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**Publicity Contact:**

Siri Grace (202) 787-1590

[publicity@alderhousebooks.com](mailto:publicity@alderhousebooks.com)

NADINE BJURSTEN

# HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY

*(Alder House Books — October 17, 2023)*

*Finalist of the PEN/Bellwether Prize for fiction, HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY is a moving portrait of one woman's search for love and belonging cast against a nuanced backdrop of political turmoil.*

It is 1977, and the police are on their way to break up another student protest at Tehran University. Amineh escapes to a side street. She will soon have her degree in Persian literature, but unlike her peers, she doesn't want to fight for a say in her country's future. She is desperate to bring another time to life: when her warm, free-spirited 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 turn to her mother's recipes to create a loving, nourishing home for her children, but it won't be long before her husband's dangerous work follows him home.

Forced to give up everything, Amineh will learn more about the tragic accident that took her parents' lives, and ultimately, she will be given one more chance to choose love.



## HALF A CUP OF SAND AND SKY

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raised north of New York City in Garrison, Bjursten has spent almost a decade writing about, traveling in, and researching Iran. Before that she served as Managing Editor of the Washington, DC-based journal *Arms Control Today*, press officer of the Global Security Institute, and well before that, editor of the La Paz-based newspaper Bolivian Times. She now lives in Lund, Sweden, with her husband and twin daughters.

Photo by Lina Arvidsson

### CONNECT WITH NADINE:

Web: [nadinebjursten.com](http://nadinebjursten.com)

Medium: [medium.com/@nadine-bjursten](https://medium.com/@nadine-bjursten)

LinkedIn: [@nadine-bjursten](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nadine-bjursten)



## TALKING POINTS

1. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *The Overstory*. How socially engaged fiction is making a comeback.
2. Persian literature in the 21st Century: How ancient literature sheds light on current social issues.
3. How a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize in Fiction and former journalist spent more than 10 years researching, traveling, and writing her debut novel featuring women's plight in Iran.
4. Immersive socially engaged fiction set against political turmoil of the Middle East.

# Q&A 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 Hafiz, Sa'di, and Rumi and am drawn to subtle Iranian concepts such as *ta'ā'rof* 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 fifty 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.

## **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 an historical context to the current issue. The 1979 revolution was interesting in the sense that all classes of society rose up 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 soon they were 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, play into your writing of this book/the way you wanted the reader to understand 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, I may add, take this a step further with *taā'rof*, treat 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 from what I heard and read in the media. Like the other religions, Islam contains guidelines for how to be good and have compassion for others. Fasting, for instance, is to show how it feels to be poor and without food so that when you see someone who doesn't have any food, you are inspired to do what you can to feed that person, regardless of 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.

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

**Bjursten:** Oh, the list is long. The most entertaining, on-fire read was *Uncle Napoleon* by Iraj Pezeshkzad. You also 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*, 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, *The Stationary Shop*, by Marjan Kamali. 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 I am closest to must, of course, be Amineh. She is her own worst enemy 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:** Above all, I'd like readers to feel so close to the characters that they can see themselves in their reactions and responses. I want readers to feel a little of the love that is in these pages and to get a sense of the complexity of not just the politics but the individuals who live there.