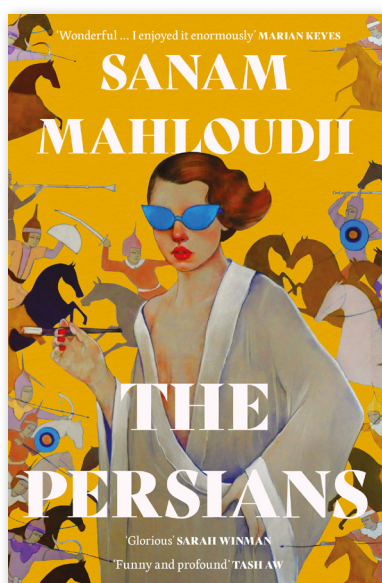


The Persians

by Sanam Mahloudji



SHORT PLOT SUMMARY

Meet the women of the Valiat family. In Iran, they were somebodies. In America, they're nobodies.

First there is Elizabeth, the regal matriarch with the famously large nose, who remained in Tehran despite the revolution and is kept company by Niaz, her Islamic law-breaking granddaughter. In America, Elizabeth's daughters have built new lives for themselves. There's Shirin, a flamboyantly high-flying event planner, who considers herself the family's future and Seema, a dreamy idealist turned bored housewife languishing in the privileged hills of Los Angeles. And then there's the other granddaughter, Bitra, a disillusioned law student trying to find deeper meaning by giving away her worldly belongings.

When an annual vacation in Aspen goes wildly awry and Shirin ends up being bailed out of jail by Bitra, the family's brittle upper-class veneer is cracked wide open. Soon, Shirin embarks upon a grand quest to restore the family name to its former glory. But what does that mean in a country where the Valiats never mattered to anyone? And, will reputation be enough to make them a family again?

Spanning from 1940s Iran into a splintered 2000s, *The Persians* is a portrait of a unique family in crisis that explores timeless questions of love, money, art and fulfilment. Here is their past, their present and a possible new future for them all.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Mahloudji creates a reasonably unsympathetic character in Shirin, who is, as Bitra explains to her therapist, could be seen as 'hollow, spoiled and unlikeable'. Unsympathetic characters or unreliable narrators – characters that the reader does not like very much, finds difficult to sympathise with, or characters that we cannot necessarily believe as telling the truth – are more often found in literary fiction, where writers can (arguably) take more risks with style than in commercial fiction.



Shortlist
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“A sweeping, joyous, multi-generational tale of a gregarious and perfectly imperfect Iranian family living in America.”

DEBORAH JOSEPH,
2025 JUDGE

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Shortlist
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Shirin is a wonderfully three-dimensional, flawed character who is spoiled, vain and arrogant, but who has also had to battle a life of prejudice as an Iranian woman in America – albeit a wealthy one – and leave the country of her birth against her wishes. Shirin, exiled to America, feels the loss of her family’s importance keenly. She is a fiercely protective mother, and over the course of the novel, we also realise that she carries a depth of pain over the loss of her daughter Niaz, who her mother, Elizabeth, has manipulated to stay in Iran.

Shirin’s storyline with the accusation of prostitution highlights structural racism in America: while she doesn’t necessarily help her own case with her rebellious behaviour, Shirin is also not required to submit to unfair treatment just because she is a woman of colour. Shirin is outspoken and sometimes shocking in her behaviour, but it is unfair and unrealistic to expect that women – and especially women of colour – always be well-behaved, whether on the page or in life. In writing Shirin’s character, Mahloudji reminds us that women are allowed to take up space.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Money – and, with it, privilege and status – is an important theme in *The Persians*. The Valiats are a wealthy family: Shirin has so much money that she thinks nothing of literally throwing expensive watches and jewellery into the snow in Aspen. In America, Shirin says, that’s all they have: the Valiats are a family that are used to having semi-royal status in Iran, because of their famous ancestor, the Great Warrior, but this sense of them as a family to be revered is missing in America.

