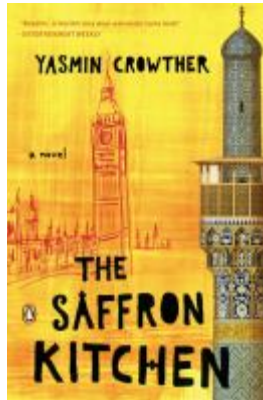


Oliver Wolcott Library
The Saffron Kitchen by Yasmin Crowther
Book Discussion Guide
Prepared by Patricia Moore



About the Book:

Born to an Iranian mother and British father, Yasmin Crowther makes a unique and impressive debut onto the literary scene with her remarkable novel about culture, family, and identity. *The Saffron Kitchen* is a poignant and timely story about one woman's struggle to belong to more than one world and how that pull between identities affects a family for generations to come.

Richmond Hill in London is a far cry from where Maryam Mazar was born and raised, the little village of Mazareh in Iran, but this affluent suburb is where she has lived for more than forty years. She has what seems a good and comfortable life, with a devoted husband, Edward, and loving daughter, Sara. But when Maryam's last living sister dies and her twelve-year-old nephew, Saeed, comes from Iran to live with them, his arrival triggers a series of dramatic events, re-opening a wound that Maryam can no longer ignore. She decides there is only one way to heal: she must return home.

With her husband's reluctant blessing, Maryam travels alone to Mazareh to face both the dreams and the demons of her past. Mazareh is in many ways a harsh place, with mud dwellings and little in the way of creature comforts. Yet when Maryam arrives, she begins to feel a sense of peace and wholeness, a connection with the earth, that has been missing for forty years. And perhaps most important, the first love of her life, Ali, her wealthy father's former assistant, is here, awaiting her return. The healing has begun.

Maryam was a girl born before her time, independent and strong-willed, refusing to follow the traditional path for women: marriage and domestic life. Forced to leave Iran after her father disowned her for shaming the family through a misunderstood encounter with Ali, Maryam nevertheless has a powerful bond with this place and its people. But now she must decide if the life that includes her past will now become her future.

Back in London, both Sara and Edward are feeling confused and angry that Maryam seems to have no impending plans to return. How could she abandon her family? When Maryam writes and asks her to visit, Sara feels she must go. She arrives feeling bitter and resentful that her mother is acting as if their life in London is meaningless, especially when she sees Ali and her mother together. But as Maryam introduces Sara to the people and places of her childhood and finally reveals the shocking details of her

forced departure, Sara begins to understand her mother in a way she never could before. In the end, Sara comes to accept that only by letting her mother go, can she finally get her mother back.

Exploring the themes of displacement and exile, of families struggling to embrace more than one culture, of longing and despair, *The Saffron Kitchen* is ultimately a love story, not only between a woman and a man, but of a woman for her homeland.

Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com

About the Author:

Yasmin Crowther was born to an Iranian mother and a British father. After graduating from Oxford, she worked for a variety of corporations on issues of globalization and sustainable development. This is her first novel.

Source: Amazon.com

Book Reviews:

"Maryam is the willful daughter of an Iranian general who backed the Shah of Iran during the (U.S.-backed) 1953 coup that toppled Iran's prime minister, Mossadegh. In the midst of the turmoil, and with the threat of an arranged marriage hanging over her, Maryam is sheltered one night by her father's trusted assistant, Ali, a young man near her age—16—for whom she feels a shy attraction. And though still a virgin the next morning, their feelings for each other are clear. Maryam is sent away by her aloof father ("she is no daughter of mine"), a painful memory that, decades later, shatters her settled marriage to an understanding if pained British husband, and bewilders and angers her own daughter. A 40-year separation from Ali and a tender reunion in a remote village are just a few turns of the intense plot, full of tragic coilings and romantic passion, that make this a wonderfully intricate debut novel. Crowther, daughter of a British father and an Iranian mother, powerfully depicts Maryam's wrenching romantic and nationalistic longings, exploring the potency of heritage and the pain of exile." *—Publisher's Weekly (Starred Review)*

"After his mother dies, young Saeed travels from Iran to London to live with his aunt Maryam. But the death of her sister, the last of her family, has pitched Maryam into despair and rekindled long-suppressed rage. After a dreadful scene with her pregnant daughter, Sara, Maryam, who has never been fully present in her marriage to a kind Englishman, flees to Iran, her heart's abode. Crowther, who, like Sara, is the daughter of an Iranian mother and a British father, slips back in time to tell the grim story of Maryam's forbidden girlhood love and the barbaric punishment her politically powerful father meted out, thus unveiling the cruelty of relentlessly misogynist customs. But when Sara, who is happily married to her Englishman, journeys for the first time to her mother's homeland, she discovers that while little has changed for women, beauty and generosity are part and parcel of Iranian life, as is an unexpected form of freedom. Despite some contrivances, Crowther's debut is spellbinding, and her cross-cultural perception and empathy are illuminating and affecting." *—Donna Seaman, Booklist*

"An unusual and satisfying read." *—The Guardian, London*

"With richly descriptive language evoking the riotous streets of Iran to the comfortable London suburbs, Crowther's well-crafted narrative will keep readers eagerly turning the pages of this poetic debut about mothers and daughters." *—PAGES*

Discussion Questions:

