



Book Review: From Miniskirt to Hijab

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From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran.
Jacqueline Saper. Potomac Books of the University of Nebraska Press, October 1, 2019, Hardcover and E-book, 206 pages.

Reviewed by Susan Gaspar.

I was immediately intrigued by the synopsis of *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran*, but I had no idea how deeply the story would pull me in. This book should be assigned reading for American high school students, and I highly recommended the

book for anyone who grew up mostly insulated from the often confusing politics and strife of international affairs.

My exposure to this story could not have been timelier. The U.S. was in the middle of a viral pandemic that shut down much of the country and kept people home, punctuated by a period of escalated civil unrest that had been building for many years. As I read, I found myself occasionally looking up from the pages in wonderment to reflect on the way historical events leave trail markers and then circle back, repeating and highlighting that which has not been resolved.

Equal parts history lesson and human drama, *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran* is the memoir of author Jacqueline Saper during a period of a sudden change in her home country as a teenager and young adult. Born in Tehran, Jacqueline is the child of an Iranian father and a British mother, and is also Jewish. Her family and domestic life are enough to build a gripping tale, but this book is much more.

I learned details of events in the Middle East, both ancient and modern-day, of which I was completely ignorant. A different perspective and an alternate world view usually provide more of an education than textbooks, and Ms. Saper's meticulous memories pull you into what otherwise might have ended up a first-hand account of Middle Eastern political developments. I almost felt that I had spent time in Iran myself, especially in the initial chapters, which describe the carefree, happy days of her childhood and early teen years.

I was enraptured with the sumptuous beauty and charming pleasures of everyday life in pre-revolutionary Iran. Suddenly tensions flared, the political and cultural climate shifted, and it became clear that those pleasant times were over. The tenor of the story is altered sharply when Iran's regime falls under the Ayatollah, and tumultuous societal pressures surge under the weight of fundamentalist Islam. My adrenaline level rose with every chapter, and the increasing loss of personal freedoms, the growing daily hardships,

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weight of fundamentalist Islam. My adrenaline level rose with every chapter, and the increasing loss of personal freedoms, the growing daily hardships, and the escalating mortal danger, felt personal.

While reading the section about the American Embassy hostages, I recalled Christmas Day 1979 at my grandparents' home with my family. As we sat in the living room chatting and opening gifts, there was a natural pause in the action, and my mother suddenly blurted out, "I can't stop thinking of those poor hostages while we sit here..." Then, her voice broke and trailed off. Nobody said anything for a bit, and I knew we all felt sad and powerless but also incredibly grateful to be so far away from something so terrifying. This portion of the book opened my eyes to how little I knew or understood of those global affairs, and how comfortably cocooned my world was that day at age 15 in small-town America.

The story spans 26 years, from 1961, when the author was born, until 1987, when she fled Iran for America. For many of those early years, she traveled freely between Iran and her mother's native England, and the contrast between these two realms was a cultural study in and of itself. But after the revolution, travel was nearly impossible, and under strict Islamic laws, life got more complicated and unpleasant. As a woman reading about the terrifying repercussions of not being appropriately dressed and of being observed and controlled by religious clerics and the morality police, I seriously doubted I could have survived some of the more unnerving moments.

The author married at a young age and gave birth to two children, and the stakes grew even higher. I spent many chapters actively worried about the people I was reading about because while I knew some of the outcomes of Iran's history, I was well aware that these human beings were real and not characters in a novel. By the time it became clear that escape from Iran was the only choice for the family, you couldn't have pried the book from my hands.

I must also mention the hidden language lessons that are sprinkled generously throughout. Always fascinated by other languages and cultures, it was a treat to have meanings of words spelled out and used in a clear context. I found myself sounding out the words to see how they felt on my tongue. And I was thrilled to discover a glossary in the back of the book containing several pages of Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic terms. It felt like a bonus gift.

From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran is ideal reading for students, and there is a convenient and comprehensive Reading Group Discussion Guide at the back of the book, which provides talking points and insights for additional research and study. Additionally, the author has a wealth of related information on her website: JacquelineSaper.com. This book will most certainly make you eager to know more—a sure sign of both distinguished writing and powerful subject matter.