



## HYBRID CULTURE IN NAHID RACHLIN'S WORKS

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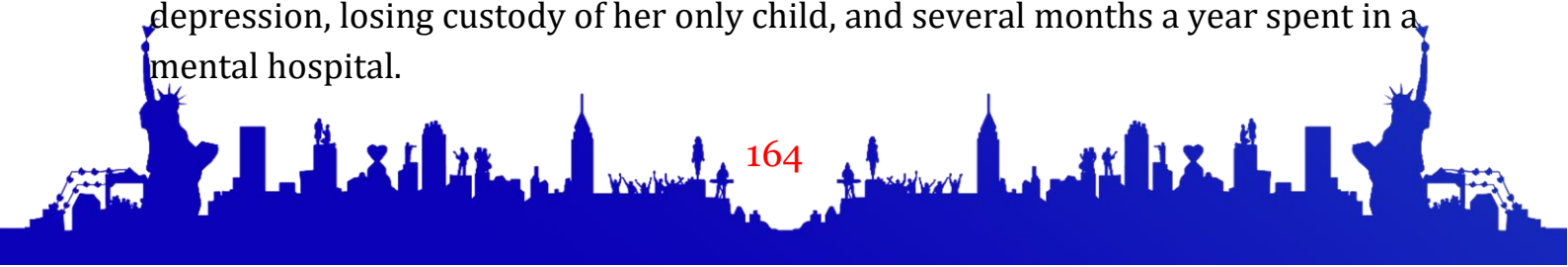
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Although Nahid Rachlin was born in Abadan, Iran, she spent her early years in Tehran. She is the most published Iranian novelist in the United States. Her mother, who already had four living children, had promised her childless sister that the next kid would be hers, so when she was nine months old, her grandmother took her to live with her mother's sister. With her mother-aunt and other extended family members' affection and dedication, Rachlin had a happy, carefree, and accepting upbringing. She rarely saw her real parents, for whom she grew apathetic by nature. But things happened, and when she was approximately seven years old, her father returned, and took her back suddenly.

Rachlin described the shock, anguish, and misery of being wrenched from the only real mother she had ever known in Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series (CAAS). She also talked about how difficult it was to adjust to a different environment and strict lifestyle in a family where her biological mother was distant and cold. She starts her narrative by recalling how, instead of attending a lecture, she would look for her elder sister Pari when she got home from high school and read to her whatever fiction she had written that day. Her tales reflected experiences or perspectives from her own life. "Pari always responded not to the story itself but to the anguish that the story expressed," Rachlin adds. "She listened not so much to my story as to me. I remember the intensity of my desire to express my feelings and reactions to what went on around me, and equally matched eagerness to hear her reassuring voice. I was also an avid reader. I would read some of the passages to her and she would say, 'You could do that.'" Rachlin still questions if she would have pursued writing if her sister hadn't supported her.

By the time Rachlin was halfway through high school, she was reading anything she could get her hands on and utilizing the books' emotions to immerse herself in other people's lives. She was writing stories and sketches, reading translations of Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, and Balzac, and dreaming of escaping the life that would have sent her straight out of high school into an arranged marriage, a marriage that would eventually result in divorce, manic-depression, losing custody of her only child, and several months a year spent in a mental hospital.



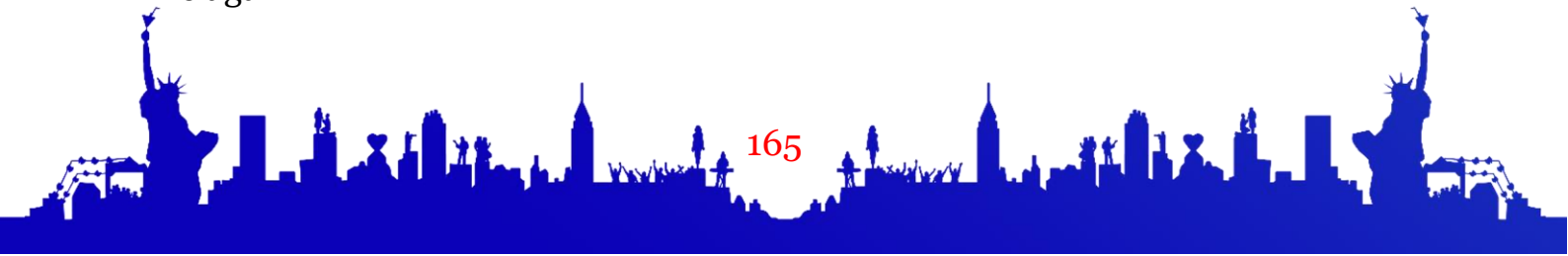


By that point, Rachlin's two elder brothers had moved to the United States, and she was begging her parents to let her join them. She was the only daughter of his who read well and performed well academically, thus her father reluctantly consented to her request in the end. She attended Lindenwood College on a substantial scholarship provided by her brothers, studying psychology and dedicating herself to writing every day. But it wasn't until she got married and had a kid that she thought she could justify setting aside time every day to write fiction. She started taking writing classes at Columbia University, where she wrote three one-page fiction sketches that were printed in a small literary magazine. The sketches were all based on her own childhood experiences in her native country.

Rachlin's first novel, "Foreigner", was inspired by her first trip back to Iran twelve years after she had left on a Stegner fellowship at Stanford. Her second book, "Married to a Stranger", explores her own teenage fantasies as well as the failing marriage of her second sister. Saideh Pakravan, who reviewed the book for "Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women", pointed out that Rachlin is a direct descendant of people who grew up in a culture where sharing stories with family members at home was a common practice. These storytellers, who were frequently parents or nannies, captivated their attentive audiences with engrossing tales of moments that impacted people's lives and fates. "Reading anything Rachlin writes is like sitting at the foot of a storyteller of yore," Pakravan said.

