



Persian Nights

Diane Johnson

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Chloe Fowler is the most unliberated woman she knows: disarmingly delicate and pretty, and not averse to putting either attribute to its best use, married, young, and satisfied with her normal American life as wife and mother. Yet Chloe is about to be liberated from everything she has ever known—in a place where her ordinary notions of reason and reality will run headlong into a wall of intrigue, and where every idea she has about herself will be put to the test. While visiting Iran with her husband, Chloe is left to travel alone when he is summoned home unexpectedly. Much to her surprise, she finds herself drawn to the life she encounters in Iran; intoxicated by each exotic sight which reminds her how far from home she really is; both comforted and unsettled by the group of foreign and Iranian physicians and their wives who take her in. However, her exhilaration crashes when her rooms are searched, and odd, often frightening events begin to occur, exposing the darker side of this "colonial life." **Persian Nights** follows Chloe on a voyage through the seductively inexplicable, and has all the qualities one expects from the gifted author of **Le Divorce**—the quirky, vivid atmosphere; the intelligent, humane voice; the compelling narrative. Once again **Diane Johnson** delivers an entertaining novel of an appealing woman caught up in a mysterious world of change and intrigue.

Persian Nights Details

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Author : Diane Johnson

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From Reader Review *Persian Nights* for online ebook

Camille Cusumano says

Took me a while to get into the story, not sure why, after all this is Iran, old Persia, and the culture is interesting. Maybe it's because the characters don't seem to care for the culture shock bona fide travelers must encounter in Iran. Maybe because the characters whom I associate with bourgeois academia elude me—these folks are here for work, not the open-minded curious travelers some of us are. Everyone (the expats from the West) is having a hushed affair or guarding some secret but it's hard to see why I should care—until the very end when, just as in a Sam Peckinpah film, the bullets fly, the violence hits the fan. I liked this novel much better than the author's bestselling *Le Divorce*, which I could not finish.

Jessica says

Her best work I've read. It was fabulous. It has the whimsical Fitzgerald quality. The characters are all explored more by action than by thought. I truly loved this book.

Julianne Berg says

I picked this book up at Wonderbooks a while ago and I just got around to reading it. It wasn't amazing and it wasn't terrible. The first half is a bit slow, but it definitely picks up near the middle. It definitely didn't go where I was expecting it to. I do have some unanswered questions, but overall it was good.

John says

This is another in a steady line up of novels that were recommended in appendix form at the end Francine Prose's book on reading and writing, and represents yet another author about whom I had previously heard nothing, but enjoyed. A nominee for Pulitzer Prize for fiction this work follows the travels of an american housewife (of a doctor) to pre-revolutionary Iran, who initially set off with her husband but wouln up alone. The barely alive embers of a cold marriage go out for the protagonist and her husband, both of whom are unfaithful to each other during the course of this story. This major plot line is set against a backdrop of Iran at the brink of its revolution with a tension that touches all the characters except the ex-patriates in Chloe's group.

In this thoughtful introspective work there are no fast paced thematic lines that propel you to read rapidly, but generous character development draws the reader in. There are many different topics that Johnson comments on in this novel, to include broad cultural differences between America and Iran, womens rights, divorce, and extramarital affairs, to name a few.

Overall a fun read with nice style.

Dholsten says

Based on the cover, I thought this would be a fun summer read. Well, no. Instead, the novel presents the chaos leading up to the overthrow of the Iranian government and its impact on both the countrymen and the foreigners that become part of the fabric via medical assistance, airline workers, CIA operatives, etc. There are so many details in this novel that the reader gets the impression that Diane Johnson has had personal experience with in terms of the intricate intrigue of hospital staffing, housing and policies; the Iranian market places, customs, poetry...and sure enough, with a little Web searching, actual notes taken by the author during this turbulent period of Iranian history are used.

I found myself thinking quite a bit about the "ugly American" pov that is addressed through the various actions that are highlighted through the characters' dialogues and the conflicts that emerge in the novel. There are moments that remind me of Conrad's novel, Heart of Darkness, when Iranians and African Americans are being discussed. The protagonist, Chloe Fowler, makes some unbelievably foolhardy decisions and on many occasions misreads the people she considers her friends. She puts more energy into her affair than in writing detailed letters to her young children that are taken care of in America. (I found most of her posts annoying.)

Overall, I thought the skill of Johnson in crafting this novel exceptional. I did have difficulty following some of the action because there were so many characters involved. However, in the hands of Johnson, both the country and the characters are flushed out. The prose has a visual quality (surprised this has not been turned into a movie). Perhaps in later editions the cover will be updated to reflect the serious elements presented.

