

The
Republic
of
Imagination

America in Three Books



AZAR NAFISI

Author of the NEW YORK TIMES bestseller
READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN

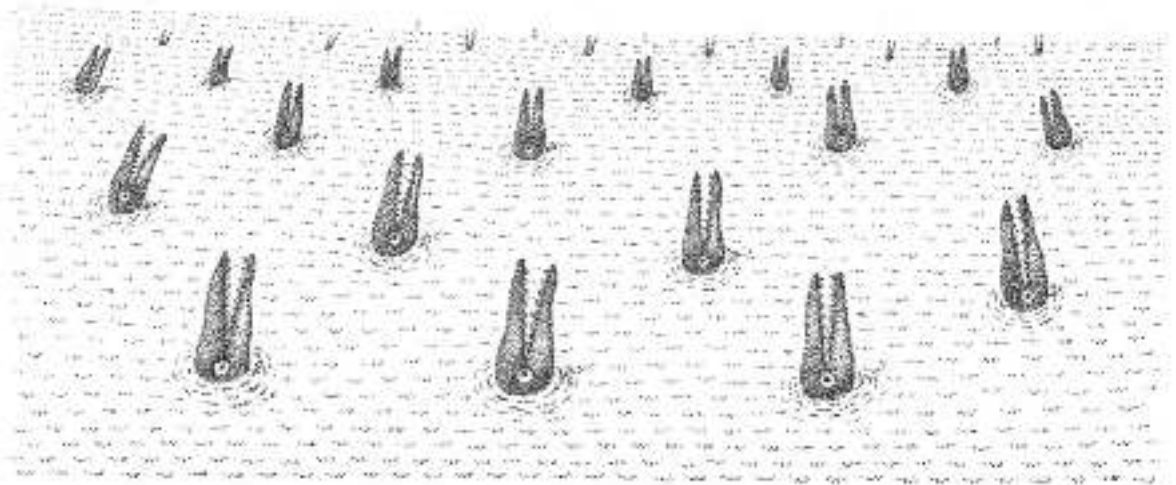
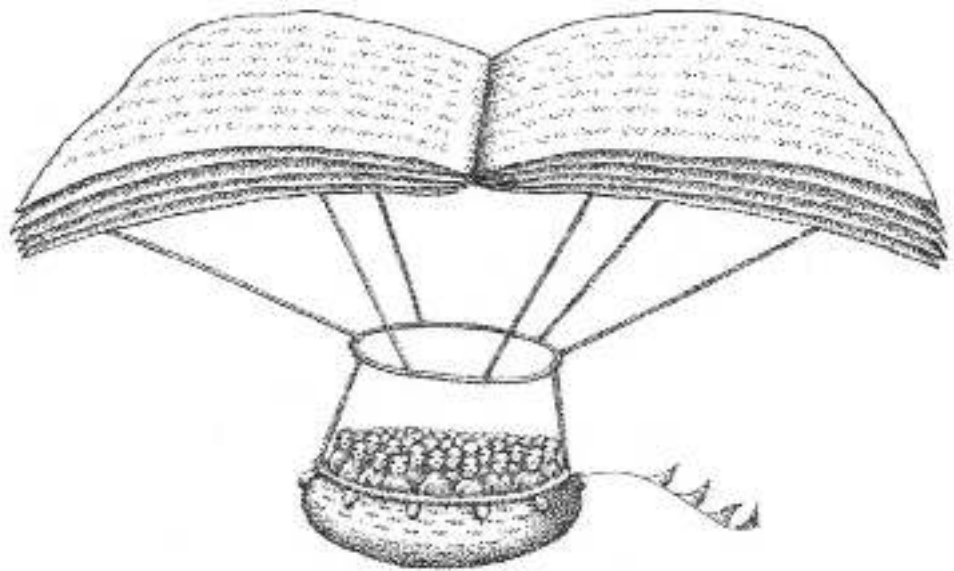
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of
IMAGINATION

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Illustrations by Peter Sis

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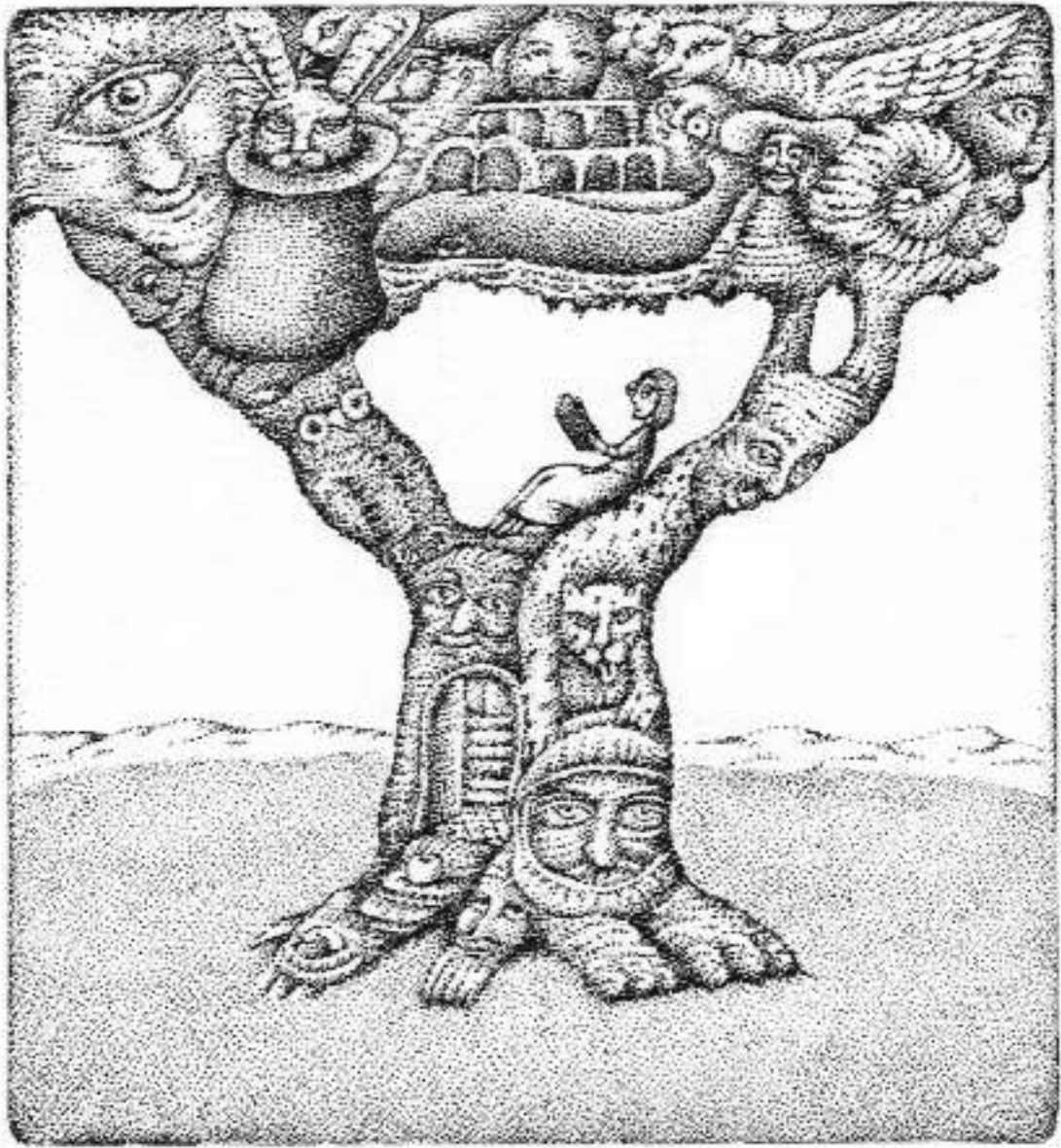
To my family, Bijan, Negar and Dara Naderi
And in memory of my friend Farah Ebrahimi

