



Leila's Secret

Kooshyar Karimi

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In fundamentalist Iran, new life sometimes means certain death. When Leila comes to see Doctor Karimi, both are in danger.

Born in a slum to a Muslim father and a Jewish mother, Kooshyar Karimi has transformed himself into a successful doctor, an award-winning writer, and an adoring father. His could be a comfortable life but his conscience won't permit it: he is incapable of turning away the unmarried women who beg him to save their lives by ending the pregnancies that, if discovered, would see them stoned to death.

One of those women is 22-year-old Leila. Beautiful, intelligent, passionate, she yearns to go to university but her strictly traditional family forbids it. Returning home from the library one day – among the few trips she's allowed out of the house – she meets a handsome shopkeeper, and her fate is sealed. Kooshyar has rescued countless women, but Leila seeks his help for a different reason, one that will haunt him for years afterwards and inspire an impossible quest from faraway Australia.

Spellbinding and heartbreaking. Leila's Secret shows us everyday life for women in a country where it can be a crime to fall in love. But for all its tragedy, this unforgettable book is paradoxically uplifting, told from the heart of Kooshyar's immense sympathy, in the hope that each of us – and the stories we tell – can make a difference.

Leila's Secret Details

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From Reader Review Leila's Secret for online ebook

Georgia says

This was a book that I could not put down. Leila's Secret was a book like no other that I have read which was both confronting and sad yet it still managed to create faith in the kindness of some people. It also brings a lot of awareness of Iranian culture and that there is still good in the world despite the bad.

Karimi is a brave man who risked everything to help those women in unfortunate circumstances. Karimi made it his life's work to perform abortions on women who have found themselves pregnant, on the side of running his own medical practice and completing military service as a doctor. Some were prostitutes, some were victims of rape and others were simply victims of falling in love outside of marriage. During this time, a woman in Iran found to be pregnant outside of marriage risked punishment of death and in more rural areas it was not uncommon for the murder to be performed by a male relative. Karimi bravely carried out abortions for many women, for the sake of saving their lives despite the risk to his own life. I really felt sympathy for Karimi as there is a blurred line in deciding if his actions were good or bad. He was essentially ending one life in order to keep another alive. He was torn between his wife's morals and the government versus his own moral judgement.

The other voice of this story was of Leila, a 21 year old woman who found herself pregnant after the betrayal by a man she loved and trusted. Leila came from a strict Muslim family and knew that her brothers would kill her if they found out. Leila was simply infatuated with a man who deceived her to believe that he was in love with her and that they had some kind of future together. Little did Leila know that he was a married man with a child. Hamid raped Leila when she asked him to stop and after this encounter she became pregnant.

Overall this was a great book.

Andrew Lucas says

'Leila's Secret' is an alarming and enlightening read. It is a difficult story to face at times, as the reader confronts the perilous existence of an Iranian doctor who secretly performs illegal abortions and one of his patients, a young woman who falls for a man on her brief excursions outside a closeted existence at home. Both face death if caught.

Karimi's use of first person narrative is a bit disconcerting, and the final pages, in which he brushes over his capture and eventual escape from Iran leaves the impression that therein lies another book.

Raz says

This book is told in alternating chapters between Leila and the doctor who helps her, and you get a really

good sense of what life is like in Iran from two very different perspectives.

It's written in a very dry style without a lot of expressive language, which admittedly put me off a bit at first. When Dr Karimi is talking about Iran's recent history or the struggles that Iranian women face, it can come across a bit like a wikipedia entry rather than the narrative of an actual person. Once I got used to it though, this book really made an impact. It really brings home just how oppressive life is there for the women whose sole purpose in life is to serve men, and for men like Dr Karimi who want things to change but risk imprisonment or death for even trying.

I would definitely recommend this book; there's not really a happy ending but there's an optimism in the goodness of the people this story's about which prevents it from just being dire and miserable (having said that, you might need tissues before the end)

Alessandro Argenti says

Mi è piaciuto un sacco, una storia vera anche se l'argomento è piuttosto inflazionato; raccontata con tatto e precisione, con sentimento e coraggio. Nessuna retorica e pochi giudizi morali, come d'altronde mi aspetto che sia.

Zoe says

Lies, lies and more LIES!

