



hoopla digital: What inspired you to write this novel?

Susanne Pari: I don't think I could tell a story that didn't involve a family. I've always viewed and experienced the world from amidst a sprawling transnational clan of diverse people. This middle space is where I process and interpret what happens in the wider world before I let it touch me as an individual. In essence, I make sense of big ideas by examining them within a tribal context. I begin with one character, in this case Mitra, and slowly, inevitably discover her tribe and the story of that tribe. The broader themes involving women's roles, motherhood, patriarchy, and oppression gain clarity through the behaviors of these characters.

hd: It has been over 20 years since you published your first novel. Can you tell us why you took such a long amount of time between novels?

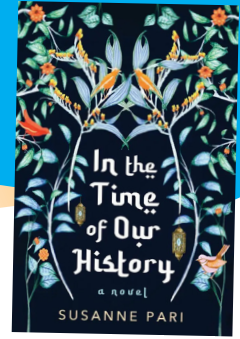
SP: I did write a second one and I worked on a third; I also wrote most of a memoir about the amusing relationship between my devout Iranian grandfather and my American mother. I'm a writer, not a publisher. The West has had a general distaste of anything Iran-related since the 1979 Hostage Crisis, and it wasn't until recently that this changed. Now, a large new generation of Iranians are living in the West, and those in Iran have access to the world through the Internet. More and more Westerners (including editors and publishers) have friends or family or colleagues who have Iranian heritage. The exposure to all things Persian has mushroomed, finally muting the sensationalist depiction favored by unscrupulous politicians and media types. I think if a writer builds a good story, readers will come...eventually. I'm glad I'm alive to see it.

hd: You were raised in a large family who emigrated to the United States from Iran as refugees. How similar are the events of the book to what your family experienced? How did the effects of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on you and your family influence this novel?

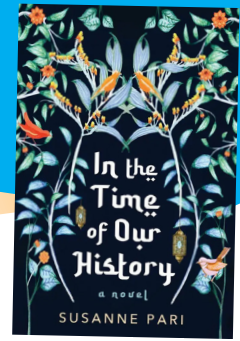
SP: Actually, my father (like Yusef) emigrated to the US in the early 1950s. He met and married my American mother in that same decade. I and my siblings are American-born. It was later, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, that my paternal family was compelled to flee Iran or suffer persecution under the new regime. In this sense, the Jahani situation is very similar to mine. In my first novel, I examined the causes and effects of the Revolution on people who were resisting migration. In this one, I wanted to examine the long-term impact of the decision to migrate, not only on those who fled, but also on their loved ones whose lives were solidly built on American soil.

hd: Your main characters' last name is Jahani. *Jahan* (جهان) means "world" in Farsi. Why choose that surname?

SP: Oh, probably because my Persian sensibility can't avoid using a metaphor when one is available to me.



- hd:** Motherhood, both in the traditional and nontraditional sense, is a theme in this novel. Why did you decide to explore this idea? What message do you hope readers will take away from your exploration of motherhood in this novel?
- SP:** I grew up, both in the US and in Iran, surrounded by women (in addition to my mother) who played mothering roles in my life. When I became a mother myself, I was living far away from my extended family and this made me painfully aware of the downsides of the nuclear family. It made me sensitive to the women in my life who'd either chosen not to have children or couldn't have them, but who had nurtured and advised me in ways my mother couldn't. I wanted to clarify these women's decisions and to honor them.
- hd:** You introduce each section of the book with poetic fable-like interludes beginning with the line, "In the time of our history." Can you share the reasoning behind these interludes, and the meaning of that line, which also is the book title?
- SP:** The interludes came to me in a kind of flow state very late in the process of writing the novel. I guess when you grapple with a story for 10 years, something of it grows inside you until it bursts forth. The interludes became a kind of connective tissue for me, a way to tie the many threads of the story together and also to include some of the backstory that I cut from the original manuscript. Anyone who is exposed to Persian culture is exposed to Persian classical poetry, which is filled with imagery, metaphor, and lyricism. It's not unusual to be at an Iranian gathering and suddenly have someone begin to loudly recite some flowery poetic verse. I can't read or write in Farsi, but clearly a lifetime of exposure had its influence on my writing. The phrase "In the time of our history" worked as a narrative prompt for me. The way I grew up forced me to hold the global and the local in my mind at the same time, to place myself in certain eras by associating the different events that were happening simultaneously across the world. The interludes allowed me to demonstrate the idea of history being global and collective.
- hd:** How did the direction of the story evolve during the writing process? Did the plot of the novel emerge in ways that surprised you?
- SP:** For me, it's usually the characters who surprise me rather than the plot. Events and situations are abundant in my mind; it's the manner in which characters react to those events and situations that determine the direction of a novel. This means I have to know my characters far better than I could ever know a person in real life. Still, they can definitely surprise me. Shireen surprised me. I didn't think she would have the strength or the will to take the path she did, and I resisted. But ultimately, she made her desires known to me.



- hd:** There are so many themes in this novel. How would you categorize it? Do you consider this a political novel? A family saga? Here at hoopla, we have an ongoing debate on if novels taking place in the 1980s and '90s are considered historical fiction. What are your thoughts?
- SP:** I have a bit of an aversion to categorizing myself and my work. We can all assign ourselves multiple labels, but I think this is an exercise in simplification. Each of us is complex and multi-layered, and for someone with my mixed background, categorization is exhausting and limiting. So yes, my novel is a political one *and* a family saga *and* historical. For me, history is what happened a minute ago. For many readers, the 1980s and '90s are history. If I had to choose a genre, I would call it a realist novel set in the not-so-distant past.
- hd:** This book is such tribute to strong, rebellious women. What rebellious women inspire you and why?
- SP:** There are so many. I've always been drawn to irreverent women. More than that, I'm drawn to the unique ways in which they express that irreverence: creatively, patiently, without guilt or regret, in small acts as well as large ones. Some of these women are in my family or are friends or mentors. Others are well-known icons like Margaret Sanger, Rosa Parks, Aung San Suu Kyi, Forough Farrokhzad, Toni Morrison, Gloria Steinem, Tina Turner, Jane Fonda, etc. But at the moment, I'm most inspired by the girls and women in Iran who, despite threats of arrest, torture, or death, are burning their government-mandated scarves in the name of women's rights.
- hd:** What are you working on next? Olga's story, perhaps?
- SP:** Olga's story has already been written; it was written first. Her relationships with each of the Jahani family members is the fulcrum upon which the family story rests and pivots. Alas, in the interest of book length, early readers and editors felt her voice was too dominant. It was very difficult for me to remove her letters and conversations from the manuscript, but I did. She is the only character in the novel who is based on a real person, which is a story in itself. Since so many readers have expressed an interest in her, I've decided to reveal some of these "outtakes" in my newsletter, *From the Diaspora, with Love*. And she will definitely appear in my next novel.



SUZANNE PARI is an Iranian American novelist, journalist, essayist, and book reviewer. Born in New Jersey to an Iranian father and an American mother, she grew up both in the United States and Iran until the 1979 Islamic Revolution forced her family into permanent exile. Her first novel, *The Fortune Catcher*, has been translated into six languages, and her nonfiction writing has appeared in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, NPR, and Medium. She blogs occasionally for the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies and divides her time between Northern California and New York.