Let America be America again,
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

...

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America was never America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

—Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”



Introduction

A few years ago I was in Seattle signing books at a marvelous independent bookstore called Elliott Bay when I noticed a young man standing by the table, watching me. When the line had dwindled, he finally addressed me. He said he was passing through Seattle, visiting a friend, and he wanted me to know he had lived in Iran until recently. “It’s useless,” he said, “your talk about books. These people are different from us—they’re from another world. They don’t care about books and such things. It’s not like Iran, where we were crazy enough to xerox hundreds of pages of books like *Madame Bovary* and *A Farewell to Arms*.”

Before I had time to think of a response, he went on to tell me about the first time he had been arrested, late at night during one of the usual random car searches by the revolutionary militia. He had been taken into custody with his two friends, more for their insolence than for the contraband tapes found in the car. They were kept for forty-eight hours and then released without explanation, after being fined and flogged. There was no denying that a normal day in the life of a young Iranian is very different from that of most young Americans.

I had heard such stories many times before, but there was something unusual about this young man. He spoke in a casual tone that made what he said all the more poignant, as if he were trying to negate the event by describing it in a nonchalant manner. He said that during the floggings, it was not just the pain but the humiliation that had made him feel for a few moments as if he were leaving his body and becoming a ghost, watching himself being flogged from a distance. “It made it easier,” he added, “as a ghost.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “It was a good survival technique.”

“It still is,” he said, with his knowing smile.

By now there was a line again, patiently and politely waiting, and I made a silly remark to the effect that perhaps America was a land of ghosts anyway. He did not react to that. Instead he handed me a Post-it note and said, “I don’t have a book. This is for a friend.”

I signed my name on that orange Post-it and gingerly handed him my card. “Let’s be in touch,” I said. He took both the Post-it and the card and of course he never did get in touch. But I never lost track of him completely, because that young man, with his serene smile and his words, revisits me in strange places and seemingly unrelated encounters. He has stayed with me partly because I felt then, as I do now, that I had disappointed him—something was expected of me that was not fulfilled. When I realized he was going to haunt me for the foreseeable future, I decided to give him a name: Ramin, in honor of another young man I had known in Iran who told me about a similar experience. All these ghosts—how do we fulfill our responsibilities toward them?

Thinking over what Ramin had said, I found it intriguing that he had suggested not that Americans did not understand *our* books but that they didn't understand their own. In an oblique way, he had made it seem as if Western literature belonged more to the hankering souls of the Islamic Republic of Iran than to the inhabitants of the land that had given birth to them. How could this be? And yet it is true that people who brave censorship, jail and torture to gain access to books or music or movies or works of art tend to hold the whole enterprise in an entirely different light.

"These people," he had said with his inscrutable smile, "are different from us. They don't care about books and such things." Every once in a while, after a talk, during a book signing or over coffee with an old friend, this point will come up, usually as a question: "Don't you think that literature and books were so important in Iran because there was so much repression there? And don't you think that in a democracy there is no such urgent need for them?"

My impulse now, as then, is to disagree. The majority of people in this country who haunt bookstores, go to readings and book festivals or simply read in the privacy of their homes are not traumatized exiles. Many have seldom left their hometown or state, but does this mean that they do not dream, that they have no fears, that they don't feel pain and anguish and yearn for a life of meaning? Stories are not mere flights of fantasy or instruments of political power and control. They link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but as they should be or might become. Imaginative knowledge is not something you have today and discard tomorrow. It is a way of perceiving the world and relating to it. Primo Levi once said, "I write in order to rejoin the community of mankind." Reading is a private act, but it joins us across continents and time.

But perhaps there is another, more personal reason for my disagreement with Ramin: I cannot imagine myself feeling at home in a place that is indifferent to what has become my true home, a land with no borders and few restrictions, which I have taken to calling "the Republic of Imagination." I think of it as Nabokov's "somehow, somewhere" or Alice's backyard, a world that runs parallel to the real one, whose occupants need no passport or documentation. The only requirements for entry are an open mind, a restless desire to know and an indefinable urge to escape the mundane.