I found it ironic that oil was mentioned as being a "future" weapon.

Tania Martin says

I'm a fan of this book for its peek at pre-revolutionary Iran through the eyes of a spoilt American housewife, Chloe, and for the self realization she earns while confronting her own biases and flaws through her interactions with the Iranians she meets. Fabulous writing.

SP says

The first half of the book is good, though the pace is slow, it does give some nice exotic flavor and mystic and suspenseful atmosphere. The second half is very poor, really poor. Too many coincidences and too many incomprehensible actions of the protagonists.

A crucial criterion of a good fiction is that the plots and the actions of the characters should be reasonable. However many plots in this book are totally contrived, making the story ridiculous. Just give some examples, (spoiler below)

(1) you hid in a room during a gunfight and by peering through the door and you just saw a gunman just fall in front of you. And minutes later you drag him in because "there are flies on his face"??

(2) you are a doctor from Paris to be summoned to Iran to perform a top secret mission, namely to cure the Shah. And you forgot the dossier on the plane??

(3) you give your passport to a local friend, tell her to use a fake identity (as you) to pass the immigration to escape, and believe that the passport will be mailed back?

(4) you never, ever feel panic during the revolution, and are always blindly optimistic that there will be no trouble to pass the immigration even you DO NOT have a passport??

(5) the missing passport page turn out to appear in the last minute, in the airport??

(6) The kidnapper, who brought the hostage down the cave and would like to murder him, happened to slip in the steep down stairs of the cave (isn't it reasonable that the hostage should be "in front of" the kidnapper so that even a slip will destroy both?)

(7) and, why if you are to murder your hostage in a hot tourist attraction cave?

(8) etc, etc, there are too many to list.

Almost all characters are weak enough (except Abbas), especially the two main characters, Chloe and Hugh. Both are stereotype and not convincing and Chloe is extraordinary disgusting. She seems to live in a parallel time and space and is always detached (or is it the intention of the author to make Chloe so unrealistic)?

My feeling is that the author cannot decide what the book want to be. It wants simultaneously to be a love story, a history fiction, a mystery story, a spy fiction, even a Bildungsroman --- and the result is baffling. The worst is that all are deliberately put in the background at the dawn of the Iranian revolution, but strangely almost nothing is said about that. The only relevant scene is the gathering of the people in the square, which however reads very trite indeed. Our main character, Chloe, even in this dire and tense moment did not get into the swing of thing.

3.5 stars for the first 150 pages. 0.5 star for the rest. It is a very big disappointment that it was a Pulitzer nominee.

Les says

The cover of this book screams "CHICK LIT", until you realize it was nominated for a Pulitzer in literature. Ms. Johnson is a master at plopping American characters in foreign countries, and showing the similarities and differences between two cultures. The ultimate lesson, I believe, is that nothing is what it seems on the news or on the surface, and you have to get to know people before you can make sweeping judgements. "You can't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes."

Fiona says

Enjoyable book. I had read Diane Johnson's *Le Divorce* and enjoyed that book so I decided to read this book.

Jeffrey and Chloe Fowler leave the US for Iran so that he could work in a hospital for a month there to help

the doctors. He's a doctor in the US. En route, he receives a message that his colleague has had a terrible accident back home so he returns to the US but insists that his wife continue her journey to Iran so she can continue her research on Sassanian pottery. He'll join her within a few weeks but never does. Apparently, their marriage is "on the rocks".

In the hospital compound in Shiraz, Iran, there are other foreigners visiting. Dr Junie Fay, Dr Dick Rothblatt, Dr Hugh Monroe who mysteriously shows up a couple weeks late, a couple of other medical couples, Linda Farmani who is the American-born wife of Dr Farmani the chief of the hospital, an archaeologist, and personnel from corporations like Grumman.

The first mystery is the dead foreigner they found while on a day trip to a sacred cave. Curiously, no one wants to know about the body. Not the hospital chief, not the police, not the morgue, not the American consulate. Who is he and what do they do with the body?

The second mystery is the whereabouts of Dr Hugh Monroe. He didn't show up at the hospital on the day he was supposed to. "Someone" said he had troubles in Tehran but no one is willing to help him. Chloe does go to Isfahan where she meets him and starts her affair with him. He tells her he was not in Tehran but in London. However, she found his laundry from the Tehran Hilton.

