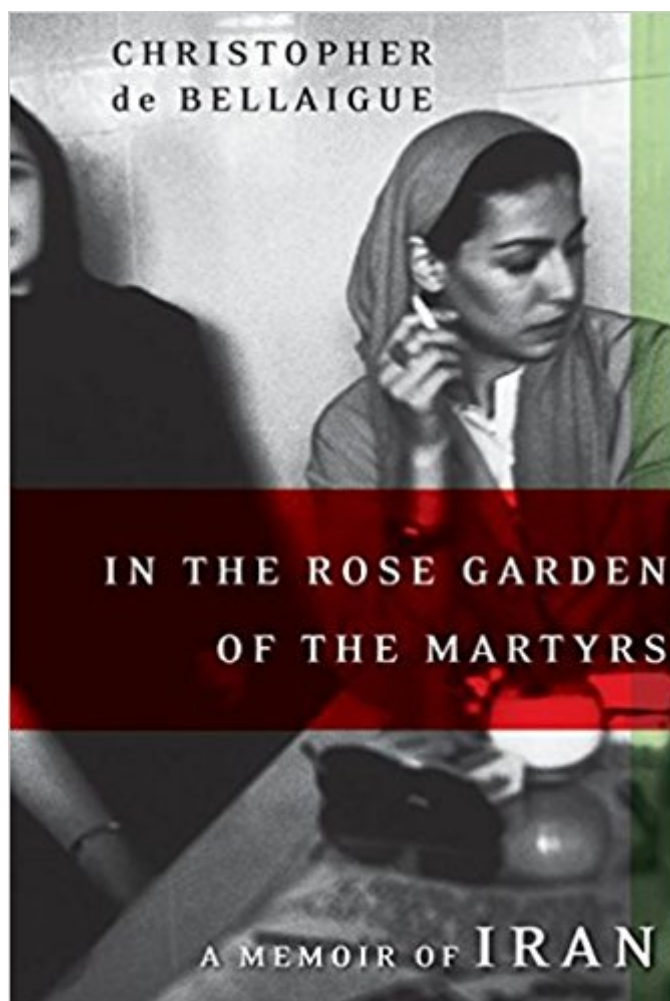


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In The Rose Garden Of The Martyrs: A Memoir Of Iran



Synopsis

Beside the highway that leads south from Tehran, the necropolis of Ayatollah Rudollah Khomeini rises from the sweating tarmac like a miraculous filling station supplying fuel for the soul. However, the paint is peeling even before the complex has been completed, and the prayer halls are all but deserted. Iran's Islamic Revolution is out of gas, but what has happened to the hostage takers, suicidal holy warriors, and ideologues who brought it about? These men and women kicked out the Shah, spent eight years fighting Saddam's Iraq, and terrified the West with its militancy and courage. Now they are a worn-out generation. In this superbly crafted and thoughtful book, Christopher de Bellaigue gives us the voices and memories of these wistful revolutionaries. Mullahs and academics, artists, traders, and mystics: the author knows them as an insider -- a journalist who speaks fluent Persian and is married to an Iranian -- and also as an outsider -- a Westerner isolated in one of the world's most enigmatic and impenetrable societies. The result is a subtly intense revelation of the hearts and minds of the Iranian people -- and what it is to live among them.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This portrait of the Islamist revolution's heartland is far from the "axis of evil" caricature so often associated with the regime that held Americans hostage in 1979-1980 and is actively pursuing nuclear arms today. Rather, Ballaigue, who covers Iran for the Economist, presents a textured view of a complex society, struggling with an ancient culture, a radical ideology and a Westernized elite. Drawing inspiration from George Orwell, who chronicled the Catalan revolution of the 1930s and its betrayal by Stalinists, Ballaigue charts the Islamist revolution from its origins in

the repressive regime of the Shah and the fiery sermons of the Ayatollah Khomeini, through its triumph and the taking of the hostages of the "Great Satan," the war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Iran-Contra scandal and the waning of the Islamist revolutionary fervor as educated Iranians became disillusioned with the mullahs and thirsted for greater cultural and intellectual freedom. The book is peppered with interviews with and vignettes of the many Iranians the author has met during his years in Iran; the title refers to a cemetery in Tehran where the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war are interred— "rose garden" being an ironic rendition of rows of headstones. (On sale Jan. 4)

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If Pollack's Persian Puzzle [BKL D 1 04] is the policy wonk's view of today's Iran, British journalist de Bellaigue's memoir is closer to the ground. Outsiders might see Iran as an emerging nuclear threat, but de Bellaigue also sees a country terribly spent from decades of autocratic rule, revolution, ultrafundamentalism, a ruinous war with Iraq, the Iran-Contra scandal, and ongoing hostilities with America. The author, who lives in Iran and writes for the New York Review of Books and the economist, discusses these issues at length, but he also guides us through city streets and into the lives of Iranian citizens. There is Mr. Zarif, who agitated for the Ayatollah's return to Iran and now wonders why his Iranian-manufactured Paykan car is so poorly built. And the war veteran Amini, whose forehead carries 60 pieces of shrapnel and who has resigned himself to letting Esfahan teens dance in public. Readers will find here a detailed picture of Iranian life that has too long been out of reach. Alan Moores