• • •

Long before I made America my home, I inhabited its fiction, its poetry, its music and films. My first fictional journey to America took place when I was about seven, when my English tutor in Tehran introduced me to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Our main text was a book with simple stories about a pair of American siblings, predictably a girl and a boy. One peculiar feature of these two fiercely clean and well-groomed urchins was that no matter what happened to them, their expressions were fixed in a perpetual smile. I knew their names (was it Jack and Jill? Dick and Jane?), their last names (the Smiths? the Joneses? the Partridges?), where they lived, their daily routine, their school. None of these small and essential details have stayed with me. There was little in their world that made me want to know these smiling, immaculately groomed children any better. The only thing I remember about that book, the one thing that was slightly interesting, was its cover: gritty to the touch, with an image of the two siblings foregrounded on a dark green background.

Near the end of each session, my tutor would close our exercise book and make her way to the kitchen, from which she would emerge with a glass of cherry sherbet and a worn copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. She read only a few pages each time, keeping me in suspense, impatient for our next meeting. Sometimes she would tell me stories from the book or have me read a short passage

I was mesmerized by the orphan Dorothy, who lived in the middle of a flat gray landscape somewhere in the middle of nowhere with her dour and hardworking aunt and uncle and whose only cheerful companion was her dog, Toto. What would happen to her when a cyclone lifted her up with her house with Toto trapped inside, and landed them in a magical place called Oz? Like millions of children, I impatiently followed Dorothy and her growing group of friends in search of the mighty Wizard of Oz, the only person who could give the Scarecrow a mind, the Tin Man a heart and the Lion courage, and make possible Dorothy's journey home.

Had I been able to formulate my first impressions of the United States, I might have said that there was a place in America called Kansas, where people could find a magic land at the heart of a cyclone. Because that was the first time I had heard the word "cyclone," I can honestly say that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* taught me both its real and imagined meanings. Kansas and Omaha were soon followed by a river called Mississippi and many more cities, rivers, forests, lakes and people—the orderly suburban households of Nancy Drew, the frontier towns of *Little House on the Prairie* and stormy plantations of *Gone with the Wind*, the Kentucky farm of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the dusty, sultry southern streets of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where justice was as embattled a notion as it would soon be in Tehran. Later, these were joined by Faulkner's Mississippi, Fitzgerald's St. Paul, Edith Wharton's New York and then Richard Wright's and Ralph Ellison's very different New York, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles and the southern towns of Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Even now I feel there are so many geographical and fictional terrains left to discover. Perhaps this was the main reason why I could not agree with Ramin: America, to my mind, cannot be separated from its fiction.

When they were young my parents were not wealthy, but all through their lives the one thing they never hesitated to give my brother and me was books. They would entrust friends who traveled abroad with long lists of titles they couldn't find for us in Tehran. As I grew up and wanted the things my friends had, my father would tell me time and again in different ways that I should not focus on things. Possessions, he would say, can't be relied on—they're easier to lose than to obtain. You should value what you can carry with you until the day you die.

One of the first books my father brought home for me to read in English was *Tom and Jerry*. I still remember when he gave me *The Little Prince* and *Charlotte's Web*, which taught me that something as fragile and forgettable as a spider's web could offer up a hidden universe. When I first read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, I was intrigued by Tom's seductive charm but did not really like him—maybe his bag was too full of tricks. In time, books and the world of the imagination they unlocked would become the portable possessions my father had hoped I would always carry with me.

Every Thursday evening, he would take me to a movie house in the fun part of town and I looked forward to our private time together all week. I remember walking hand in hand with him down Naderi Avenue, itself like a scene in an impressionist movie, with its chaotic shops selling nuts, spices, coffee, pirashki and ice cream. Alongside Iranian films, we saw ones starring Ismail Yasin, Fernandel, Norman Wisdom and Vittorio De Sica and the romantic dramas of the Indian superstars Raj Kapoor and Nargis. And, of course, we saw American films: *Spartacus* and *Ivanhoe*, *Mogambo*, Laurel and Hardy, *South Pacific* and one of my favorites, Danny Kaye's *Hans Christian Andersen*. I was not sure what to make of American musicals, where characters suddenly started gyrating in the middle of a meal or while walking down the street, as if overtaken by a mischievous genie, bursting into song only to calm down the next minute and resume eating or talking or kissing. Ever since, I have thought of America as a land of song and dance. From an early age I nurtured an idea of America that I believed in even if I knew that its reality, like any reality, was certain to fall short in some way.

and disappoint.

My father translated the tales of La Fontaine for my brother and me, doing all of the drawings himself, and wrote simplified versions of the classic Persian poets Ferdowsi and Nezami. More than anything when I think of him, this is what I remember: his sharing of his time and pleasure with me, as if I were his equal, his companion and co-conspirator. There was no moral lesson to be drawn; it was an act of love, but also of respect and trust.

• • •

Eleven years have now passed since I met Ramin at that bookstore in Seattle, and since then I have traveled thousands of miles over thirty-two states, conversing mainly about the subject he and I talked about that day. And he did have a point. Between my first book tour, in 2003, and the next one, in 2009, many of the places I visited had undergone a significant transformation or vanished: Cody's in Berkeley, seven branch libraries in Philadelphia, twelve of the fourteen bookstores in Harvard Square, Harry W. Schwartz in Milwaukee and, in my own hometown of Washington, D.C., Olsson's and Chapters. At first it was the independent bookstores, then came the bigger chains: Borders (I wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran* at the Borders on Eighteenth and L, now a Nordstrom Rack) and, more recently, the Barnes & Noble in Georgetown, replaced by a cavernous Nike store—and the list goes on.

It is not just bookstores and libraries that are disappearing but museums, theaters, performing arts centers, art and music schools—all those places where I felt at home have joined the list of endangered species. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe* and my own hometown paper, *The Washington Post*, have all closed their weekend book review sections, leaving books orphaned and stranded, poor cousins to television and the movies. In a sign of the times the Bloomberg News website recently transferred its book coverage to the Luxury section, alongside yachts, sports clubs and wine, as if to signal that books are an idle indulgence of the super-rich. But in there is one thing that should not be denied to anyone rich or poor it is the opportunity to dream.

Long before that extremely cold, sunny morning in December 2008 when I took a loyalty oath at an Immigration Services office in Fairfax, Virginia, and finally became an American citizen, I had often asked myself, What transforms a country from a place you simply live in or use as a refuge into a home? At what point do “they” become “us?” When you choose to call a place home, you no longer treat it with the episodic curiosity of a guest or a visitor. You are concerned with the good and the bad. Its shortcomings are no longer merely topics of conversation. You wonder, Why are things this way and not another? You want to improve the place, to change it, to make your complaints known. And I had done enough complaining by then to know it was time I became an American citizen.

