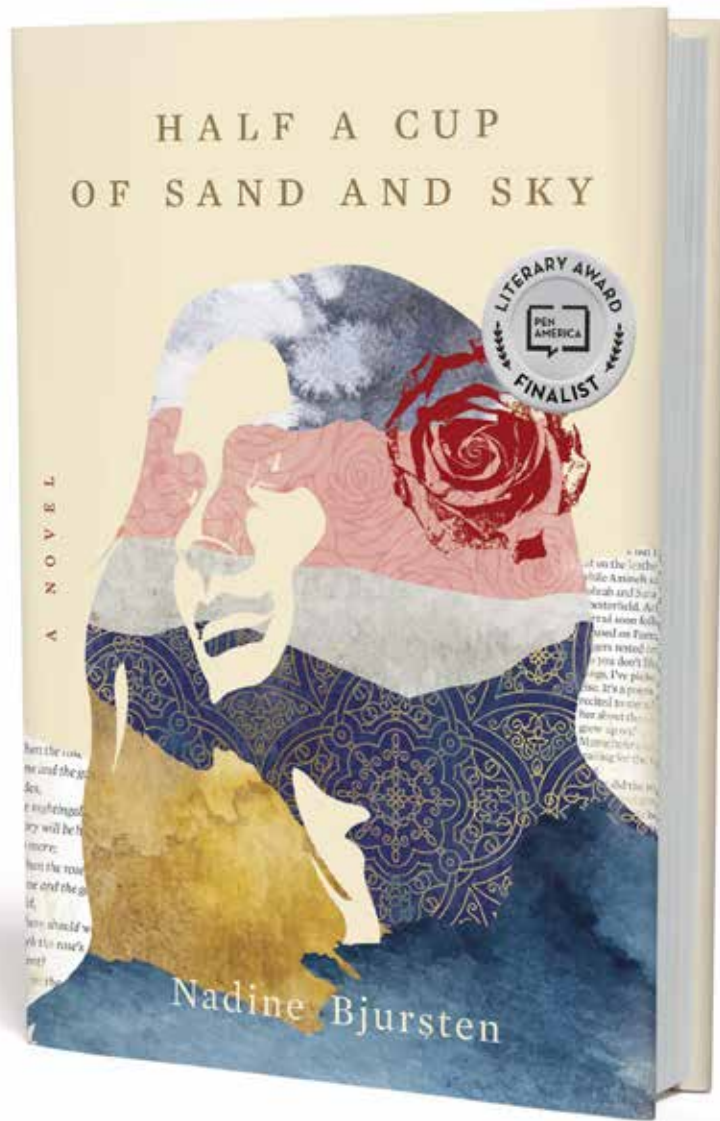
Instructions

1. Add 1 ½ tablespoons of loose tea to the teapot.
2. Bring 2 cups of cold water to a boil and pour into the teapot.
3. Cover the teapot and place it over the cup warmer. Place a folded napkin loosely over the teapot for more efficient brewing. Be careful that the napkin does not come in contact with the heated surface.
4. Steep the tea for 10-15 minutes to your desired color.
5. Use a strainer and pour about 2 ounces of the brewed tea into each glass.
6. Separately, boil 6-8 cups of water and fill each glass. Adjust the color to your taste.

Notes

Let the tea cool to your liking. Serve tea with sugar cubes, sweets, pastries, or just black.

Enjoy!



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#HalfaCupofSandandSky

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