



Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran

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The book that revealed Iran to the West, now with a new Afterword. Elaine Sciolino updates *Persian Mirrors* to include coverage of the 2005 presidential election in Iran.

As a correspondent for *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, Sciolino has had more experience covering revolutionary Iran than any other American reporter. She was aboard the airplane that took Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Tehran in 1979 and was there for the revolution, the hostage crisis, the Iran-Iraq war, the rise of President Khatami, the riots of 1999, and the crisis over Iran's nuclear program. In *Persian Mirrors*, Sciolino takes us into the public and private spaces of Iran, uncovering an alluring and seductive nation where a great battle is raging -- not for control over territory, but for the soul of its people.

Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran Details

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From Reader Review Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran for online ebook

J.I. says

What an incredible, if very limited, insight into a culture. While it is written by an outsider, it is an educated, thoughtful, and considerate one. The main focus of this book is on the political changes of Iran, mostly focusing from the revolution to 2000, though with extended commentaries of the time before, for context, and full of cultural, personal, and historical tidbits.

What is striking about Sciolino's book is how careful it is to maintain its distance of authority. While she has been covering the region for decades, traveled extensively, made friends and contacts all over the country in all kinds of situations, she is still an outsider looking in, trying to make sense of this world from her own viewpoints. Sciolino often points out her relative position, when attempting to bridge the gaps of these worlds, and the result is that the reader feels that they know this world better, but not that they have a complete understanding of it.

Obviously, with a book that is largely concerned with Iran politically (in terms of understanding it, not in terms of predicting or defeating or promoting, or whatever), the date is something to keep in mind. The last edition has a 2006 afterward that addresses this a little, but Iran has had a very interesting place in the world since then, and that simply isn't covered. This isn't a flaw in the book, it is simply something to keep in mind. That being said, I would highly recommend it, as it was striking and marvelous.

Kate says

This was a long haul. I'm glad I picked it up this last month, given all that going on in Iran right now. I really feel like I have a better understanding of the country (which isn't saying much, since I had almost no understanding of it before). Elaine Sciolino has used her experience of more than twenty years as a correspondent in Iran to write a book about the modern face of the nation. It's extremely detailed, covers a wide variety of subjects, and stays interesting all the way through. I would say it was even a bit TOO long, since it did seem to drag along in the sections about the economy.

Sciolino has obviously had a very interesting career, and has met a wide range of very interesting people. There's a tendency to name-drop that gets a little annoying at times, but mostly I really appreciate the chance to see Iran from so many different angles. I would like to see her take on what's been going on with the recent Iranian presidential election, as I'm sure she's got something very insightful to say. Overall, this book is a useful introduction to a country about which most Americans (myself recently included) know very little.

Julie Christine says

Elaine Sciolino is a long-time international correspondent for the NY Times and Newsweek. The book is an in-depth, first-hand look at Iran since the revolution- Elaine was on the jet that returned Khomeini to Iran to overthrow the Shah- she knew NOTHING about Persian culture/history/politics when she started that assignment 20 years ago, but is now considered an expert on the region. The book really opened my eyes and

piqued my curiosity about this amazing country and its people. She spends a lot of time discussing women and their complex, important role in Iranian society- debunking a myth that they are a silent and oppressed majority.

Assal says

Being Iranian myself, I usually steer clear of books about Iran written by media personalities and the like, but Ms. Sciolino's take on Iran was a breathe of fresh air. Most writers focus on the government and take the people and their chants of "Death to America" at face value. Ms. Sciolino chose to dig deeper and really see what Iranian society is made up of (the past and present)....and her openness and desire to find the real Iran in the myriad of elusive mirrors really shines through in her writing. This was an excellent foray into trying to understand my complicated country. Bravo, Elaine.