When the founding fathers conceived of this new nation, they understood that the education of its citizens would be essential to the health of their democratic enterprise. Knowledge was not just a luxury; it was essential. In those days, men who worked for a living were not thought to be fit for public life and a liberal arts education was essential for anyone aspiring to join the political class of the new republic. Over time, politics became a more contentious enterprise, and a new political class was born that had little time for cultivated gentleman farmers who read Cicero and Tacitus for pleasure. Of course, the founding fathers' hope was that one day all Americans, regardless of their wealth or station, would have an opportunity to read Tacitus and Cicero. The point of their new democracy was not just to vote but to make accessible to most citizens what had until then been enjoyed by only a few. Museums, libraries and schools were built to further this democratic ideal.

Jefferson, who spent his life collecting books, many of which he donated to the Library of Congress, boasted that America was the only country whose farmers read Homer. “A native of America who cannot read or write,” said John Adams, “is as rare an appearance . . . as a Comet or an Earthquake.”

I have often wondered whether there is a correlation between the growing lack of respect for ideas and the imagination and the increasing gap between rich and poor in America, reflected not just in the gulf between the salaries of CEOs and their employees but also in the high cost of education, the incredible divide between private and public schools that makes all of the fine speeches by our policy makers—most of whom send their children to private schools anyway, just as they enjoy the benefits and perks of their jobs as servants of the people—all the more insidious and insincere. Those who can afford private schooling need not worry about their children being deprived of art, music and literature in the classroom: they are more sheltered, for now, from the doctrine of efficiency that has been radically refashioning the public school curriculum.

American students, we are told, are falling behind in reading and math; on test after test, they score below most European students (at the level of Lithuania), and the solution, rather than seeking to engage their curiosity, has been testing and more testing—a dry and brittle method that produces lackluster results. And so resources are pulled from the “soft” fields that are not being tested. Music teachers are being fired or not replaced; art classes are quietly dropped from the curriculum; history is simplified and moralized, with little expectation that any facts will be learned or retained; and instead of reading short stories, poems and novels, students are invited to read train schedules and EPA reports whose jargon could put even the most committed environmentalist to sleep.

The crisis besetting America is not just an economic or political crisis; something deeper is wreaking havoc across the land, a mercenary and utilitarian attitude that demonstrates little empathy for people’s actual well-being, that dismisses imagination and thought, branding passion for knowledge as irrelevant. Shrill posturing in the media and among policy makers fosters a boxing-match mentality as we, the citizens, become spectators whose emotions and sensations must be kept high in a sort of adrenaline rush that turns us into passive onlookers, addicted to the game.

In a recent CNN interview, Mark Zuckerberg suggested, with every good intention, that scientists should be treated as celebrities, remarking that Einstein had been one in his own time. What does the word “celebrity” even mean? We imagine Einstein with his eyes turned inward and not toward the camera, a beautifully absentminded genius with ruffled hair and sandals. But Einstein was articulate and well-read, a lover of classical music, and it was he who said, “I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

The truth of the matter is that scientists do not need to become celebrities. What they need is respect and support for endeavors that might not make money but are important to human knowledge and therefore to humanity. The first favor one could do for both scientists and artists would be to stop pitting them against one another, remembering the words of a great writer and scientist, Nabokov, who used to advise his students, “You need the passion of a scientist and the precision of a poet.”

I object to the notion that passion and imagination are superfluous, that the humanities have no practical or pragmatic use or relevance and should thus be subservient to other, more “useful” fields. In fact, imaginative knowledge *is* pragmatic: it helps shape our attitude to the world and our place in it and influences our capacity to make decisions. Politicians, educators, businessmen—we are all affected by this vision or its lack. If it is true that in a democracy, imagination and ideas are secondary, a sort of luxury, then what is the purpose of life in such a society? What will make its citizens loyal or concerned about their country’s well-being, and not just their own selfish pursuits? I

would argue that imaginative knowledge is, in a very practical sense, indispensable to the formation of a democratic society, its vision of itself and its future, playing an important role in the preservation of the democratic ideal. At some point this state of affairs became an obsession with me, and I began to think that there must be some connection between the demise of the idealistic or moral aspects of the American dream and its material side. I started collecting newspaper accounts and statistics on the state of the humanities, alongside articles on education, health care, social mobility and all the other component parts of the material aspect of the American dream. Parallel to works of poetry and fiction, biography and history, my office and my home gradually became filled with cuttings from newspapers and magazines and printouts of Internet articles. I began reading blogs on education and books about the Internet or the state of the economy, surprising my friends with references to Joseph Stiglitz and Jaron Lanier. In my notebooks I copied down statements by policy makers and media pundits. My husband routinely complained about the many programs I had taped—PBS, *60 Minutes*, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert—leaving little room for him to record his soccer games. Words that I had never paid attention to now made frequent appearances in my notes, alongside phrases like “income inequality” and “upward mobility.” After the fashion of my student days, I pasted a few sentences on a piece of paper and wrote underneath, in red ink, “The American dream?” Later, I added: “The way we view fiction is a reflection of how we define ourselves as a nation. Works of the imagination are canaries in the coal mine, the measure by which we can evaluate the health of the rest of society.”

And yet I was not unaware that the current state of affairs was partly due to the fact that many of our dreams had been fulfilled. America is far more inclusive now than it was even four decades ago, when I was a student at the University of Oklahoma. Technology has opened many different vistas; it has connected us to the rest of the world in unimaginable ways and created possibilities for education and knowledge on a vast scale. In Iran, it has allowed students and people of all ages who are opposed to theocratic rulers and their oppressive ways to find a voice that cannot be censored, to form a community of people sharing the same ideals and passions.

The current crisis is in some respects the outcome of an inherent contradiction at the heart of American democracy, one that Tocqueville so brilliantly anticipated. America’s desire for newness and its complete rejection of ties and traditions lead both to great innovations—a necessary precondition for equality and wealth—and to conformity and complacency, a materialism that invites a complete withdrawal from public and civic spheres and disdain for thought and reflection. This makes it all the more urgent, in this time of transition, to ask new questions, to define not just who we are but who we want to be.