This all takes place in the waning days of the Shah just prior to the Iranian Revolution. The SAVAK, the internal spy agency, supposedly have spies everywhere. One day Dr Farmani is picked up by the authorities in the early morning hours. Why? Who was the spy for SAVAK? Everyone is blaming Chloe for the arrest.

The group takes a trip to see Persepolis ruins, however, they meet with gunfire. There is a trade of guns for ancient artifacts. One in their group is killed. Is this an omen of trouble brewing?

During this entire time, Chloe and Hugh are having an affair. She also receives a letter from Jeffrey that he wants a divorce because he has found someone else. Dr Junie Fay and Dr Rick Rothblatt are having an affair too but she is in love with Abbas, one of the Iranian doctors.

I quite enjoyed the author's writing. She gives a lot of insight into what Chloe is thinking about, especially the changes that are in her life.

Fun book.

Dhartridge says

Her books are Jane- Austen- like in the author's focus on the relationships of the characters and their foibles. I read this years ago and just reread it, wanting something light. I think it's my favorite of her novels, set in Iran, before the fall of the Shah. The main character, Chloe, is a type that is much less common these days, a woman who depends on her relationships with men (her husband and then her lover) for her sense of self. She begins to get a clue about other alternatives during an eventful stay in Iran.

Laura Atwood says

Plopped down in Iran, unexpectedly on her own, Chloe's personal exploration and discovery, and the turbulence of Iran on the verge of revolution, unfold and intertwine together.

Anita says

I know this book is more than a decade old but it is still relevant and really brilliant. Diane Johnson gets inside the mind of her heroine, Chloe Fowler, and creates a portrait of a woman that is lovely and poignant.

Andrea says

Diane Johnson has a great gift. To be able to write about manners and mores with such a sharp eye, keep it funny yet maintain gravitas, contemporary and timeless, can be masterful.

I first fell in love with Ms. Johnson's writing a decade ago with *Le Divorce*, when I fell in love with Isabelle and Roxy-- to live in Paris! Or Santa Barbara! To have money, style, breeding...well, maybe it's not all it's cracked up to be.

Persian Nights follows in a similar vein, with Chloe our would-be heroine, arriving in Shiraz, Iran sans doctor husband, in the late 1970s, just prior to the revolution. She immediately falls in with the local expat community and the Iranians with whom they are friendly (aka, doctors and their wives), providing more than enough characters for a proper game of Clue.

Ms. Johnson allows a diverse inner monologue with Chloe and her peers, so we know that she's well educated (if naive), curious (just to the precipice of danger), and blatantly selfish. A group trip to a cave early on reminded me of *A Passage To India*, which Chloe was also reminded of. Forster is a good guide for Ms. Johnson, and overall she honors him well.

My only complaint was that SO MUCH melodrama happened in a few short weeks. Perhaps that's possible in a certain place at a certain time, but it made it kind of like a soap opera. Still, to peer in on the lives of Westerners abroad and see ourselves (it's true) is a gift.

Michelle says

Yuck. Just yuck. I don't think I have ever read a book with a more insipid main character. Chloe is pathetic. She is entitled, selfish, stupid and a bigot. And most of the other characters were not much better. Honestly, I don't think the author was capable of writing a character any other way. Blargh.

And the writing - I don't even know where to begin. It was so scattered, I could hardly follow the story. Not that there was much of a story to follow. Just the random ramblings of a spoiled housewife on vacation in Iran. And the constant referring to every character by their first and last names every single time they were

mentioned was cumbersome and irritating. The writing, aside from being scattered, was also choppy. And no one speaks the way the characters in this book spoke. "'Chloe, where have you been?' they all cried." I have never been anywhere that 7 (or more) different people yelled the identical sentence to me in unison. Honestly, I'm no author, so I don't imagine anything I write would sell, but I think even I could write better dialogue.

Horrible book. Complete waste of time. Don't bother.

*Edited to add - this piece of trash was nominated for a Pulitzer? Was the committee drunk that year?!?

Helaine says

Chloe Fowler is a thirty-something wife and mother with one foot in the 1950's and the other in the pre-HIV, sexually free 1970's (book takes place about 1979) who finds herself unexpectedly in an Iran on the verge of revolution sans husband. I expected some superb writing since this book was nominated for a Pulitzer. But I could not identify with Chloe (especially her lament at the end "to be good") or any other character in the book. I also found awkward the frequent change of perspective--especially when the change was accomplished in very short paragraphs. The first few chapters seemed to drag on. I would like someone to tell me why this book was Pulitzer material--what am I missing?