Wesley Gerrard says

Elaine Sciolino is a female New York Times journalist who had the good fortune of being present in Paris with the exiled future leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. When he seized power from the Shah in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Sciolino was one of the first Western journalists on the ground and she enjoyed privileged access to the new Iranian clerical elite. Iran is a country so alien to us in the West and the lack of knowledge of this ancient culture that is expressed to us in our news and history books made me drawn to reading this book. It is very well written, with lots of detail and the best part for me was the personalised touch. We hear of a woman with a deep commitment to exposing this 'other' culture. She writes with the eyes of an American female yet is obviously deeply in love with this country's people, if not always the ideals of their government. The ways of life are so strikingly difficult. I was overwhelmed by the seeming oppression that the general population live under. There is a remarkable contrast between public and private life and Sciolino was fortunate enough to be invited into the private spheres that would often elude a typical tourist's quest. The acceptance of senior Imams and clerics and government officials to provide her with sensitive material makes this such a critical read and I found it particularly interesting when her Iranian female friends allowed her into their private spaces, where the public veil of the chador could be lifted. The exploration of various areas of Iran journeyed us from ruins in Persepolis to the rigours of religious life in Qom. There was always an overlook at how the Islamic Revolution was still occurring and the ways that this strict religious governance affects people truly exposes the current national psyche that separates us so much from Iranians in the modern age. 'Death to America', a much-repeated slogan in the Revolution must have meant that it was particularly dangerous for Sciolino to research this book, but she demonstrates that things are changing and in fact most Iranians would love to actually visit America and it is this that makes her as an individual, as fascinating to them as they are to her. I think that for anyone who wishes to understand Iran, in its modern situation, especially with the rhetoric of the current global political climate, that this book is a most essential read.

Elizabeth Theiss says

A friend traveled to Iran to give a philosophy paper and recommended this book. Sciolino is a journalist whose curiosity and acute observations make this a fascinating book and a nice introduction to Persian society, especially the society of women.

Mike says

I am glad to be done with Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran and will put it on the 3 Star shelf. Stories of the Middle East are often sad and depressing. I hoped it would be different here, with the magnificent history of Persia lending an exotic flavor to this travel and adventure tale. Unfortunately, that is not the case:

The sadness of young people shows up in other ways. A young Iranian-American friend of mine who grew up in the United States but returned to Iran for a visit prided himself on his ability to blend in with people his age who had grown up in the country. But one day in a barbershop, the barber stated, “You recently came from abroad.”

“How could you tell?” the young man asked.

“You have laughter in your eyes,” the barber said. “No one at your age who has known nothing else but life in Iran has laughter in his eyes.”

There was entirely too much focus on the political maneuvering of the 90's, when the book was first published. I was tempted to put the book down several times yet would find reasons to continue, like the story of Hamid, an Iran-Iraq war veteran that was reminiscent of the Vietnam era, a forgotten soldier, living at the margins, railing at society and politicians for not honoring the war veterans and casualties.

I wanted to hear more about the Iran-Iraq war but also about the Iranian people and their life. This NYT reporter was on the plane with Khomeini when he went back to Iran. She has traveled many times to the country and has some good insight and anecdotes. I think women might like this book more than I did, because she does focus some large portions on the progress and regression of women in the Islamic Republic. The stories are alternatively uplifting and hopeful and then depressing.

In Qom, shortly after the revolution, I saw a scene that chilled me: three women in black chadors, their faces hidden behind gauzy black cloth. They could see out, imperfectly, I guessed, but outsiders couldn't see in. “Death out for a walk,” was the way the nineteenth century French writer Guy de Maupassant once described women in chadors. He could have been in Qom that day with me.

The young people are a major force to be reckoned with, after the baby boom following the revolution. The mullahs wanted population growth and they got it. This resulted in a large group of young people who were becoming disillusioned in the late 90's as they couldn't get jobs. I think there remains opportunity to connect with the younger generation that has no love for the religious clerics who rule or fond memory of the revolution. There is a irreverence that comes through in the book that is catchy:

...a close friend who is a political scientist at the University of Tehran said only half jokingly that he was going to send me a video of himself.

“A video?”

“I thought I'd do a video of myself saying that if I confess I have cheated on my wife and committed treason, don't believe it.” He said. “It's forced. I thought I'd send it to a few of my friends.”

Then he had a better idea. “Maybe I'll make two—one for my friends and one for my jailers. The one for my jailers will confess to everything. That way, they won't have to bother torturing me first. They can just put the confession on television and set me free!”

With the ongoing tension recently between the West and Iran, I wanted to get a feeling for the Iranian side.

With the outdated political discussions here, even with the 2005 afterword addition, I didn't get enough of what I wanted. Interesting comment on the Iranian vs American view.