• • •

For Ramin, “freedom” and “individual rights” were not mere words. He had experienced their deprivation in concrete terms and had been forced to read books, listen to music, dance and hold hands with his girlfriend in secret, like a criminal, and like a criminal he had been punished—over here we can safely say tortured—when his transgression was discovered. How could he comprehend the careless attitude he found toward ideas and imagination in the country that had produced Emily Dickinson and Ralph Ellison? For him, as for millions of others who have lost a country and a life coming to this land in search of the fugitive freedom they were denied back home, imagination and ideas are not accessories; they are essential to the preservation of identity, to what makes us human beings with a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And so while all of these future or would-be citizens will celebrate the generosity of America, its gift of choice and freedom, they are

often more anxious than those born here about the potential of squandering what is now so frequently taken for granted.

I could have told Ramin that in many ways totalitarian and democratic societies are one another's distorted mirrors, each reflecting and predicting the other's potentials and pitfalls. In countries such as Iran, imagination is threatened by a regime that desires total control over the lives of its citizens, for whom resistance against the state is not just a political act but an existential one. But what of democracies, where that naked tyranny does not exist? In a totalitarian country, brutality and repression are present in their most blatant forms: torture, arbitrary laws, executions. Ironically, within such societies, the value of imagination, its threat to the existence of the state as well as its importance to the lives of citizens, is quite obvious—which is one reason why people in repressive societies tend to take great risks to read banned books, watch banned films and listen to banned music. For them literature is not simply a path toward literacy or a necessary step in their education. It is a basic need, a way to reclaim an identity confiscated by the state.

Although literacy is the first and essential step toward the kind of engaged citizenry necessary for a thriving democracy, it is not enough, for it is only the means to an end. What we learn and how we learn it is just as important. Regardless of their ideological inclinations, autocracies like those wreaking havoc in Iran, China, Zimbabwe, Saudi Arabia and North Korea are afraid, and justifiably so, of the aftermath of literacy—namely, knowledge, the bite of the forbidden fruit, with its promise of a different kind of power and freedom. That is why the Taliban destroys schools and wishes to murder young teenage girls like Malala who are brave enough to publicly articulate their passionate desire for education and freedom.

The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky memorably quipped that Lenin, Stalin and Mao were all literate people—Stalin was an editor, and Mao wrote “some verse,” as he put it. The problem was “their hit list was longer than their reading list.” It is not for no reason that totalitarian states view the so-called liberal arts as dangerous and subversive and seek to eliminate them at all costs. They know the dangers of genuine free inquiry. Their fear of democratic societies and their hostility toward them are less a function of military might than of culture, and all the trouble that can bring. And so it is that they ironically appreciate what we increasingly dismiss and devalue.

In a democracy, the arts tend not to threaten the state or to exert such a sense of urgency. You can be seduced into a paralysis of consciousness, a state of intellectual indolence. “The real danger for a writer is not so much the possibility (and often the certainty) of persecution on the part of the state, as it is the possibility of finding oneself mesmerized by the state's features, which, whether monstrous or undergoing changes for the better, are always temporary.” Again, Brodsky! This is true of both democracies and totalitarian societies. Every state, including a totalitarian one, has its lures and seductions. The price we pay for succumbing is conformity, a surrender of one's self to the dictates of the group. Fiction is an antidote, a reminder of the power of individual choice. Every novel has at its core a choice by at least one of its protagonists, reminding the reader that she can choose to be her own person, to go against what her parents or society or the state tell her to do and follow the faint but essential beat of her own heart.

What made Brodsky, Nabokov, Czeslaw Milosz and Hannah Arendt—all of whom took refuge in America (Einstein too, for that matter)—resist the totalitarian states of their home countries and reject the empty temptations of Western democracies was essentially one and the same thing: they knew that to negate and betray that inner self was not just a surrender to the tyrant's will but a sort of self-inflicted death. You become a cog in a vast and invisible wheel over which you have no control—Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, only without the comedy.

That inner self is what makes it possible for private individuals to become responsible citizens of their country and of the world, linking their own good to that of their society, becoming active and informed participants. For this they need to know, to pause, to think, to question. It is this quality that we find in so many of America's fictional heroes, from Huckleberry Finn to Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. How can we protect ourselves from a culture of manipulation, where tastes and flavors are re-created chemically in laboratories and given to us as natural food, where religion is packaged, televised and tweeted and commercials influence us to such an extent that they dictate not only what we eat, wear, read and want but what and how we dream. We need the pristine beauty of truth as revealed to us in fiction, poetry, music and the arts: we need to retrieve the third eye of the imagination.

If my students in Iran and millions of other brave souls like Malala and Ramin risked their lives in order to preserve their individual integrity, their access to free thought and education, what will we risk to preserve our access to this Republic of Imagination? To say that only repressive regimes require art and imagination is to belittle life itself. It is not pain and brutality that engender the need to write or the desire to read. If we believe in the first three words of the Constitution, "We the People," then we know that the task of defending the right to imagination and free thought is the responsibility not just of writers and publishers but of readers, too. I am reminded of Nabokov's statement that "readers are born free and ought to remain free." We have learned to protest when writers are imprisoned, or when their books are censored and banned. But what about readers? Who will protect us? What if a writer publishes a book and no one is there to read it?

"Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing." So says Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, expressing the feelings of millions. We must read, and we must continue to read the great subversive books, our own and others'. That right can be guaranteed only by the active participation of every one of us, citizen readers.

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As a child, I was too mesmerized by the Land of Oz to pay much attention to that other place where Dorothy lived, her home in Kansas. It is described in some detail: The house is really one large room where Dorothy, Aunt Em, Uncle Henry and Dorothy's dog, Toto, all live. "When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached to the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else."

Dorothy's relatives, the only human beings she comes into contact with, are not merely dull but stern and uncommunicative. Aunt Em, we are told, used to be pretty, but "the sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also." She never smiles. There is a rather frightening description of poor Aunt Em's reaction to Dorothy when she first arrives after her mother and father have died: "Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears; and she still looked at the little girl with wonder that she could find anything to laugh at." Uncle Henry, "stern and solemn" is also gray and never laughs. He works from morning to night and "did not know what joy

was.”