1. The Middle East is very much in the news these days, and perhaps never before has it been more on the mind of Westerners. What issues did *The Saffron Kitchen* bring up for you, and did it change or influence your idea of Iran in any way?
2. Maryam says she hits Saeed to make him strong, just as her own father hit her as a girl. Do you believe this? Why or why not? Discuss the reasons you think Maryam feels so angry at Saeed. What does he represent to her? Why do you think some abused people grow up to continue that abuse, while others vow never to repeat the “sins of their fathers”?
3. When Maryam returns home (p. 28) after taking Sara to the hospital, she says to herself, “I should never have left.” What is she referring to? The hospital? Iran? And what does she mean by this? How does her statement foreshadow what happens in the rest of the novel?
4. What is the moral of the Gossemarbart story and how does it relate to Maryam’s own story? Discuss the symbolism of the stone woman and its significance in the novel.
5. “Your father was kind to us before his death,” Hassan tells Maryam upon her return (p. 116). Was there any good in this man? Was he a product of his time and traditions? What makes a man like Maryam’s father turn out the way he does in contrast with a man like Doctor Ahlavi?
6. Sara and Saeed form a strong connection with one another. Talk about the things they have in common, the things that make them different, and how they might derive comfort from one another.
7. Farnoosh, Hassan’s unmarried daughter, says to Maryam, “You think [having your family is] enough? When you leave yours behind? Please don’t patronize me” (p. 128). Can you explain Farnoosh’s point of view? Do you see Maryam as selfish? Why or why not?
8. “For each freedom we choose, we must give up another,” Maryam says (p. 128). What does she mean in terms of her own life? Do you agree or disagree, and why?
9. What do you think Maryam wants for Sara? Does Sara have a right to be angry at her mother? How would you feel, as a daughter or son, if your mother left you to return to the place of her birth?
10. Where does Maryam’s love for Iran end and her love for Ali begin? Are they separate?
11. Discuss how the author uses the color saffron as a symbol throughout the novel. What does it represent, to Maryam, to Sara, to Saeed?
12. Think about the different worlds to which you belong. Consider the transitions between these worlds and discuss how navigating these transitions affects your life.

Further Reading:

Brick Lane by Monica Ali

After an arranged marriage to Chanu, a man twenty years older, Nazneen is taken to London, leaving her home and heart in the Bangladeshi village where she was born. Her new world is full of mysteries. How can she cross the road without being hit by a car (an operation akin to dodging raindrops in the

monsoon)? What is the secret of her bullying neighbor Mrs. Islam? What is a Hell's Angel? And how must she comfort the naïve and disillusioned Chanu?

The Gift of Rain: A Novel by Tan Twan Eng

In 1939, sixteen-year-old Philip Hutton—the half-Chinese, half-English youngest child of the head of one of Penang's great trading families—feels alienated from both the Chinese and British communities. He at last discovers a sense of belonging in his unexpected friendship with Hayato Endo, a Japanese diplomat. Philip proudly shows his new friend around his adored island, and in return Endo teaches him about Japanese language and culture and trains him in the art and discipline of aikido. But such knowledge comes at a terrible price. When the Japanese savagely invade Malaya, Philip realizes that his mentor and sensei—to whom he owes absolute loyalty—is a Japanese spy. Young Philip has been an unwitting traitor, and must now work in secret to save as many lives as possible, even as his own family is brought to its knees.

The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir by Linda Hogan

"I sat down to write a book about pain and ended up writing about love," says award-winning Chickasaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan. In this book, she recounts her difficult childhood as the daughter of an army sergeant, her love affair at age fifteen with an older man, the legacy of alcoholism, the troubled history of her adopted daughters, and her own physical struggles since a recent horse accident. She shows how historic and emotional pain are passed down through generations, blending personal history with stories of important Indian figures of the past such as Lozen, the woman who was the military strategist for Geronimo, and Ohiesha, the Santee Sioux medical doctor who witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee. Ultimately, Hogan sees herself and her people whole again and gives an illuminating story of personal triumph.

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi

Wise, funny, and heartbreaking, *Persepolis* is Marjane Satrapi's memoir of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. In powerful black-and-white comic strip images, Satrapi tells the story of her life in Tehran from ages six to fourteen, years that saw the overthrow of the Shah's regime, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the devastating effects of war with Iraq. The intelligent and outspoken only child of committed Marxists and the great-granddaughter of one of Iran's last emperors, Marjane bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country.

Shanghai Girls: A Novel by Lisa See

In 1937 Shanghai—the Paris of Asia—twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree—until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth. To repay his debts, he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from Los Angeles to find Chinese brides. As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey of a lifetime, from the Chinese countryside to the shores of America. Though inseparable best friends, the sisters also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. Along the way they make terrible sacrifices, face impossible choices, and confront a devastating, life-changing secret, but through it all the two heroines of this astounding new novel hold fast to who they are—Shanghai girls.

Caucasia: A Novel by Danzy Senna

In *Caucasia*—Danzy Senna's extraordinary debut novel and national bestseller—Birdie and Cole are the daughters of a black father and a white mother, intellectuals and activists in the Civil Rights Movement in 1970s Boston. The sisters are so close that they have created a private language, yet to the outside

world they can't be sisters: Birdie appears to be white, while Cole is dark enough to fit in with the other kids at the Afrocentric school they attend. For Birdie, Cole is the mirror in which she can see her own blackness.

~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.