Reading Lolita in Tehran: Nabokov could not have wished for more attentive students than those who met on Thursday mornings in 1995 at the Tehran apartment of Azar Nafisi to study English literature. Nafisi, who had recently resigned her position as Professor of English Literature at the University of Tehran, expertly guided a group of seven young women in discussions of works such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Daisy Miller*. *Lolita*, however, was the class favorite. To them, the Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and they were like Dolores Haze—controlled by an authority who confiscates their individual identities and replaces them with a cipher of his own imagination. The slightest provocation, a hair out of place, a bared ankle, maddens Humbert just as it does their own tormentors. In the alternative world of Nafisi's apartment, where not the horrors and humiliations waiting in the street below but the mountains of Tehran were reflected in the antique oval mirror that hung on the far wall of the living room, Nafisi and her group of hand-picked students used literature, as Nabokov had, to transcend the unacceptable realities of a preposterous life and find a place where art, tenderness, and beauty prevailed. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is Nafisi's account of the years she spent in Iran trying to come to terms with the totalitarian regime that came to power in 1979. By the time the Islamic Republic had so circumscribed the lives of women that attending an all-girl literature class at the home of a professor might require an alibi, "Knowledge nicely browned" was no longer an option. For these students, reading Nabokov, reading Persian and western classics, reflecting on and being transformed by what they read, was ultimately an act of subversion.

Nafisi, a student in the 1970s at the University of Oklahoma, read with equal passion Nabokov and Mike Gold, the proletarian American editor of the popular literary journal *New Masses*. As at many American universities of the time, Nafisi and her fellow Iranian and Americans students viewed the Shah as reactionary and Marxism as a means of transforming Iranian society. Once she returned to Tehran, and both Marxist and Islamic fundamentalists struggled for political control of the country, Nafisi began to realize that the small details and gestures of daily existence such as eating ice cream or simply feeling the wind on your skin were not trivial or bourgeois, as many of her Marxist friends insisted, but the essence of life and identity. The more irrelevant the Islamic Republic made her feel, the more devoted to western literature she became. She then rediscovered Nabokov, rereading *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Ada*, *Pnin*, *The Defense*, and any of his books—all of which were forbidden—that she could find. Imagine us, we won't exist unless you imagine us, Nafisi—evoking Nabokov—implores the reader. A country fallen to religious
totalitarianism and a group of girls seated around a living room to discuss literature. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is both an account of the devastating rise of Islamism in Iran since the Islamic Republic was established and a textual engagement with the literary works that helped her cope with it. In the introduction to the book Nafisi writes "I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves, changing and interchanging facets of their lives so that their secrets are safe." Although written as a personal memoir, certain details hint at the borrowed fictions Nafisi uses to illuminate the story. The name for Mr. Forsati, a student in the Muslim Students' Association who uses his position to gain special privileges, suggests, in Persian, opportunism. When Nafisi decides to put *The Great Gatsby* on trial to determine if it truly is an immoral work, as several of the fundamentalist students in her class have claimed, the description seems to borrow as much from the mock trial in *Alice in Wonderland* as it does from the actual facts of the incident as it took place. Once more echoing Nabokov, Nafisi reminds us that the boundary between fiction and reality is porous and fictions can both irradiate and transform everyday life. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is beautifully imagined and affectionately recalled, and many of the details of the story evoke Nabokov. On the first morning of the private class made up of all of Nafisi's best female students, Mashid, a devout Muslim who had been jailed for five years because her religious affiliations were not sanctioned by the Islamacists in power, arrives first. After she is convinced that there are no men in the house, Mashid agrees to take off her black robe, revealing a white shirt with a huge yellow butterfly embroidered on it. Nafisi asks, "Did you wear this in honor of Nabokov?" The yellow and white shirt repeats the yellow and white daffodils Mashid has already presented to Nafisi as a housewarming gift. Nabokov's butterfly signals the transition from the bleak world outside to the colored interior of the apartment and the radiant gift that Nabokov and other writers will bestow over the course of the many weeks the group is together. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is part literary criticism, part personal memoir, part political commentary. Its popularity of may be a matter of timing: the subject is topical, and the story of rebellious women refusing to succumb to oppression appealing. But the real charm of this book is in the many small details, such as the green gate at the entrance to the university in front of which the women had to be questioned and searched before they could enter, or the adhesive tape stuck to fortify the windows during the bombing in the Iran-Iraq war, which evoke a reality that is both familiar and alien at the same time. Nafisi, while still teaching at the University of Tehran, wrote the full length *Antiterra:*
A Critical Reading of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels. She has studied Nabokov deeply, understanding that human imagination and curiosity are prepolitical, that the act most subversive to any political system is to think independently and be true to one's dreams, that even the oppressor cannot always be reduced to his caricature. Borrowing from the rhetoric of Mike Gold and others who sought, however unsuccessfully or misguidedly, to overthrow societal unfairness by direct political action, Nafisi posted this directive at the website entrance to the Dialogue Project, an online forum she conducts to discuss Democracy in the Middle East: "Book Lovers of the World Unite!" For Nafisi, and maybe even Nabokov, good readers really can "save the world."

