

## NOTES FOR READING *PERSEPOLIS*

*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood; Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return.*

Marjane Satrapi: “Image is an international language. When you draw a situation—someone is scared or angry or happy—it means the same thing in all cultures. . . It is more accessible.”

Critics generally praised the graphics of *Persepolis 2* as richer and more complex; Satrapi explains, “Everybody thinks I did it on purpose, but in the second one, I just learned to draw.”

### TITLE.

*Persepolis* is a perfect metaphor for her book: it resonates with Westerners and is a symbol both of imperial transience and of the continuity of Persia and the Persian people.

### GENRE.

*Persepolis* has been called a comic book (*Time* listed the first volume as one of the best comics of 2003), a graphic novel, and a graphic autobiography (a coming-of-age story).

It combines the personal, the family, the political, the religious, and the national.

### THEMES.

Class:

Marji’s family is privileged, upper middle-class (her father drives a Cadillac),  
Her great grandfather was the last Qadjar emperor of Iran,  
The romance of Mehri, the maid, and Hossein, the neighbor,  
The maid eats by herself and began working at age 8,  
Condescension of her radical parents and their friends.

Socialization of children: school, family, peers, government agents.

Humanizing Islamic Iran to Westerners (correct Western mis-perceptions),

Does she convincingly show the similarities of Western and Islamic societies?

War (Islamic Revolution, 1979; Iraq War, 1980-88):

Its horrors,  
Political/religious manipulation of citizens (elevation of martyrs),  
Shah’s unpopularity with and overthrow by secular leftists and religious fundamentalists.  
Outer war with Iraq and internal war against Iranians.

Love of country and being Iranian:

Iranian society survives invasions (Arab, Mongol) and oppression and continues to be Iranian.  
Being a hero and being alive.

Modernity versus tradition:

Marji hides wanting to be a prophet from her parents,  
She’s conflicted over the veil, being religious deep down and living with a modern family.

Social injustice

The radical politics of her family and their friends,  
Marji’s desire to be the Last Prophet.

Marji’s developing identity as an individual and an Iranian.

Note her reactions to what she overhears or is told and observes,  
Her conflicts within and without—personal, political, national,  
Anoosh and family memory continuing,  
Father’s advice to remember “who you are and where you come from,”  
Grandmother’s advice to be true to herself.

Freedom versus oppression/confinement:

Small acts of rebellion,

Role of women—Marji, mother, grandmother, teachers, maid, neighbors, Guardians of Revolution.,

Is she portraying religion in general or just fundamentalism as repressive?

### **CHARACTERIZATION OF MARJI.**

Feisty, imaginative, sense of wonder, confused, honest, funny, resilient, questioning, rebellious,

She struggles to understand the adult world, acts on her understanding, and may learn from her actions.

Do we identify with her?

### **DRAWINGS.**

Stark, simple lines and shapes,

Expresses wide range of emotions,

Some look like woodcuts,

Details (clothing, people, background) are sometimes black sometimes white,

Range of effects—sad, tender, violent, angry, humorous, compassionate, chilling.

### **STORIES.**

Stories shape us and shape our perceptions and experiences. Satrapi presents stories others tell her within the main story of her experiences, i.e., she uses stories within her story. Notice the effect of the stories on Marji.

Marji and the Islamic Revolution, as learned from her father (pp. 10-11),

Father and the burning of the Rex Theater (pp. 14-15)

Her father and Reza's seizing power and becoming king (pp. 19-21),

Her father and the story of her family (pp. 22-24),

Her mother and her father's imprisonment (pp. 24-25),

Her grandmother and the arrest of her husband (pp. 26-28),

Her father and the cancer victim-martyr (pp. 31-32),

Writer Ali Ashraf Darvishian and stories of child labor (p. 33),

Marji and Mehri becoming a maid and her romance with their neighbor Hossein (pp. 34-37),

Mohsen and his prison experience (pp. 50-52),

Anoosh and his life (pp. 54-60),

Her cousin Shahab and the story of boy recruits-martyrs (101-102),

Her mother and the arrest of Tinoosh's father (105).

### **NEGATIVE CRITICISMS.**

She presents Islam as backward and inferior.

At times she falls into polemics, preaching and moralizing .

She presents a limited world, one of upper middle class intellectuals and secular radicals.

Her details about her family are sketchy; for instance, how is her immediate family is able to survive relatively unscathed and out of prison?

Dialogue is sometimes stiff or stilted.

### **SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT.**

What do you think of the London *Telegraph* calling *Persepolis* a “stylish, clever and moving *weapon of mass destruction*”? (I added the italics for emphasis.)