Americans, it is often said, have too little sense of history and the people of the Middle East too much. Where people in the Middle East carry around every past misfortune as a burden to be redeemed or avenged, Americans are constantly shucking off the past in favor of the present.

I'd agree with that. This is a good but dated look at Iran that is not hard to read.

Cecily Robertson says

I hated History in high school. I just assumed I always would, but now I can see what I hated about it. American History was boring--Americans have learned about it all their lives. Government was boring--it was about the American Government. World History was boring because it was told from the *American* perspective. I read this for my Global Awareness class and found it interesting, fascinating at some parts. As an American I have almost no knowledge of Middle Eastern countries and this book easily lets you see into the private and public lives of Iranians. It gives great historical context and also a great insight into the people of Iran, since Sciolino herself spent nearly twenty years writing about (and visiting) Iran. I particularly enjoyed the chapters about Iranian women. They were surprising and very intimate. A good, informative read.

Fadillah says

I've read many books on Iran but it never came from the perspective of non iranian or foreigner. This book is somewhat interesting. I've read Shirin Ebadi, Houshang Asadi, Marjane Satrapi, their book is the manifestation of their personal story ; It might involve other people but at the end of the day, they are the star of their own book. Sciolino's approach of writing is simply based on her observation of what's Iran like on the daily basis. She ventured into the country that she had little knowledge of in the name of journalism. She encountered countless of experiences ; some were bitter, some were sweet and some were leaving such depth mark in her own memory. Every chapter that she wrote connected with her experience and ordinary people of Iran. I might re-read this book. What a great book!

Adam says

2.5 stars really... It's a great way to see inside contemporary Iranian society, but as far as her focus and translation of Islam or political happenings, they are quite funny and a little warped. She has no ability to see the grammar of Iranian, neh Islamic, societies and customs. I'll put up some funny quotes...

Denise says

An excellent, insightful and well-rounded portrait of Iran in the last two decades of the 20th century. The author's deep familiarity with the country and its people, gained over the course of twenty years, shines

through in every chapter.

David Harris says

I studied Farsi in college but have never had an opportunity to visit Iran. I was looking for a book which would give me a sense of what it's like there. This book, which is perhaps a little dated now (although I wouldn't let that stop you from reading it), contains a wealth of information about politics, daily life and religion in Iran. It goes into great detail about political personalities and the struggle between conservatives and reformists. There are also all sorts of great details about what it's like to navigate the country from the immigration desk at the airport to public domains such as hotels, restaurants, taxi cabs and walking on the street as well as private domains such as family homes and gardens.

The author clearly has a lot of affection and respect for Iranian culture, but she pulls no punches when it comes to criticizing the repressive government. It's bad enough that women routinely have to deal with thugs approaching them on the street to instruct them to adjust their scarves to better cover their hair. But the consequences of pushing the boundaries on dress and behavior can sometimes have much more drastic consequences given that there is no real rule of law and that the rules change arbitrarily all the time.

Sciolino wrote this book with 20 years' experience as a journalist covering Iran, so she brought to it the benefit of personal relationships with people in key positions of power in Iran and those close to them. It's fascinating to read about the rise of the reformists in the elections of 1997 and 2000 and their jostling for influence with the conservatives who were and remain determined to maintain a stranglehold on power in the country.

I enjoyed learning more about such colorful characters as former Tehran mayor Gholam-Hosein Karbaschi. He's a guy who knows how to get things done, but there's no doubt he was guilty of at least some of the corruption he was charged with when the conservatives brought him to trial to undermine the reformist agenda. I'm not sure that necessarily makes him a bad guy, though, given that it takes all sorts of creative strategizing to accomplish anything of consequence in that political environment.

Rafsanjani, too, is a multi-dimensional character who can't easily be categorized as either a good guy or a bad guy. But, certainly, Khatami and others of the reformist bent can be placed firmly in the good list in that they have taken on all sorts of personal risks, including prison time, in order to rescue the country from presumably well-meaning individuals who believe that imposing their religion on everyone, no matter what their beliefs are, is the best way to protect the country from outside influences. Others are Abdollah Nouri, a former Khatami cabinet member, Ayatollah Montazeri and both his father and son, and even the Supreme Leader's own brother, Hadi. On the bad-guy list belong those who are determined to do whatever is necessary to protect the status quo no matter who gets hurt or killed as a result.