I've got to say I as a muslim was offended by this book.

I was very interested in this book just to see how this poor girl suffered and all the other girls as well but I noticed that the writer's message was much bigger than that. All he wanted to do was to show that islam is a barbaric religion.

So much exaggeration was in this book that at times I felt like laughing because I've been to Iran and I have family there and never ever did I see or hear anything like what he wrote in his book. If you're a jew good for you but don't try to insult other religions (indirectly).

Simone says

When I first started reading this book I thought it was a work of fiction (albeit based on factual details about Iranian society). It wasn't until I researched the author a little further that I realised it was in fact a memoir based on Kooshyar Karimi's real experiences as a doctor in fundamentalist Iran in the 1980s and 1990s. The main reason I thought it was fiction was because it is told in two voices, that of Dr Karimi and a young woman named Leila. Dr Karimi has written both parts but gives an authentic voice to Leila given that he knew her story so intimately.

Most of us have knowledge of fundamentalist Iran and the severe restrictions it places on women. Still it is difficult to fathom just what a different life I would lead had I been born there. Simple everyday things such as the right to a full, unbiased education, the freedom to move away from my family home and experience

any lifestyle I desired and ultimately being able to choose my own life partner (or not should I not find one I loved enough to marry). Most frighteningly though should I have ever found myself pregnant outside marriage I would have faced the possibility of being stoned to death for the sin of bringing shame to my family.

Kooshyar himself suffered many injustices in his life as the son of a Jewish single mother in a Muslim country and had to jump many hurdles to ultimately complete a medical degree. He did not set out to become an illegal abortionist, but the job somehow found him through first one acquaintance, then another and another as his name was passed around to others desperate enough to seek his services. In each case Kooshyar is told it is a matter of life and death. Should the young unmarried woman in question not undergo an abortion she will have no other choice than to kill herself. Each abortion is fraught with risk and not only because the procedure itself is illegal. Kooshyar can only undertake the operation in private homes, far from medical equipment should it be required. Many times he is unsure whether or not his patient will survive.

Leila is a young woman severely frustrated with her life. Forbidden from studying to become a teacher like she dreams of, she snatches small pockets of freedom by visiting the library. It is during one of those brief unsupervised excursions that she meets a handsome shopkeeper who ignites a passion in Leila that she never knew existed. This liaison sets Leila on a treacherous path that ultimately sees her meeting Kooshyar, but for a different reason that touches the young doctor deeply and ultimately changes his life.

Leila's Secret is an amazing story, as equally compelling as it is unfathomable (that this could happen in the late twentieth century). Kooshyar Karimi is a natural storyteller with a very easy to read style, despite the difficult subject matter. I immediately found myself fully invested in both stories, knowing that they must intersect at some point but surprised in the way they ultimately did. The book shines a light on a way in which women and their bodies have (and continue) to be abused and controlled, yet also demonstrates that good people exist everywhere and will put themselves at risk to help others.

Jenny says

Beautifully written, despite my initial misgivings about the book's cover (yet another dramatically veiled woman, because hey, that sells well in the West). Dr. Karimi and Leila's story is one that needs to be heard.

Context

Note, however, that their story needs to be heard in context. We're talking predominantly about impoverished areas in the 1990s where people's survival revolved around violence, inflicted either by the authoritarian government or by those in their own communities -- a grim situation that is unfortunately found throughout the world. My fear, though, is that some people will read this book and blanket-blame the Iranian people, or Shia Islam in particular, or Islam in general. Such generalizations are superficial and counterproductive, and I believe they go against the author's intentions.

Forgiveness and Tolerance

I liked what Dr. Karimi wrote in his Author's Note at the beginning of the book: "I have written this book in the hope that one day we will start tolerating and stop tormenting; in the belief that if we learn to forgive, freedom will come." After all he's been through, he still chooses to believe in sentiments like that, and I admire him for it. He knows that effective reform isn't achieved through hatred.

Health of the Imagination

One aspect of this book that surprised me was its insight into the imagination. For some people, like Azita, the rigidness of their lives blunted their creativity to the point where they could not change, because "if you want to do something that takes you away from the customary role our culture dictates, you have to first be able to imagine it. And Azita [and people like her] cannot." Meanwhile, other people, like Hamid, were driven mad by their imaginations, which had been repressed until they reached the breaking point. It really makes you wonder about the state of your own mind and what your own cultural blindspots are.

