

BOOK ANALYSIS

The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation

Basic book information:

Mackey, Sandra. *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*. Plume 1998.

Author's bio:

Sandra Mackey is an authority on Middle Eastern culture and politics as well as an award-winning author. She received an M.A. in International Affairs at the University of Virginia. In addition to this Sandra Mackey worked as an underground journalist in Saudi Arabia for four years. She has contributed to many periodicals and appeared on major news networks, notably CNN as a commentator on the first Gulf War. As well as authoring *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*, she has written books on Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Synopsis:

The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation is a broad overview of Iranian history and culture from the Achaemenian dynasty to the late 20th century. In this work, Sandra Mackey advances the theory that Iranian culture is a mix of competing Persian and Islamic traditions, which deserve equal recognition from Iran's leadership. Carefully weighing the pros and cons of each successive government, she passes judgment based on the ability (or more commonly inability) of Iran's leaders to acknowledge and accommodate this dual heritage. She also presents Western political thought as a third competing element and describes in detail the complex relationship between Iran and the West. While drawing from a wide range of academic sources, *The Iranians* also benefits from a multitude of personal anecdotes collected by the author while staying in Iran.

Perspective / Angle:

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All in all, Sandra Mackey offers a balanced and wide-ranging introduction to Iran. She writes from a Western perspective, but her extensive knowledge of Iranian history and culture contributes to a work that does not suffer from excessive Western bias. The author's own experience supports this degree of objectivity via smoothly integrated anecdotes from average Iranian citizens. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite its thorough research, *The Iranians* is not a scholarly publication and fits more appropriately into the

category of popular history. Given its broad scope, the book is forced to reduce all the complexities of Iranian history and culture into a simplistic thesis, which has irritated some readers.

Transgressions on the part of the U.S., U.K., and Russia are explored in an honest attempt to explain the mindset of the Iranian people, and Mackey shows respect for the Islamic government as a legitimate product of Iranian culture. In these respects Mackey does not seem to be advancing any type of agenda, be it pro-Western or anti-Revolutionary.

However, the author's background in journalism is relevant in assessing the objectivity of the work as a whole. Factual errors have been noted, and in its final segments *The Iranians* appears biased in favor of Iran's politicians Rafshanjani and Khatami, neglecting to mention various shortcomings like lukewarm economic reform and complicity in political violence now generally acknowledged as fact. Whether this skewed presentation was deliberate or merely stems from lack of information is debatable, but this does not change the fact that the academic tone Sandra Mackey maintains for much of the beginning portion of the book begins to gradually devolve into the rhetoric of journalism by its conclusion.

How it relates to or supports mutual understanding:

This book supports mutual understanding by offering a wide range of perspectives on Iran's competing traditions. Author Sandra Mackey gives a voice to regular Iranian citizens by sharing their personal anecdotes and views. This offers a varied and realistic presentation of Iran to Western readers who are typically force-fed biased information by the mainstream media. Also, *The Iranians* tends to cover the segments of Iran's history involving the West through both Iranian and Western perspectives. Mackey is often critical when speaking about foreign policy issues, but she does not outright condemn either side or reduce a complex situation to black vs. white. Instead she attempts to explain the multifaceted nature of the circumstances by placing them in historical and cultural contexts. Lastly, mutual understanding can only be achieved through proper information, and *The Iranians* offers a great deal of it in a concise and readable format.

Study guide questions:

1. Sandra Mackey presents both the Pahlavi rulers and the post-Revolutionary government as flawed due to their neglect or repression of one half of Iran's identity. In what other ways does post-Revolutionary Iran mirror Iran under the Pahlavi dynasty?
2. *The Iranians* presents the 1979 revolution not as a sudden or unexpected twist in Iran's history, but rather as both a fluid continuation of Iranian values and a natural result of the events preceding it. According to the author, what elements of pre-

Islamic culture in Iran contributed to the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic Republic?

3. The author discusses at length the tendency for Iranians to assimilate and modify other cultures with which they come into contact. How has this trait affected the development of Shi'a Islam in Iran? Based on the author's presentation of the Iranians, does it seem likely that the traditions of Islam and Western liberalism can be reconciled in Iran?
4. In the book's epilogue the author explains Iran's aggressive foreign policy as stemming from a desire for honor and respect for the country's unique heritage. How might the Islamic Republic more effectively present the image of its heritage to the international community in order to avoid confrontation? How might the United States more constructively address this issue of respect in terms of its policy on Iran?