Other interesting details include the story of Ayatollah Montazeri, chosen early on by Khomeini as his successor, and his subsequent fall from grace due to his public criticisms of repressive practices by the government. Interestingly, he was not jailed for his views as many others have been. Instead, he was allowed to continue to live in his house and to teach students studying to be clerics. Indeed, Shi'ite Islam is all about encouraging a diversity of opinions and allowing everyone to follow the cleric whose opinions most resonate with their own. So it's odd to think that a government led by Shi'ite clerics would be so determined to quash competing points of view by jailing clerics and other members of society the way the Islamic Republic does.

There are many stories about mainstream Iranians and the problems they face in their daily lives. And there are others which describe problems faced by women and minorities in particular. Baha'is in particular face severe challenges because their religion is considered invalid in that it was established after Mohammed, who is believed to have been the seal of the prophets whom no others can follow. Baha'is are required to serve in the army and to pay taxes, but they have no rights and can have their passports or property seized for virtually any reason. But it's bad enough for Jews, who are routinely rounded up and put on trial for spying for Israel or other absurd charges, and Christians, whose schools and churches are, by law, overseen by Muslims though they do not benefit from the large bonyads (foundations) which fund mosques.

I regret that this review is coming across as so negative because there are actually many positive aspects of Iran discussed in the book. The centuries-long tradition of Persian poetry, for example, and beautiful architectural landmarks in places like Shiraz and Esfahan. Cultural events like the Persian New Year, inspired by the Zoroastrian religion native to Iran, are likewise described in detail along with many examples of the constructive ways Iranians go about creating a meaningful life for themselves despite the repressive environment they face.

And, of course, Iran and Islam don't have a monopoly on religious-inspired repression. There was, for example, a story in the book about a female student who was not allowed to take a test at her college because her coat was too short, a story which reminded me of a similar incident which happened at BYU in my hometown of Provo, Utah. That latter incident became famous when the student wrote a letter to the editor of the student newspaper describing the encounter, which resulted from the fact that she was wearing jeans, which weren't allowed at BYU at that time. The solution, she wrote, was to remove her jeans underneath her winter coat in order to gain access into the testing center to take her test. That letter is occasionally republished in the student newspaper along with other memorable letters from across the decades.

In any case, it's clear that Iran will have to change to accommodate the younger generation, who sees no point in social restrictions which have no real benefit to them. And, already in 2000, Sciolino notes that positive change is apparent.

Undoubtedly, the US has undermined Iran over the years. But, in many cases, Iran has brought this on herself. Toward the end of the book, the author points out that our two countries have many goals in common, and she predicts that this will bring us together eventually. Indeed, the democratic tendencies of the Islamic Republic, despite conservative attempts to undermine it, could serve as a model for the rest of the Middle East once they work out more of the kinks. (And God knows that America has enough problems with its own democracy which, likewise, needs major reforms 15 years into the 21st century!)

Finally, I wanted to mention briefly that I read this book side-by-side with Jamie Maslin's *Iranian Rappers* and Persian Porn_ and Roger Housden's *Saved By Beauty*. The three books together gave me a combined sense of Iran that I wouldn't have gotten by reading only one or two of them. Housden's is a little more esoteric, focusing on Persian art and philosophy. And Maslin's book was a fun travelogue and a quick read if a little heavy on the details of his partying with mindless hedonists. If you have limited time to devote to reading, I'd go with this book over either of the other two. However, if you're really more interested in a travelogue then an in-depth book about Iranian society, one of those other two books is probably more what you are looking for.

update: Hooman Majd's *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* is an excellent companion volume to this one. If you're not all that interested in a deep look at Iranian society, go with the Maslin travelogue. Otherwise, Majd and Sciolino are the best books I know of on this subject. I am less enamored of Roger Housden's *Saved By Beauty*, mostly because it's very slow and easy to put down. But

I'll revisit this review once I've actually finished that book as I want to give it a sporting chance.

Richp says

The author, whose name is Scorpion according to Google, spent considerable time and effort doing the research that went into this book. She even managed to interview the Ayatollah Khomeini when he was in exile in France. I cannot pretend to have anywhere near the understanding she does about the people of Iran, although when I add up my personal experiences, they do add up to noticeably not than zero. I think she probably did an excellent job describing the people of Iran at that time and how they think.