"Except, having lost the innocent rapture with which children listen, we also observe the sleight of hand, and wonder how Rachlin manages to hold us, how her restrained writing can exercise such pull. There is no answer, unless it lies in the very lack of artifice."

When writing about her past, Rachlin likes to write in what Pakravan described as the subtle voice of a strong storyteller. In CAAS, she made the following comment: "It has to do with a desire to bring into the present a reality which is no longer represented in my present life. The differences between the Iranian and American cultures are so vast that in order for me to have adjusted to the American way of life I have had to, without always being conscious of it, suppress much of my own childhood and upbringing. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night with a nightmare that my past has vanished altogether and I am floating unanchored. I get out of the bed and begin to write. Then it is all with me again."

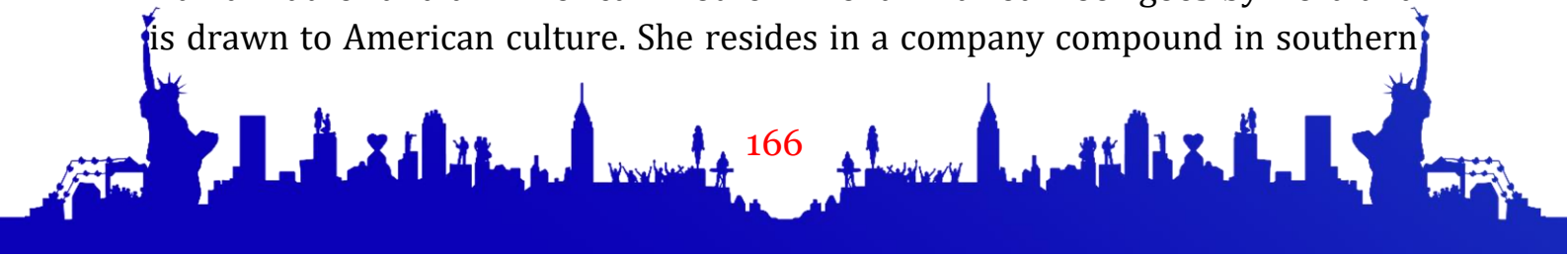




Rachlin said "I have always written fiction rather than nonfiction because I feel that only fiction can convey the complexity of character and situation that I see around me. I think that the purpose of fiction in society is to provide models for alternate courses of life—not so much as a guide for action but as a vehicle for understanding people. *Foreigner*, my first published novel, for instance, seems autobiographical because of many parallels in the protagonist's life and my own life (a young woman coming to the U.S., marrying an American and then returning home for a visit). "The same with my second novel, *Married to a Stranger*, which is about a young woman in Iran, yearning to break through the rigid traditions around her." According to Barbara Thompson in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Rachlin captures the range of forces that were brought to bear on personal relationships in the changing political and social setting of the last years of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's reign, writes Barbara Thompson in *New York Times Book Review*. She shows us not only the tranquil inner courtyards with sweets and gossip exchanged by the fishpond, the flower bedecked bridal chamber, but also the political, social and religious factions contending for primacy in the streets outside." It's "a woman's novel in a very particular sense," according to Carolyn See of the *Los Angeles Times*. "The reader has the feeling that these are the facts, ma'am; perhaps the real facts of one ordinary relationship, matter-of-factly described against the larger background of a country ripped by war and revolution. But it's the single human beings who are important here; that is, perhaps, what makes it a woman's novel."

Again drawing from Rachlin's own experiences, "The Heart's Desire" focuses on an Iranian-American couple navigating cultural differences in post-revolutionary Iran. "The plot immediately reminds one of "Not without My Daughter", the controversial novel (also made into a film starring Sally Field) about an American mother fighting to save her child from an abusive Iranian husband in a country basically described as an insect-infested black hole," a reviewer at *Iranian.com* wrote. The reviewer also said that Rachlin's straightforward writing is a "blessing." The reader is left free to understand complex human and cultural issues with clarity, rather than trying to decipher literary riddles, metaphors, and hallucinations in magical realism."

Another 1970s setting, "Jumping over Fire" takes place under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule. Noor Ellahi, the narrator, is the daughter of an Iranian father and an American mother. The fair-haired Noor goes by Nora and is drawn to American culture. She resides in a company compound in southern





Iran, built by Iranian American Oil Co. for its employees, including her father, a radiologist at the company hospital, along with her parents and brother Jahan, who enjoys the freedoms of a man. Many of the enclave's residents are English or American, and the streets are named after American suburbs, and the theater screens classic American movies. The Ellahis, who do not practice any religion, live a luxurious life with servants until revolution approaches and they leave to America. Nora and Jahan, who is adopted, have been lovers, and they want to venture out on their own in the United States together, but he is unable to adjust culturally, and they split up. "A deeply flawed family, and the people of many nationalities who touch their lives, are seen with a clear but forgiving eye," School Library Journal contributor Christine C. Menefee observed.

Rachlin describes her upbringing, her early years with her aunt, her return to her family, and the love support she got from Pari, who died at a young age, in "Persian Girls: A Memoir".

Editor of Publishers Weekly: "this memoir gives American readers rare insight into Iranians' ambivalence toward the United States." "Ever since I was a teenager I found that writing, giving shape to some of the events of my own life and of those around me, created a sense of peace in me, Rachlin said to CA. I hope that my books will make people aware that important human emotions and desires are universal. I hope to alleviate some of the stereotypical pictures people have of cultures like Iran."

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