

But a chicken-and-egg question arises: Can the informational approach lead to new physics, or do we need to understand the physics in order to work out the evolution of information? On this crucial point, Lloyd's eager presentation falls short. It's nice to know, in a broad sense, that the growing complexity of our cosmic habitat does not contravene any basic laws. But what we really want to know, surely, is not just how any old complex universe came into being, but how this particular universe and our cozy planet, with its odd collection of life forms, came to pass.

—David Lindley

#### CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

## Iran's Authentic Voices

FOR SHIA MUSLIMS IN IRAN who oppose the theocratic repression of the last 25 years, one of the holiest statements ever uttered was that of Hossein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, when

**WE ARE IRAN:**  
The Persian Blogs.

*Edited and translated  
by Nasrin Alavi.*  
Soft Skull Press.  
336 pp. \$15.95

he refused to submit to the corrupt Islamic tyrant Yazid in AD 680. "The most honorable jihad," he declared, "is a just word spoken to an unjust ruler."

It's probably coincidence, but Hossein is also the name of the journalist who taught Iran to blog. In 2001, a recent immigrant to Canada named Hossein Derakhshan was moved by the attacks of 9/11 to launch a weblog in Farsi. Then, writes Nasrin Alavi, the editor of this remarkable book, Derakhshan "created a simple how-to-blog guide in Farsi. With the modest aim of giving other Iranians a voice, he set free an entire community." By 2004, the number of Persian-language blogs was 64,000 and counting.

Published by the Brooklyn-based Soft Skull Press, the publishing equivalent of an alternative record label, this is a new kind of book: half guidebook to contemporary Iran, half greatest hits from a remarkable flowering of free speech in a country described by Reporters Sans Frontières as "the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East." Alavi (the pseudonym of an Iranian writer and academic who now lives in the United Kingdom) innovates with exceptional clarity and taste. Banish all thought of blogging as self-indulgent verbiage. Her selections range from the boldly polemic to the beautifully poetic. Here are some examples:

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"You say Father can get a second wife; but we don't ever want the familiar scent of our mums' beds to change. . . . You say Father is allowed to give Mum a beating once in a while; well, when we grow up we'll show you who needs a beating. . . . When you say I am valued twice as much as my sister, you're essentially asking all of us men to be unchivalrous and we don't like it." —*Antidepressant*

About a foreign reporter who condescended to a group of Iranian women: "May she rest in peace! My grandmother could shoot an apple in half while galloping on horseback. Yet after all these years they think it's amazing that we drive cars!" —*Barhar-Goler*

It's good to travel in a foreign country. It's better to do so with a savvy guide.

By October 2004, several Iranian Internet journalists and bloggers were being held in undisclosed locations awaiting trial.

Best of all is to do so with a guide who is not only well informed but also well connected, so you can meet a lot of different people. Books help, but they cannot provide the

feeling of meeting people directly. This book can. It elicits something of the same complex emotional response as a prolonged period of face-to-face contact. After you read it, you'll start e-mailing the people who open their hearts to you in its pages.

And you'll be distressed whenever an e-mail bounces back. In April 2003, the regime began doing to bloggers what it was already doing to print and broadcast journalists. By October 2004, writes Alavi, "several Internet journalists and bloggers were [being] held in undisclosed locations awaiting trial," and new laws were being decreed against such "cybercrimes" as "disturbing the public mind." The election of a hardline president in July 2005 could mean further tightening.

These efforts make blogging more difficult and dangerous, but they are unlikely to succeed completely, any more than the Soviet Union's efforts to silence its poets succeeded. Human voices have a way of refusing to be silenced altogether—perhaps because, as the Persian poet Rumi once wrote, "the wine God loves is human honesty."

—*Martha Bayles*

## The Lives Beside Us

A DISHWASHER AT THE DELI

where I worked during graduate school once asked me out for coffee. He'd heard I was a writer interested in life stories, and he wanted to meet me every week and tell his, starting with the day he was born. Hearing his whole story was the only way anyone could really understand him, he said. No one ever had.

The author of *Orange County Housecleaners*, anthropologist Frank Cancian, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine, offered seven housecleaners, all women, the opportunity to tell their stories. The result is a collection of intimate confessions from strangers who might otherwise sit silently next to us on a bus. Cancian recorded the subjects as they recounted their histories; then he edited the transcripts and added the women's family photographs and pictures he took himself.

These are tales of marital squabbles, family births and deaths, illegal border crossings, religious faith, personal triumphs and shortcomings. "I have to go way back for you to understand . . . where I am today," says Tina Parker, who started cleaning houses at the age of 12, shortly after her Jehovah's Witness mother,

**ORANGE COUNTY  
HOUSECLEANERS.**

By Frank Cancian.  
Univ. of New Mexico  
Press. 116 pp. \$22.95



When Leidi Mejia became pregnant with her daughter Monica, the father abandoned her. The living room walls of their Orange County home are decorated with Monica's tae kwon do and school awards.