

drix book with *A Racial Agenda*.” Readers who can get past the rhetoric will be rewarded with provocative insights into black America and white America and Hendrix’s singular position at the intersection of the two. But there’s also a bunch of oddball material, including a fabricated review of a movie Hendrix never made and a bizarre synopsis of a novel Hendrix never wrote. Through it all, Tate writes with an engaging, highly stylized voice, which on occasion even manages to evoke Hendrix’s own loopy lyricism.

Despite all the pyrotechnics, though, the book seems not so much searing Hendrix solo as Eddie Van Halen guitar extravaganza, full of impressive licks and memorable riffs but leading nowhere. Tate thoroughly documents Hendrix’s African-American roots, both social and musical, but this knowledge does nothing to explain his incomprehensible leap from sideman on the black “Chitlin Circuit” to white rock ’n’ roll icon. Then again, geniuses by definition are beyond the understanding of mere mortals.

—PRESTON LERNER

READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN:

A Memoir in Books.

By Azar Nafisi. Random House.

347 pp. \$23.95

In 1979, having spent 17 years abroad as a student, Azar Nafisi returned to Iran and found her homeland transformed. Gone was the café where she and her brother, as children during the Shah’s reign, had watched incoming planes through French windows. With signs proclaiming “Death to America!” and posters of Ayatollah Khomeini, the new reality was hell-bent on asserting its dominion over the imagination of the Iranian people. Yet beneath this totalitarian blanket, Nafisi resisted and flourished. She sets out here to “thank the Islamic Republic for all the things it had taught me—to love Austen and James and ice cream and freedom.”

As the youngest faculty member in the English department at the University of Tehran, Nafisi was well situated to chart the Islamic Revolution: The university “was the navel, the immovable center to which all

political and social activities were tied.” She bore witness to the censorious climate that subsumed everything—culture, dress, and social interaction—beneath ideology. “There were only two forces in the world, the army of God and that of Satan. Thus every event, every social gesture, also embodied a symbolic allegiance.” She quit her job in 1981 after refusing to don the veil, and went on to teach at two other Iranian universities, where she repeatedly crossed lances with those who would politicize literature. Finally, she left academia.

“After resigning from my last academic post, I decided to indulge myself and fulfill a dream,” Nafisi writes. From 1995 to 1997, she hosted a seminar at her home in Tehran. On Thursdays, seven of her former female students, chosen for their literary acumen, would discuss the intersection of reality and literature. (The husband of one student would meet with Nafisi in private, for teaching “a mixed class . . . was too risky.”) Their discussions ranged across such topics as a woman’s right to choose her destiny (*Pride and Prejudice*), the sustaining power of the imagination in the presence of death (*A Thousand and One Nights*), and what it means to be the object of a megalomaniac’s obsession (*Lolita*).

These books, Nafisi convincingly argues, pose an even greater threat to a despotic orthodoxy than any open display of political rebellion. They’re especially dangerous because they are *not* overtly political. By addressing the private rather than the public sphere, they do not speak in the hangman’s language, which depends upon what can be observed, and thus regulated.

Though the narrative’s path toward magnanimity is never really in doubt—Nafisi is too detached, too much the aesthete, to be unhinged by deprivations, and she knows that during times of unrest, the servants of beauty are most needed—the content of the book overcomes the conventionality of its form. What could have devolved into a misty-eyed hymn to literature is saved by its singular locale. In a nation afflicted with “intense sensory deprivation,” where even open displays of affection are proscribed, literature becomes a matter of urgency. By thinking through books rather than about

them, Nafisi has produced a deeply literary and novelistic memoir, displaying penchants for both understatement—exemplified by a stunning account of the void felt throughout Iranian society in the wake of Khomeini’s death—and complexity.

Writing of communist Eastern Europe, Philip Roth once noted, “Over there noth-

ing goes and everything matters; over here everything goes and nothing matters. When everything is free and nothing is at risk, when all is blandly equal, who cares?” Nafisi shows us a stifling regime where nothing goes, and the inner life that surmounts the odds and manages to thrive.

—CHRISTOPHER BYRD

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