

| Review | *The Lemon Grove* by Ali Hosseini
August 3, 2012



“Centuries ago, old Zoroaster walked these lands and told us of the struggle between light and darkness, encouraging us to practice kindness and good deeds so that light would be victorious over darkness. Was nothing learned from him?” So muses Behruz Pirzad, the protagonist of Ali Hosseini’s *The Lemon Grove*, which is the Iranian author’s first novel to be written in English.

The land that old Zoroaster walked is Persia, but in *The Lemon Grove* it is the late 1970s, and Persia is Iran, and Iran has been taken over by religious nut-jobs who wear beards, hate alcohol, and have a passion for stoning women. It’s not a good place if you’re a free thinker, or if you are in love with your brother’s wife. This is Behruz’s situation. He and his brother Ruzbeh grew up in the ancient city of Shiraz, home to the poets Hafez and Saadi. A privileged family, the brothers spent summers on their family’s lemon grove, which is called Narenjastan. There, they grew up with the silent girl Shireen, who they each fell in love with. Once, the grove was lush with water and full of sweet lemons. But then the water stopped flowing, and the lemon trees became diseased. Ruzbeh is the family’s favorite, so it’s Behruz who goes to study in America, leaving Shireen to marry his brother.

The Islamist revolution occurs while Behruz is studying abroad. A Marxist, Behruz and his expatriate friends also want the downfall of the Shah, but the Ayatollah turns their homeland into a nightmare. Schools are closed, doctors flee en masse, and women are required to cover their hair. On top of that, war with Iraq erupts, and on the other side of Iran, the Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan. In the midst of all this madness, Behruz returns to Shiraz and has an affair with Shireen, a married woman. After informers relate what happened to the mullahs, Islamists come for Shireen, bury her up to her waist, and gather stones. Behruz swallows a bottle of poison, in remorse for the result of his passion.

This is where the book begins. A slow, peaceful, and pleasant narrative unfolds as an old man named Musa nurses Behruz back to health, and a suspicious young man named Kemal is set on bringing Narenjastan back to its former glory. Kemal works on the water pump, while Musa makes Behruz eat. Hardly speaking, Behruz spends his days hiding from zealots who like to hang adulterers using cranes—until he discovers that Shireen is still alive, and sets off to find her.

For contemporary readers caught in the hyper-paced progress of the post-digital world, *The Lemon Grove* is a treat. The land abounds with mythical stories of spirits and ancient ruins, a traditional land whose traditions are holding its people back from modern progress; in one amusing section, Kemal explains how they have “modernized” opium smoking, using a wire and tube, rather than the traditional water-pipe.

Other engrossing passages are America obsessed, with characters comparing the desolate desert of Iran to the Promised Land of “self-made people” who have a “can-do attitude,” where history

always seemed to “lay lightly.” In contrast, Iran “seemed an old nation not able to break with its past, a past that is a heavy load not just dragged behind but also controlling the future.” Behruz muses to himself that “it’s as if the train of time had left us many stations back while we were busy with our past and our God.” Though *The Lemon Grove* could have benefited if written in the third person instead of the first, it is when Hosseini takes us inside Behruz’s head like this that the novel shines brightest.

Thirty years after *The Lemon Grove* takes place, things in Iran haven’t seemed to have changed much, despite a push for democracy from brave students and free-thinkers. Like many Iranian intellectuals, academics, and artists, Ali Hosseini now lives in America, where he can safely write about his home country and its recent past, and in doing so, comment on its present. Like the history of Persia, the tale of Behruz, Ruzbeh, and Shireen is a sad story, but one that ultimately offers hope and happy endings among chaos and the madness of war – the disease that strangles our world just like the disease that strangled the lemon trees of Narenjastan. Already a successful writer in Persian, *The Lemon Grove* proves that Hosseini is just as talented writing in English.

[Curbstone/Northwestern University Press](#)

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