Only Toto, the merry little black dog, “saved her from growing as gray as her other surroundings. And yet Dorothy never complains. She never wants to leave that dull farm in Kansas. Dorothy is no Alice, running after a white rabbit or its magical equivalent. She is not bored with her seemingly boring life. She is no Little Prince roaming the earth and acquiring wisdom—nor is she the mischievous wooden doll Pinocchio, who has to climb into the jaws of a whale in order to become human. She is a little girl thrown into the magic world of Oz by accident, because that cyclone uprooted her as she was going about her business, like any other girl her age.

Dorothy has an unwavering determination to return home. Nothing is more important to her than Kansas and her stern relatives’ lonely house in the middle of nowhere. When the Scarecrow says to her, “I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas,” she responds, “That is because you have no brains.” And then she goes on to explain, “No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home.”

There have been many interpretations of this story offered up over the years. Some have described it as an allegory of the political and economic circumstances of its times (it was published in 1900) or a reflection of its author’s support of the Populist Party and of his ideas on monetary reform. The yellow brick road leading to Oz has been compared with the gold standard, and the Emerald City to the land of greenbacks and fake ideals, while Dorothy’s silver slippers (ruby red in the film) represent the Populists’ support for the use of free silver instead of gold. The famous Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Technicolor talkie, made in the thirties, has likewise been interpreted in light of its times (in this case the Great Depression). All of this is interesting, and some of it does ring true—as with many stories, one of the pleasures of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is its many levels of allusion and meaning. But we would have forgotten it long ago if not for its magic. That magic is at the heart of the story, a minor miracle that has nothing to do with political allegories. It is not just Dorothy’s miraculous uprooting and transportation to the Land of Oz; it is what greets her when she comes home. Dorothy returns to Kansas safely, but her home has changed in essential, if seemingly imperceptible ways. We can sense it in Aunt Em’s transformed attitude—she has been watering the cabbages when she sees Dorothy running toward her. “‘My darling child!’ she cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses.”

Dorothy’s lesson—and it is the lesson of every great story—is that the land of make-believe, that wonderland, the magical Oz, is not far away; it is, in fact, in our backyard, accessible if only we have the eyes to see it and the will to seek it. Dorothy, Alice, Hansel and Gretel all return home, but they will never be the same, because they have learned to look at the world through the alternative eyes of the imagination. That essential transformation is a change of heart. In a depersonalized and atomized environment, the heart preserves our essential humanity and makes possible our connection and communication with the rest of the world. We the readers are like Dorothy or Alice: we step into this magical world in order to return and retell the story through our own eyes, thus giving new meaning to the story as well as to our lives. This is the reason we need readers—not just in our academies but everywhere, in every town, in every walk of life. We need readers to give a new spin to the experience we call life.

It is interesting that Dorothy’s time in the Land of Oz is not presented as a dream—the reader is left to draw her own conclusions as to whether these things really happened. Perhaps this blurring of the lines between everyday reality and dreams is in fact the true magic of Dorothy’s story: the fact that for her, the most enchanted place is her humble home in all its bare simplicity.

I first discovered Dorothy's story many decades ago in Tehran, in a home that no longer exists, and I have returned to it in my new home of Washington, D.C. My physical homes have changed, but the story remains, and so does its magic. What would life be like without that wonderland in our backyard? Like most children, I had my own desire for elsewhere, for a secret hiding place that would take me to a parallel world. And, like most children, I differentiated between my real and imagined worlds—instinctively I knew that at some point I would have to return to real life, and that was okay, so long as I had my portable world of the imagination with me. Somehow the stories, the travels to Oz and to Wonderland, with Pinocchio into the stomach of the whale, and later to that remote planet where the Little Prince watered that one flower—his self-centered rose—made me more willing to go through the routines of life. At times I feel as if the Land of Oz, along with Alice's Wonderland and Scheherazade's room, is fading and receding the way light recedes into darkness. We all know how easy it is to lose our real homes. What will we do in the absence of this most enduring of all homes, this Republic of Imagination?

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Life after a totalitarian revolution is not unlike a day after a cyclone. The air may be crisp and brilliant, but there is plenty of debris around to remind us of what is missing. You have to ask yourself, Where should I start to pick up the pieces? In a country as ancient as Iran, telling stories has been a time-tested way of resisting political, social and cultural invasion. Our stories and myths became our home, creating a sense of continuity with a past that had been so consistently plundered and obliterated. For many of us, lighting out was the only way to survive; it was not always possible or desirable in a physical sense, but we could escape through the realm of imagination and ideas.

Home! How deceptive and fragile that enticing concept can be. For an immigrant, any new country is always conceived either negatively or positively in light of the country left behind. For me, my new home was always firmly rooted in its fictional landscapes. All I had left from my beloved Iran was that portable world of memories and literature that my father had taught me to appreciate. I knew when I left (and nothing has happened since to change this view) that it was the only world upon which I could safely rely.

It was in Iran that I discovered the close relationship between individual rights and the right to free expression, the indispensability of a democratic imagination. My students might have been opposed to (with some justification) or ignorant of America's policies, but they celebrated its music, its films and its literature. It seems right to me that the fiction of one country should kindle one's understanding of another—not the "other" captured and domesticated by certain academic theorists and guardians of political correctness but that living, breathing other that Atticus alludes to in *To Kill a Mockingbird* when he says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Difference is always celebrated in literature, but the cult of difference can become dangerous when it is not accompanied by that shock of recognition and the realization of how alike we are—that despite our differences, our hearts beat to the same rhythms and we are all capable of the best and the worst. It is this realization of our shared humanity that makes it possible for people to make their home in another country. Exile always entails a sense of loss. Home is not home anymore, but in time a different place offers up the potential for new memories and relationships.