In Search of Women's Voices

I also wondered how different the book would be if Leila could tell her story in her own words. What would she choose to emphasize? How would our understanding of the characters change? I ask because once again, we're not hearing from women directly. Doing that isn't possible in this case, I guess, but it's worth remembering that in a book filled with women, not one speaks directly for herself; they all speak through the filter of Dr. Karimi's memories.

Overall, this book is a heartfelt contribution to the greater human rights narrative, and it's well worth the read.

Karene Atkinson says

This book was a page turner and very hard to put down. The reader is drawn into the lives of the doctor and the young woman Leila. We are made aware of the complex and unfair system that chain women to a life that most do not want, with no voice to say no, I want more, I want to be heard, I want to be of value. Then when the last page is reached, the reader is left wanting more. A great book.

Moniii says

Islamski fundamentalizm, trudna sytuacja kobiet w Iranie... Wiele ju? na ten temat s?ysza?am i czyta?am, ale mimo to przedstawione w ksi??ce historie g??boko mnie poruszy?y, a nawet przerazi?y. Opis ukamieniowania, ca?kowita zale?no?? kobiety od m??czyzny (nie tylko ?ony od m??a, ale tak?e siostry od brata), brak jakiegokolwiek swobody w ksztaltowaniu swojego ?ycia. I to wszystko w drugiej po?owie lat 90-tych XX wieku, bo w?a?nie wtedy toczy si? akcja ksi??ki. W ostatnim czasie Iran nieco otworzy? si? na ?wiat, w du?ych miastach wida? "wyzwolone" dziewczyny w kolorowych szalach na g?owie, które tylko w 1/3 zakrywaj? w?osy. Ale na prowincji nadal ka?da kobieta ubrana jest w czarny czador, a za szczególnie zamkni?tymi drzwiami ira?skich domów dziej? si? historie takie jak te, przedstawione przez doktora Karima.

Jess Dumitro says

This book gets better and more intense as you read on. It really opened my mind to other cultures in this world. Was a great read and I finished the last half of the book in a day because I couldn't put it down.

Vanessa Mozayani says

When I selected this book, I thought it was a work of fiction. This book tells of the life of the author who was a doctor whilst living in Iran. It is written like a work of fiction with alternating chapters of the Doctor and Leila. It was terrifying and heartbreaking.

Ilyhana Kennedy says

This is a work of non-fiction and possibly an important documentation, told in story form, of the plight of women living under the brutality of fundamentalist Islam in Iran.

The story is told by a doctor who eventually fled Iran to live in Australia.

The content can be hard going but for readers who want to know, it's an education.

I found the last pages riveting, as he told the story in précis form of the rest of his life 'after Leila'. Incredible.

Joanne says

I Saw Dr. Karimi on the Adelaide Writers Week early this year. His story moves me, his humbleness inspire me. If what i thought i experienced on his sessions on ADLWW, it is just a start. reading of this book brings things to new prospective. This is a true story, or stories of Iranian girls, ladies, and women that have unwanted pregnancy through love, luss, or mostly, through the power and domination of men. It is a storrry on how an inocent 22 years old girl Leila falls in love with a man, and how she end up being rape by this man, and fall pregnantt before marriage. It is also a story about strength, hope, and how unconditional a mother's love can be for their child. It is a story about the conflicting ethical world of Dr. Karimi as a medical profession, and a husband and father. and how the constent fight within him, to him and his family to stay safe, as termination of pregnancy is a no-no in Iran, even till this very day. It is a book that look in to the societal issues of such country, how when religious and politics overtake the control of huminity. It is not a lite read, but is definitely a book that will make one stop and think, and ponder on issues that seems so simple, but yet, so solym...

Summer Faraj says

I have not read a good story in such a long time! Then I came across this one and I get excited everytime I get a minute to read!! What a story!! I wish there was more he knew about Leila and Zahra and where they have ended up! Maybe a sequel when he does find her!! This is definitely one of my top 3 favourite stories!

Kirra says

An absolutely amazing story that had me in tears. An excellent non fiction read that has really made me appreciate living in Australia.