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Painful to read. Unfortunately the author has a confused, non-sequitur mind: "He never made the pilgrimage to Mecca for that would have implied a repentance he couldn't entertain." ... "He was handsome— not tall. but slim, with delicate features and a cleanliness beyond hygiene. (I'd been sensitized to such things; my enquiries into the War had brought me into contact with many people who were dirtied, and I longed for a spotless soul"... "I go to Mr Soroush who looks sixty five but has youthful eyes"... "Mullahs study so they use their knowledge of God's Will, and their God given rationalism to,extract the law. They have tools: their knowledge of Arabic, grammar, rhetoric and logic. These help them when it comes to learning a set of principles for deriving the law from its sources. The art of derivation is called jurisprudence."..[Mullahs go to school to make money, something which has not occurred to the author]."Some mullahs aren't interested in the people or their questions; they rarely step out of the seminary. Some want to teach.

Others want a quiet life, without stress and bother. If they marry, their cells may be passed on to a son, with familiar smells and unwashed tea things. The Shi'a Imamate, remember is a holy family, founded by the Prophet; Iranians have an innate respect for the hereditary principle."...It's acceptable for mojtaheds to reach different conclusions, as long as they reach them using universally accepted methods." [What he is talking about is that two Mojtaheds may say completely opposite things, and Shi'ism says both are right, because they are Mojtaheds.]... "They loathed Fath-Ali's son, Muhammad who reigned for fourteen years until 1848, because he patronized Sufis".. Maybe if the author had a Seeing-Eye dog he could at least write at the dog's level.

Christopher de Bellaigue [pronounced "deh bellog"] has written a wrenching account of contemporary Iran (2000 to 2002) in considerable detail. As a British journalist, he had visited Tehran several times prior and after the period he focuses on with the aim of understanding the Iranian political culture and its leaders' fascination with martyrdom particularly during the post-Khomeini 1998 era and the disastrous Iraq and Iran - more than 2 million Iranian casualties. What follows is a much detailed account from one Iranian veteran or family after another carefully interviewed and documented by de Bellaigue who is fluent in modern Persian and at home in Iran with his Iranian wife and in-laws in Tehran. De Bellaigue follows up lead after lead of Iran's veterans in the capitol and provinces including the province of Khuzistan where much of the early war was fought by the Iran against the invading forces of Saddam Hussein from lower Iraq amidst Iran-Iraqi oil fields. De Bellaigue even visits some of the bloodiest battlefields, villages and towns, such as Khorramshahr (Date-Town) whose name was changed to "Khooneenshahr (Bloody Town) due to the vast devastation of people and buildings. The narrative is unrelenting in dissecting the eight-year war including the 1983 peace offering from Saddam Hussein which Ayatollah Khomeini turned down thus extending the massive blood-letting of Iran's eligible male population including 10-14 year old youth called the "basij" force. De Bellaigue also interviewed the fallen veterans' families in villages and towns giving the heaviest detail to the agonies and rationales for such bloody history so very new to Iranians whose last comparable conflict in longevity and fatalities can only be found in the twelve-year Ottoman-Iranian war along the Turkish/Iraqi borders with Iran in the last parts of the 16th century (AD 1578-1590), a cluster of wars by Iran's mid-16th-17th cc. Safavid shahs in the Caucasus, and in the dynasty-killing Afghani Occupation of Iran in the early 18th c. (1722-25) - In other words, most horror display of misguided nationalist outburst for 20th century Iran. The thousands of black wreaths that decorated the doors of fallen veterans' homes remain a rivetting and most unpopular collective memory of the present Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian academic

specialists, graduate students in international relations or conflict resolution, Iranians themselves, and war reporters will most enjoy the gruesome realities suffered by the Iranians at home and in diaspora. I don't believe that too many others will. The overall picture of Iran, wittingly or not, portrayed by de Bellaigue is vastly unfavorable to the Iran the wine drinking, poetry reading, picnicking, and sufi mystical Iran/ancient Persia many of us know.

Like David Remnick's "Lenon's Tomb" and its treatment of the dissolution of the USSR, "Garden of the Martyrs" explores the issues, lifestyles, culture and history of the Iranian nation through intimate portraits of individuals living it. Focuses mainly on the years since the Revolution, with some particularly engaging and intriguing insight into the Iran-Iraq war. But also gives the novice an historical outline/framework for understanding the Prophet Muhammad and the evolution of a nation that has been invaded and occupied by countless powers/armies over the centuries and that is still a complex work in progress.

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