When I left Iran for good and came to America with my family in 1997, I had so much to be grateful for. My husband, Bijan, found a job working as a civil engineer, and I enrolled my children in

the local public school. We bought a house, and I was offered a job teaching at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. At first I reveled in my newfound freedom: at last, I could craft my own curriculum without having to worry that the dean would call me in if my hair slipped out from underneath my headscarf, or for my unorthodox and casual behavior toward my students, or the unsavory books I taught. But nothing is as simple as that—there were new challenges and new ideologies as fiercely and rigidly defended as any in Iran. Like all ideologies, the one I now found myself confronting depended on a simplification of reality and a generalization of concepts—looking to complacent, ready-made answers and inviting little self-questioning. What had started as a serious theoretical questioning of authority had by now become an easy formula, applied to both literature and reality. From this perspective, nothing that pertained to old norm and judgment would be tolerated. Classic texts were now suspect, symbols of scorned elitist orthodoxy. Eighteen years had passed since I had finished my doctorate in America, and many of the English and American writers I had taught in Iran had not fared well in my absence. Here too they had been tried and judged and found wanting.

Living under the Islamic regime's black-and-white system, my views had become more complex and nuanced. I drew closer to the fiction I so loved, in which everyone was granted a voice, even the villain. Students who disagreed with my political views—and who, being in a place of power, could have denounced me because of my unruly habit of voicing those views—would come to my office to talk about Bellow or Nabokov, Ibsen or Austen. I had stumbled on a way to communicate with people who otherwise would never have approached me. That changed my life and my attitude toward life. I turned something that had been a private passion into a more urgent calling, which I felt I could no longer keep to myself. I came to see my passion for books and reading as intimately connected to my life as a citizen, as a teacher, as a writer, and felt I had a responsibility to articulate and share it in a public manner. This was one reason why I wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I wanted to share the gift my students had offered me. But there was also another reason. When I was asked what Iranians thought of Americans, instead of spouting hackneyed truisms, I thought I might tell the story of that young girl, a young Muslim girl, in fact, who had never left Iran but who wrote poetry in three languages and composed one of the best essays I have ever read by a student on Virginia Woolf and the Impressionists.

I was expected by some in academia to talk, teach and write as a woman from Iran, with a particular position on the “West” and the “rest.” From this point of view, literature was mainly a reflection, a handmaiden, a means to a political and ideological end, and that meant that if you came from Iran, you could not love Emily Brontë or Herman Melville—a condescending view of Iran and Iranians, if ever there was one. I felt like saying, “Go and tell that to my students in Iran! Tell it to my fellow Iranians, whose supreme leader was so afraid of the power of literature that he condemned a writer to death, a writer whose only weapons were words!” True equality is not an invitation simply to talk about ourselves, to boast about ourselves or present ourselves always as victims. We resist victimhood by choosing who and what we want to speak about, and what is more expressive than a young Iranian girl who has never left the Islamic Republic speaking with insight and passion about Virginia Woolf? Does that detract from her loyalty to her own culture, or does it reveal her confidence in herself and her ability to transcend the proximate circumstances of her life and upbringing?

I wrote *Reading Lolita* because I wanted people to know that Iranians, real Iranians, are not some exotic other, a product of “their culture,” but that we too are people, like the rest of you. Some of my students were religious and some were not; some were orthodox Muslims and some were secular Muslims; some were Baha'i or Zoroastrian, and there were some who hated religion and some who

died for that belief—while some never thought of religion at all. I wanted to show the world that the Iranian youth, the students I was in close contact with for eighteen years, when deprived of access to the world, communicated with it through its golden ambassadors, the very best it could offer: its poets and novelists, playwrights, musicians and filmmakers.

After the success of *Reading Lolita*, I was invited to speak to groups all across the United States, in red states and blue, big cities and small. At first the invitations were mostly from colleges, and the book festivals, museums and civic associations, and a wide variety of different high schools like City Honors School in Buffalo, Thomas Jefferson High School in Virginia, Spence and Choate and the Bronx Academy, where through the enthusiastic efforts of one teacher, Amy Matthusen, each year for the past three years I have held a question-and-answer session with her class. In San Antonio, a young woman told me that she was an elementary school teacher and that the art class had recently been dropped and her students shared a music teacher with another school. She herself worked as a part-time librarian to make ends meet. She said this with a smile, partly resigned and partly in protest. In Baltimore, at a book festival, a young Latina girl told me she had come with some of her high school classmates. “Our school is poor, you know,” she said, hesitating a little, knowing that I did know. “But I am going to teach English,” and her mischievous friend behind her said, “Yeah, that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

Some came with gifts: a small arrow from New Mexico, a tiny box, a picture book. And as I talked to people old and young, to doctors and soldiers, librarians and teachers, and began to confide my secret desire to connect readers all over the world and engage them in a meaningful dialogue—when I told them about my dream of creating a Republic of Imagination and invited them to join me in a march on Washington so that we would fill the space between the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial, going past all of the war monuments and the jewel in America’s crown, the Smithsonian, and spreading all the way out toward the Library of Congress and the White House, ending in front of Congress, where we would ask, “Who is going to bail out imagination”—many came up to me afterward and said, “How can I help?” “What can I do?” I found a nation of readers, large and small, old and young, rich and poor, of all colors and backgrounds, united by the shared sense that books matter, that they open up a window into a more meaningful life, that they enable us to tolerate complexity and nuance and to empathize with people whose lives and conditions are utterly different from our own.

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When Dorothy and her friends finally find the great Wizard, in response to Oz’s declaration “I am Oz, the Great and Terrible,” Dorothy simply responds, “I am Dorothy, the Small and Meek.” Dorothy and her companions discover in the end that the myth of Oz’s power is as much of a sham as their belief in their own weakness, and that they, led by Dorothy, can do what Oz was powerless to achieve: destroy the Wicked Witch and liberate the frightened citizens—a myth worthy of a people who had defeated a mighty empire in search of their own independence.

Dorothy is one in a long line of American heroines and heroes, small and meek, who somehow manage to appear greater than their mighty opponents. This quality is usually revealed once the protagonists are separated from their actual homes and surroundings. Huckleberry Finn is perhaps the most memorable of those humble citizens of the imaginary America who stand up to forces great and terrible, but Huck refuses to return home, thus foreshadowing the destinies and shaping the choices of so many other fictional American characters who either leave home, never to return, or long to do so.

