Q&A with Susanne Pari about IN THE TIME OF OUR HISTORY

Q: You were raised in a large Iranian-American family. How similar are the Jahanis to your extended family?

A: The people in my family aren't as interesting as the Jahanis, at least not that I know of. (Sorry, Family.) That's not to say that my fiction isn't influenced by real life people, events, or observations. But those are only the first bits and pieces that, over a very long and often frustrating and sometimes fun period of musing, daydreaming, spacing out, and drafting finally become the story's characters. For me, it's the characters who create and move the story, so I have to know them far better than I could ever know a person in real life. But I have to admit that I *do* engage in some minor thefts of reality. For example, the Jahani patriarch's office is an exact replica of my own father's; the decor was so perfectly indicative of the mid-century vibe that I couldn't resist. But the father who sits behind that massive desk is nothing like my straight-laced and playful dad.

Q: Motherhood, in its many manifestations, is a theme in this novel. For some characters, motherhood doesn't require that they bear children, only that they love and nurture them. Why did you decide to explore this idea?

A: 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.

Q: You were raised a Moslem, but now call yourself secular. Can you tell us about that process? How influential were your maternal family's Jewish and Christian beliefs and traditions on you as a person and as a writer?

A: My American mother, who was the product of a Jewish-Christian marriage, converted to Islam to please my father's devout Shia parents. Her belief was in God, she said, not a specific religion. My father, who was actively, but not strictly, religious, taught me and my siblings the basic tenets of Shia Islam and we identified as Moslems (this spelling is based on the Persian pronunciation). After the Ayatollah Khomeini wrenched power away from the Shah in 1979 and turned Iran into a theocratic dictatorship with a convoluted interpretation of Sharia Law, my father and my family stopped identifying as Moslem. We aren't unusual. Even inside Iran, only about 30% of people say they're Moslem. So, not all Moslems or Muslims (or Christians or Jews) are

the same. Personally, I don't view these three major religions as very distinct, and the stereotypical ways in which we, as a society, depict them has always frustrated me. In their extreme, they breed the same kinds of fanatics down to the costumes they wear. So I find it comforting to reject religion as a tool to control people, obtain power, and make money.

Q: One of this novel's main characters is a domineering patriarch. Were you concerned that this would promote a Middle Eastern stereotype?

A: My hope is that it will do the opposite. In my life, I've known patriarchs, some vicious and others reluctant, in every culture I've lived in or been associated with. The U.S. is no exception. And in the Iranian culture, I know men who are more enlightened about gender roles than Western men. My hope is that readers come away from this novel with more questions about how we label and categorize people. People are rarely either villains or heroes; humans are complex. If we accept this instead of searching for straightforward or simple definitions, I think our lives would be richer and our world more serene.

Q: In the novel, one of your characters says that patriarchy cannot exist without the collusion of women. What do you mean by this?

Patriarchy happens to be the predominant societal structure in this world, and since women comprise half the population, it must be supported by us to survive. That doesn't mean we're aware of all the ways in which we prop it up. From how we raise our children to the stances we take in our marriages to the responsibilities we take on at work—our decisions are subtly influenced by our individual and familial histories. If our mothers deferred to our fathers and spoiled our brothers, many of us will do the same without thinking; it's what we consider 'normal,' even if we believe in gender equality. I wanted my characters to discover these points of collusion in their own lives. The behaviors, secrets, and silences that we may think are protective to our loved ones, but in reality are forms of collusion that can perpetuate a damaging norm.

Q: When was the last time you were able to visit Iran? Would you like to visit now? Why can't you?

I left Iran for the last time in August of 1978 with the intention of going back in the Spring to visit my father's birth city of Tabriz, which I've never seen. I guess for some of us — the naive ones — revolutions happen when we least expect them. For various reasons, it has never been safe for me to go back. I was born in the US, but because I have a father and a husband who were born in Iran, the Islamic Republic considers me an Iranian national to do with what they please. I have written against the regime and I have challenged the regime in the International Court in The Hague. The far right

theocratic machine wouldn't have to drum up false charges to justify imprisoning me. I would love to go back, but the regime would have to change first.

Q: It has been over 20 years since you published your first novel, can you tell us what took you so long to write a second one?

A: 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 visceral 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.