AZAR NAFIGI: professor and best-selling author, is best known as the author of the national bestseller Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, which electrified its readers with a compassionate and often harrowing portrait of the Islamic revolution in Iran and how it affected one university professor and her students. Earning high acclaim and an enthusiastic readership, Reading Lolita in Tehran is an incisive exploration of the transformative powers of fiction in a world of tyranny. The book has spent over 70 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list to date. Reading Lolita in Tehran has been translated in 32 languages, and has won diverse literary awards, including the 2004 Non-fiction Book of the Year Award from Booksense, the Frederic W. Ness Book Award, the 2004 Latifeh Yarsheter Book Award, an achievement award from the American Immigration Law Foundation, as well as being a finalist for the 2004 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Memoir. Azar Nafisi is a Visiting Professor and the director of the SAIS Dialogue Project at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC, where she is a professor of aesthetics, culture, and literature, and teaches courses on the relation between culture and politics. Azar Nafisi held a fellowship at Oxford University, teaching and conducting a series of lectures on culture and the important role of Western literature and culture in Iran after the revolution in 1979. She taught at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University, and Allameh Tabatabai before her return to the United States in 1997 – earning national respect and international recognition for advocating on behalf of Iran’s intellectuals, youth and especially young women. She was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the mandatory Islamic veil in 1981, and did not resume teaching until 1987. Azar Nafisi conducted workshops in Iran for women students on the relationship between culture and human rights; the material culled
from these workshops formed the basis of a new human rights education curriculum. She has lectured and written extensively in English and Persian on the political implications of literature and culture, as well as the human rights of the Iranian women and girls and the important role they play in the process of change for pluralism and an open society in Iran. She has been consulted on issues related to Iran and human rights both by the policy makers and various human rights organizations in the US and elsewhere. She is also involved in the promotion of not just literacy, but of reading books with universal literary value.

Azar Nafisi has written for The New York Times, Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Her cover story, “The Veiled Threat: The Iranian Revolution’s Woman Problem” published in The New Republic (Feb. 22, 1999) has been reprinted into several languages. She is the author of Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov’s Novels. She also wrote the new introduction to the Modern Library Classics edition of Tolstoy’s Hadji Murad, as well as the introduction to Iraj Pezeshkzad’s My Uncle Napoleon, which will be published by Modern Library in April 2006. She is currently working on two books, one tentatively titled The Republic of the Imagination, which is about the power of literature to liberate minds and peoples, and the other, Things I Have Been Silent About, about culture, history, and loss. She lives in Washington, DC.

Questions:

On her first day teaching at the University of Tehran, Azar Nafisi began class with the questions, "What should fiction accomplish? Why should anyone read at all?" What are your own answers? How does fiction force us to question what we often take for granted?

Yassi adores playing with words, particularly with Nabokov's fanciful linguistic creation upsilamba (18). What does the word upsilamba mean to you?

In what ways had Ayatollah Khomeini "turned himself into a myth" for the people of Iran (246)? Also, discuss the recurrent theme of complicity in the book: that the Ayatollah, the stern philosopher-king, "did to us what we allowed him to do" (28).

Compare attitudes toward the veil held by men, women and the government in the Islamic Republic of Iran. How was Nafisi's grandmother's choice to wear the chador marred by the political significance it had gained? (192) Also, describe Mahshid's conflicted feelings as a Muslim who already observed the veil but who
nevertheless objected to its political enforcement.

In discussing the frame story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Nafisi mentions three types of women who fell victim to the king's "unreasonable rule" (19). How relevant are the actions and decisions of these fictional women to the lives of the women in Nafisi's private class?

Explain what Nafisi means when she calls herself and her beliefs increasingly "irrelevant" in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Compare her way of dealing with her irrelevance to her magician's self-imposed exile. What do people who "lose their place in the world" do to survive, both physically and creatively?

During the Gatsby trial Zarrin charges Mr. Nyazi with the inability to "distinguish fiction from reality" (128). How does Mr. Nyazi's conflation of the fictional and the real relate to theme of the blind censor? Describe similar instances within a democracy like the United States when art was censored for its "dangerous" impact upon society.

Nafisi writes: "It was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile" (145). How do her conceptions of home conflict with those of her husband, Bijan, who is reluctant to leave Tehran? Also, compare Mahshid's feeling that she "owes" something to Tehran and belongs there to Mitra and Nassrin's desires for freedom and escape. Discuss how the changing and often discordant influences of memory, family, safety, freedom, opportunity and duty define our sense of home and belonging.

Fanatics like Mr. Ghomi, Mr. Nyazi and Mr. Bahri consistently surprised Azar by displaying absolute hatred for Western literature — a reaction she describes as a "venom uncalled for in relation to works of fiction." (195) What are their motivations? Do you, like Nafisi, think that people like Mr. Ghomi attack because they are afraid of what they don't understand? Why is ambiguity such a dangerous weapon to them?

The confiscation of one's life by another is the root of Humbert's sin against Lolita. How did Khomeini become Iran's solipsizer? Discuss how Sanaz, Nassrin, Azin and the rest of the girls are part of a "generation with no past." (76)

Nafisi teaches that the novel is a sensual experience of another world which appeals to the reader's capacity for compassion. Do you agree
that "empathy is at the heart of the novel"? How has this book affected your understanding of the impact of the novel?