These homeless protagonists of American fiction become the true guardians of what is best in American individualism, never identifying happiness with wealth or power. Perhaps in no other fiction, in fact, is materialism so frowned upon, or defined as the root of so many evils—an ironic but salutary reminder for a country so blatantly devoted to the pursuit of wealth and power.

I have always been drawn to America's vagrant nature, so well portrayed and celebrated in its best works of fiction. I believe that many of those who, like my family and me, migrated to America from all over the world can feel at home in it because it allows us both to belong and to be outsiders. It somehow encourages our vagabond self—befitting a nation that started its life by deliberately choosing to become an orphan. No fictional characters are quite so suspicious of home as those wandering the landscape of American fiction. These homeless characters become disturbing and dangerous, loitering with intent on the margins of our consciousness.

All writers and poets are strangers, or pariahs, as Hannah Arendt chose to call them. They look at the world through the eyes of the outsider, but only American writers turn this attribute into a national characteristic. "All men are lonely," wrote Carson McCullers, and then she added, "But sometimes it seems to me that we Americans are the loneliest of all. Our hunger for foreign places and new ways has been with us almost like a national disease. Our literature is stamped with a quality of longing and unrest, and our writers have been great wanderers. Poe turned inward to discover an eerie and glowing world of his own. Whitman, that noblest of vagabonds, saw life as a broad open road. Henry James abandoned his own adolescent country for England and the airy decadence of nineteenth-century drawing-rooms. Melville sent out his Captain Ahab to self-destruction in the mad sailing for the great white whale. And Wolfe and Crane—they wandered for a lifetime, and I am not sure they knew themselves just what it was they sought."

McCullers wrote this piece to advise American writers to come back home, to turn inward, as she put it, but the fact is that even in turning inward, we need to reflect on this constant restlessness, this unending questioning, this battle between the desire for prosperity, status and success and the urge to walk away from it all, to be wary of complacency—in short, to perform the miracle of the small vagabond Huck, who followed his heart as he floated on a raft down the Mississippi. "This singular emotion, the nostalgia that has been so much a part of our national character, must be converted to good use," McCullers continued. "What our seekers have sought for we must find. . . . America is youthful, but it can not always be young. Like an adolescent who must part with his broken family, America feels now the shock of transition. But a new and serene maturity will come if it is worked for. We must make a new declaration of independence, a spiritual rather than a political one this time. . . . We must now be homesick for our own familiar land, this land that is worthy of our nostalgia." McCullers herself knew that this urge for wandering, for the always new, was what kept America America, what gave it vitality. Meek and small characters, orphans, outcasts—not just because of the race, class or gender but because of what Elizabeth Cady Stanton so eloquently defined as their solitariness—abound in the vast and capacious terrain of American fiction. One can argue that they represent the myth of American rebellion. There is some truth in that, but it has been a long time since America moved from the margins to the center of power, with the privileges of wealth replacing those of birth—a long time since George Washington and Benjamin Franklin refused wages because they felt they were public servants and should be immune from the temptations and corruption of money.

We need to remember that, despite the prevalent attitude today that arrogantly defines success as money, the real heroes of this nation's fictional landscape are vagrants, marginal and subversive, from Melville's *Bartleby*, the scrivener whose mantra is "I would prefer not to," to the heroines of Henry James and Edith Wharton, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Janie*, Bellow's

Herzog, Philip Roth's Sabbath or Omar Little of *The Wire*, who reminds us of the importance of a code of honor. All seek integrity and listen to their hearts' dictates, cautioning us against our willingness to betray the American dream when it is, as Fitzgerald put it, besmirched with the "foul dust that floats in the wake" of our dreams.

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The thought of writing this book first came to me when I was finishing the last chapter of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. At the time, I thought of calling it *Becoming an American*. I did not want my readers to believe that the books we read were meaningful simply because they were illicit and frowned upon by the moral guardians in Iran. I wanted them to know how vital they were in America, too, as the freedom that so many fictional characters lay claim to is not political but moral, a freedom to turn their back on society and what is expected of them and to forge their own lonely path. I have chosen to focus on three novels, starting with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in part because I was fascinated by the idea that Huck, who rejected the concept of roots and tradition, became a parent to so many homeless protagonists of American fiction. Why these three books? The choice was not easy. When I first presented an outline to my publisher, I struggled to slim down the list of books I would discuss to twenty-four. But before long I found Huck dominating the story, just as *Lolita* had before. I think of this book as the story of Huck Finn's America, and of his fictional progenies. I chose to focus on two of those—Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, featuring an anti-Huck who craves status and acceptance and all of the outward signs of material success, and Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, with its lonely band of listless misfits longing to connect, helpless in a world built on longing but not its fulfillment. I could have chosen dozens more—Melville, Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Dawn Powell, Nathanael West and others all clamored for their own chapters and will have to await another book. I wanted to end before the 1960s because what followed in their wake was a new era, in terms of both social and political realities and the direction of American fiction, and needed a different context. I felt that James Baldwin, as a writer and civil rights activist, was most suited to mark the termination of what I think of as the classical period of American fiction and the beginning of a new epoch. When I made the decision to devote my epilogue to Baldwin, I was not aware of the extent to which he would come to represent to me the truth of the present, its crises and my hope for its future.

Over the course of my readings, reflections and recollections I came to see associations between Baldwin and Twain, an affinity that Baldwin had never acknowledged or even hinted at, one that existed not by choice but as a testament to other affinities unknown and maybe even unwanted. Because in life and writing James Baldwin was a descendant of the "infinitely shaded and exquisite mongrel" that Twain once claimed kinship with.

From the moment Plato's philosopher king threw the poet out of his Republic, we knew that imagination was dangerous to authority and that the alternative eye of the poet would always be deviant and unpredictable, always subverting authority and captivating souls. It is with this idea in mind that I wrote this book at the dawn of a new century, which has begun with doubts and anxieties and a crisis that goes far beyond the immediate economic one. It is written not out of despair but out of hope, by which I mean not a simple giddy optimism but the belief that once you know what is right and what matters, you can get there with enough determination. My experiences in Iran gave me a definition of hope that is very different from simple optimism. What I have in mind is most closely captured by Václav Havel, who said, "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep an

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