Given that praise from me, how can I possibly give this book the lowest possible rating? This book is not just about Iran, it is about the relationship between Iran and USA. It is clear she knows little about USA (she often forgets the name of that country and is reduced to describing it by the hemisphere of the world it is mostly located in) or else maybe she does and she is lying her buttocks off. (I suspect it is a combination of dumb and lying but that is not important.). I give two specific examples, although I could give more. The first is describing the shoot down of an airliner from Iran as an accident: it was not an accident, it was deliberate; the most benign defense of the captain is that maybe he was too busy trying to kill some boats to bother figuring out what that airplane was doing by flying over the Gulf. The second is that Madeleine Albright is mentioned several times, but what she is most infamous for is what she said about the deliberate deaths of half a million babies and young children caused by USA in a Persian Gulf nation: "the price is worth it", yet she is presented as a voice of reason. The half million dead, due to the fawning approval by the U.S. press, is likely a lot more than two million by now. Books like this are parts of why this keeps happening.

Margitte says

The blurb says it the best. Iran is one of the countries I would love to visit one day. A beautiful, multi-cultural, architectural gem where intellectual debate started thousands of years ago, civilization never stopped its constant renaissance, while preserving the ancient and the unique, and where nature has a mystic quality to its diversity. Contrary to popular believe, Iran is an ancient old wine-making country, an art form which never bowed completely to the new theocracy of recent decades. The spirit and vitality of its people never seized to feed the imagination of visitors to this vast and inviting space. Iran is technically and geographically not a middle-eastern country. The original religion prior to Islam is still practiced.

The author uses the journalese style to invite the reader into this wonder world while addressing the political changes, the cultural norms and values and introduce a much different Iran to the outside world than is commonly known. I have read several books about this old land, and this is not one of the most exciting ones, however, it is so in-depth and informative that I tried to stick to it for most of it. Unfortunately it became a tedious read, since it's style makes it difficult to portray in text what a film documentary could have done better. A visual representation will work better in my humble opinion.

The author is a good writer, but the constant neurotic nature of her approach got me down. Some uplifting stories, but most of it is just depressing. She was on the same airplane as the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 when he returned to Iran from France, covered the Iran-Iraq crises, the revolution, hostage crisis, the 1999 riots, and in a new afterward added the elections of 2005.

So, although the book is already a bit dated, it does provide an informative read, particularly focusing on women's issues in many instances. Azam Taleghani was one of the outstanding women who ran for president just to create a stir and a debate all over the country for women's rights. Iran has very much a gender fault line in its current and complex theocratic setup.

Given the harsh treatment of women in much of the Islamic world, it is understandable that Iran's clerics would seek to rehabilitate their country's image around the world by celebrating the centrality of their women. Women make up 25 percent of Iran's labor force and half of the university population. They drive their own cars, buy and sell their own property, and run their own businesses. They keep their own names at marriage. The roots of these rights date from the constitutional movement of the early twentieth century, when women began to demand more rights, and later from the rule of Reza Shah, who expanded education and employment opportunities for women.

Most important, women vote in elections and hold political office. In 1999, when Iran held the first town council elections since the revolution, some Iranians told me that they voted for certain candidates simply because they were women.

...Unlike many other Islamic countries, Iran has an active family planning program, and birth control is widely available. Women are out on the streets early and late; they catch buses and communal taxis to school and work at 6:00 a.m." and they shop for food at 3:00 a.m. in twenty four-hour supermarkets. In countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, most of these rights are denied to women.

So I will go for four stars on this one. It is, however, worth the read. I enjoyed the few days I tried to get through it. But I need to move on. Too many books waiting.

Vasil Kolev says

While reading this, at some times when I saw what the people there endured and even liked, I got reminded of something from Pratchett ("Interesting times"):

"You know their big dish down on the coast?"
"No."
"Pig's ear soup. Now, what's that tell you about a place, eh?"
Rincewind shrugged. "Very provident people?"
"Some other bugger pinches the pig."

Maybe there's a chance for this people.

The book itself is great, and has a lot more depth than what's expected from journalists.
