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Talking Volumes: Azar Nafisi Continues Love Affair with American Lit

Author Azar Nafisi views fiction as “the moral guardian of the American dream.”

**By** [**Kristin Tillotson**](http://www.startribune.com/kristin-tillotson/10646121/)Star Tribune

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STANLEY STANISKIAzar Nafisi examines three American literary classics — “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” “Babbitt” and “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter” — in her new book.

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The last time Azar Nafisi came to the Twin Cities, she took great delight in visiting one of the St. Paul houses where F. Scott Fitzgerald lived.

“I thought of ‘The Great Gatsby,’ where he mentions Minnesota and the cold, and how it made the place feel so familiar,” said the author of the international bestseller “Reading Lolita in Tehran,” which detailed her love of Western literature and her experience teaching it, in secret, during the reign of the Ayatollah Khomeini in her native Iran. “That’s the amazing thing about books. You go to a city where you’ve never been and it feels like home, like you’re coming to visit relatives.”

That was in 2010, when Nafisi received the Don and Arvonne Fraser Human Rights Award for her advocacy of women’s rights in Muslim societies. She returns to the Twin Cities on Nov. 5 for a Talking Volumes event to be held — where else? — at the Fitzgerald Theater, where she will discuss her just-published “Reading Lolita” follow-up, “The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books.” In it, she makes an impassioned argument that reading literature is our best hope for sparking creative problem-solving and fighting complacency in the face of an ever more polarized culture.

Between the time she attended college in the United States and when she returned to live here 17 years ago, “all these great transformations in attitudes toward minorities and women have come about,” she said. But alongside those positive changes, she also saw something disappointing, a search for personal comfort that superseded the desire to understand perspectives different from our own. “That desire only comes from imagination and ideas, ideas given voice in a free society,” she said.

Nafisi, 58, has lived in free and restricted societies. She grew up in a highly accomplished, educated family. Her father was a mayor of Tehran, her mother one of the first women elected to the Iranian parliament. She has a Ph.D. in American literature from the University of Oklahoma and was a fellow at Oxford.

Returning home in the late 1970s to teach at Tehran University, she chafed at the severe limitations being placed on women by leaders of the Islamic Revolution. In 1981 she lost her job for refusing to wear a veil. She eventually invited her best female students to read forbidden Western works such as “Daisy Miller” and “Pride and Prejudice “ with her at home. Those lessons, in which she encouraged comparisons to life in Iran, became the inspiration for “Reading Lolita” in 2006, which stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for two years.

AZAR NAFISI

What: Author of “Reading Lolita in Tehran” discusses her new book, “The Republic of Imagination,” with MPR’s Kerri Miller.

When: 7 p.m. Nov. 5.

Where: Fitzgerald Theater, 10 E. Exchange St., St. Paul.

Tickets: $25. 651-290-1221, www.ticketmaster.com.

Coming up: Karen Armstrong (Nov. 11) and Richard Ford (Dec. 1).

Twain, Lewis, McCullers

Nafisi’s new book, a blend of memoir and conversationally delivered analysis, examines three classics she finds to be quintessentially American.

The first, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain, would be on just about everybody’s list. She calls Huck “the source for so many other characters that populate fiction’s landscape.” The second, “Babbitt” by Minnesota’s own Sinclair Lewis, satirizes middle-class materialism and the pursuit of conformity over individuality. The book has fallen into semi-obscurity despite themes that resonate at least as sharply today as they did when it was published in 1922.

Speaking from her home in Washington, D.C., where she is a fellow at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, Nafisi grew animated as she explained her change of heart over the titular character, acquisitive huckster George Babbitt.

“I found him just horrible when I first read the book in college. But I decided to include this book because I needed an anti-Huck, someone who explains another point of view. So many of us say we are against the things Babbitt stands for, but who is in line for eight hours to get the new iPhone? Who is in love with mindless entertainment on TV? Who is it that will accept soulless surroundings as long as everything is more efficient and comfortable? We can’t blame the Babbitts. They may be expert seducers, but we are the seduced.”

Carson McCullers’ first novel, “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,” rounds out the trio. The 1940 Southern-Gothic touchstone tells the story of a pair of deaf/mute roommates and other motley residents in a small Georgia town, all somehow isolated in their own ways.

In praise of Baldwin

Nafisi notes that often, the great classics presage historical events and cultural trends with uncanny accuracy. “Babbitt” sets the stage for the commercialism that came to dominate American culture by the 1950s. In “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,” Dr. Copeland, a black Southern physician raging against racism, speaks of leading “more than one thousand Negroes in this country on a march. A march to Washington. All of us in one solid body.” A quarter-century later, just such a march, attended by 250,000 supporters, became a hallmark of the civil rights movement.

Asked what she thinks of readers who prefer nonfiction, finding fiction to be a less productive use of time, she said, “the two are complementary. Usually nonfiction complements fiction, not the other way around, because fiction is about our routine, habitual lives, things we don’t notice, yet it gets at our deepest feelings and the reasons behind them, how we relate to each other. Nonfiction doesn’t give us that liberty.

“Fiction is the moral guardian of the American dream,” she said. “It shows the good side, the miraculous side of America that makes the impossible possible.”

Nafisi added a last-minute epilogue to her book because she felt rueful about not including James Baldwin’s “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” affirming his desire to be known not as a great black writer or great black, gay writer, but a great writer of universal truths.

“I felt it needed a greater finale. Baldwin represents that incredible transition period of the 1960s, he opened us up, touched our hearts just as much as Salinger. There’s just as much reason to call Baldwin the great American novelist as anyone.”

As for who is writing novels today that will become the great, enduring American classics of tomorrow, she hasn’t a clue.

“I don’t know,” she said, laughing. “There are many I like, but it’s too difficult for me to make such a judgment about people who are still living.”

When she does decide to make that judgment, she probably will use as her guide the closing sentence of her epilogue:

“The true lure of a great book is not that sugarcoated candy house offered by the witch, but the mysterious whisper that beckons, saying, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once did, ‘Draw up your chair to the edge of the precipice and I’ll tell you a story.’ ”

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