

# FRIENDS JOURNAL

Quaker Thought and Life Today

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The Lemon Grove

*by Ali Hosseini. Curbstone Books, 2012. 189 pages. \$18.95/paperback.*

*Reviewed by Karie Firoozmand*

In *The Lemon Grove*, Ali Hosseini gives us a realistic image of post-revolutionary Iran in the 1980s, and he does it with a storyteller's skill and a novelist's art. Finally, we have a novel about Iran written in English for what seems to be a Western audience.

Americans are little exposed to Iran for what it is, an ancient culture with a complicated past. Iranian people love family, food, poetry, gardens, and wine (the novel's setting is the city of Shiraz). But Iran is also, according to the main character, "a people of copiers and counterfeiters, who copy from the West and don't even copy well. Even our religion was introduced to us. We are a people of the past, always blabbering that we had the first empire in the world. . . . But what about now? What about our place in modern history?"

Since the 1979 revolution, when it became the world's only theocracy, Iran has become isolated and beset on all sides like the thirsting lemon grove of the title, surrounded by a threatening desert where things are not as they seem. The narrator, Behruz, observes, "Even the Mongols bowed low. . . . But what can save you from the wars of modern man and the enemies within and without. . . . Can they be fought with poems and roses?"

*The Lemon Grove* takes place in the 1980s, when Iran went through a series of traumas most Americans don't know about. The eight-year war started by Iraq followed the revolution and brought death and destruction on cities from the Iran/Iraq border to Tehran, where bombs fell on apartment buildings. Until then, there was no word in Farsi for shell shock.

At the same time, the religious regime tightened its hold, gradually controlling more aspects of private life. Women covering up in public became law, as did the prohibition of men wearing shorts in public. Checkpoints sprang up to catch people in any type of un-Islamic behavior, from possessing alcohol to wearing makeup or playing music too loud; informing was encouraged, and roving bands of unsophisticated zealots were given free reign to arrest people at will. Universities were closed in retaliation for student protests. To this day, a woman cannot be in public in the company of a male non-relative.

Hosseini brings the fear and chaos to life in the characters of a family damaged by war, sexist practices like stoning, and the uncertainty and danger of a country in rapid transition from a pro-Western monarchy (with its own violently repressive apparatus) to a far worse theocracy. He compares it to “that time of day when evening is approaching. . . whatever you see may not be what it appears to be.”

Hosseini’s skillful and luminous prose shows Iran as it was and is, but what makes *The Lemon Grove* a page-turner is the believability of the characters. The plot pivots around a love triangle involving twin brothers, one of whom suffers from battle wounds inflicted on the psyche, the other from guilt and self-doubt at fleeing Iran. Both choices prove painful, as Hosseini reveals the struggles of people living today in Iran and its diaspora.

All of the characters suffer the terrible loss of home, yet must live on in struggle, as the dry lemon grove suggests. As night falls and Behruz witnesses again “the full moon slowly rise and roll out her silver sheets over the desert. . . the whispers that move past as if the earth were breathing,” we feel the tug of the universality of belonging and loss. *The Lemon Grove* tells the particular story of Iran’s recent losses as well as a family’s struggle for unity in a place that is falling apart—“and nobody is doing anything about it.”

Consider yourself invited to take in history and fact along the way as you take respite in *The Lemon Grove*. To use the Iranian way of invitation, *befarmayeed*.

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