However, money is a difficult subject. Bita is uncomfortable with the money and lifestyle she has been born into, and opts to give away the majority of her own personal fortune. However, as Shirin points out, the act of freely giving away a fortune is, in itself, an intensely privileged act:

‘This is the danger of being born with money. You can think it’s not important. Why do you think most of the Persian communists were well off? ...Mao was the son of a rich farmer. Marx’s family was upper middle class; they owned vineyards’.

Indeed, when Niaz is arrested, it’s Maman Elizabeth that can bail her out with ‘a deed to several thousand acres of land, her house up north and a big chunk of her bank account’. Again, Niaz’s (worthy) revolutionary activities are cushioned by her family money.

What messages is *The Persians* giving the reader about money, women and independence? How do the characters in *The Persians* have privilege, and where do they lack it? Is money enough to have high social status, or are there other structural inequalities that restrict Shirin, Bita and Niaz? As Bita asks, ‘could the Great Warrior’s money be a curse?’

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

QUESTIONS

Shirin and Seema have a brother, Nader, but he doesn't have a significant presence in the novel. Why might this be?

Compare Shirin's life in pre-revolutionary Iran to that of her life in the US. How is each better or worse?

Is America 'the land of the free'? How is this shown or not shown in *The Persians*?

Were you surprised by Nounou's suicide? Discuss why.

NEXT STEPS

Elizabeth's drawing and painting is an important part of her life and self-expression. Attempt a drawing or painting of someone you love, as Elizabeth draws her family and her love, Ali Lufti. You might like to watch some how-to videos online to get some pointers if you have never tried drawing before, or to get some ideas about where to begin. You could try to copy a photo of someone or even draw them from life. Do your feelings play a part in how the portrait comes out, or the style and colours you use?

Alternatively, inspired by Niaz, throw a party to fundraise for a cause that is important to you. If you know anyone who is an artist, you could include an art auction or get friends who are musicians to play some music. Set some creative tasks as part of the party – maybe make up a crafts station with paints and paper, clay and fabrics, or curate other activities that attendees can enjoy. At the end of the party, you could collate everyone's creations and share them on social media. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sanam Mahloudji was born in Tehran and grew up in Los Angeles after leaving Iran during the Islamic Revolution. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize and was nominated for a PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. Her writing has appeared in *McSweeney's*, the *Idaho Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. Mahloudji lives in London with her husband and two children. *The Persians* is her debut novel.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *Refuge: A Novel*, Dina Nayeri tells the moving story of a lifetime relationship between an Iranian father and his daughter, who escapes to America when she is a child.

In Elif Shafak's stunning exploration of generational trauma, *The Island of Missing Trees*, sixteen-year-old Ada seeks to untangle years of her family's silence, but the only connection she has to the land of her ancestors is a fig tree growing in the garden of their home.

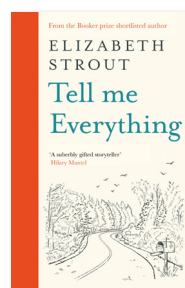
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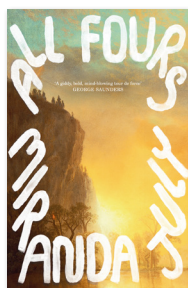
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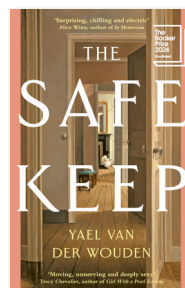
Good Girl
by Aria Aber



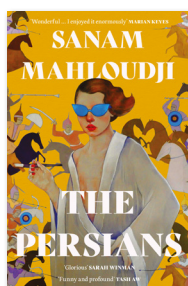
Tell Me Everything
by Elizabeth Strout



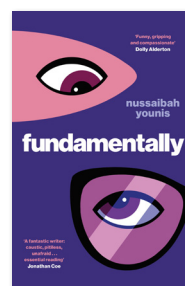
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The Safekeep
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The Persians
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