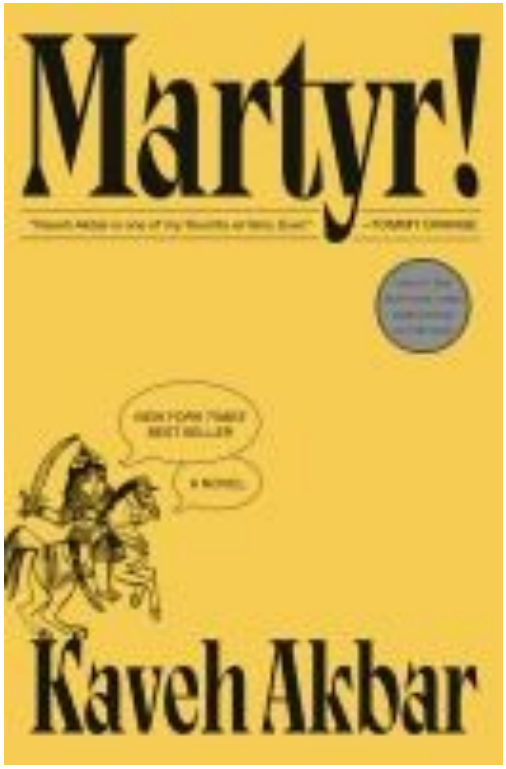
BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

Douglas County Libraries



This guide may contain:

Discussion Questions
Author Interview
Biography
Reviews
Activities & Games
Read-Alikes

Discussion Questions

1. The title of the book includes an exclamation point. What tone did this set for you before you began reading the book?

2. Author Kaveh Akbar is an award-winning poet. How do you see his talent as a poet influence his writing in Martyr!?

3. Akbar based Roya's death during a real-life event— the destruction of Iran Air Flight 665 by the U.S.S. Vincennes in 1988. Afterwards, her widower and child immigrate to the United States, the same country that was responsible for the tragedy. How do you think this shaped the trajectory of Ali and Cyrus's lives?

4. How do you perceive Cyrus's imagined conversations between fictional characters? Who would you put into an imaginary conversation together and why?

5. How has survivor's guilt affected Cyrus throughout his life? Does he feel doomed or spared?

6. Does Cyrus's conversation with Orkideh change his view of martyrdom? Discuss.

7. In an interview with NPR, Akbar said "art is a mechanism by which people have sought immortality for millennia." Do you agree with his statement? How does this relate to Cyrus's journey?

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Cyrus Shams is both the son of the Middle East and the American Middle West, who's been instilled with tragedy. His mother, Roya, was aboard Iran Air Flight 655, which was shot down by mistake by the U.S. Navy during the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. He and his father, Ali, wind up moving to Indiana, where Ali works - overworks really - at a poultry farm and dies from a stroke. Cyrus becomes a drunk, drug addict and a poet - not a totally unprecedented combination. But at the age of 30, he is sober, restless and still in Indiana and thinks there might be one path left to deliver himself to a kind of immortality. "Martyr!" is the name of the debut novel from Kaveh Akbar. He's also poetry editor of The Nation, teaches at the University of Iowa, Randolph College and Warren Wilson College. He joins us now from Iowa City, Iowa. Thanks so much for being with us.

KAVEH AKBAR: Thank you so much for having me, Scott.

SIMON: And that flight, of course, is in the novel, but Iran Air Flight 655 was shot down in 1988, wasn't it?

AKBAR: It was. It was. It was shot down by the USS Vincennes, a U.S. naval warship. They say that they mistook it for a military plane, and they shot it down. And all 290 passengers on board were killed, including 66 children.

SIMON: Does Cyrus feel doomed or spared?

AKBAR: I don't think they're mutually exclusive. I think one can feel doomed and spared - doomed to the same ineffable resting place that awaits us all and also spared from dying of addiction, from dying aboard that flight with his mother. So both.

SIMON: Cyrus has a poetry project in mind. Is he hoping that will deliver meaning or immortality or what?

AKBAR: Art is a mechanism by which people have sought immortality for millennia. The idea that we could store our intelligence in our stories, in language - meaning in each other - outside of our brains, means that we could transmit stories to family members that we would never know, who would be born after we died, right? And that's as close as I know of any human being ever achieving corporeal immortality. And so Cyrus is intensely interested in that. He's also interested in some kind of martyrdom, right? Not necessarily religious martyrdom or theological martyrdom but martyrdom for a divine that might be more terrestrial - right? - whether it be justice or land or dignity or family or art. He's suicidally sad, but he doesn't want to waste his suicide.

SIMON: He had an uncle who was once the angel of death. That must leave an impression.

AKBAR: Yeah. So the uncle in the book - during the Iran-Iraq war, he has a job where every night after the battle, he gets on a horse and wears a long, black robe. And he wants to give people a glimpse of the angel, of something celestial and holy in their dying moments to embolden them in their dying, to persuade them to die with dignity. He - that's his job. That's his job in the army.

SIMON: Does he hope it gives people meaning?

AKBAR: The way the Iranian government yoked itself to cultural and religious ideas around martyrdom and harness those towards its own sort of propagandistic ends is a story that I only glance upon in this book but could be the subject of, you know, a million graduate theses.

SIMON: I laughed out loud - and maybe I shouldn't have - of some of the sections of the book where Cyrus has a part-time job to educate doctors, in which he plays patients who have to get bad news. He's great at that. Am I right to think that this is probably not something he should be doing in his current frame of mind?

AKBAR: (Laughter) Well, yeah. So Cyrus is a medical actor who doctors train giving patients bad news by giving Cyrus bad news. And then he plays all these different characters. And yeah, I mean, his best friend in the novel is named Zee. And Zee thinks that Cyrus shouldn't be doing it because he's not necessarily in a good state of mind for it. And I appreciate you for saying you found the book funny, too. I do hope that it doesn't feel like a relentlessly dour slog. I mean, my experience of life on the planet Earth is private joys amidst collective grief and private grief amidst collective joy.

SIMON: Addiction looms over this story almost as much as martyrdom. Cyrus at one point writes, for a drunk, there's nothing but drink. There was nothing in my life that wasn't predicated on getting drunk - which raises a difficult question. Does he see martyrdom as a way out with a little more - I don't know - a little more style?

AKBAR: Sure, absolutely. I think that your two choices as a person in recovery are to relapse or to die sober. And you only really win recovery by dying sober, right? The entirety of your life is just a million, trillion opportunities to relapse. I am a person in recovery. I've been sober for 10 years. But it can be exhausting, and I think that there is a part of Cyrus that feels very, very exhausted.

SIMON: May I say something just from a family who's been touched by this?

AKBAR: Of course. We're talking.

SIMON: Good for you. Ten years...

AKBAR: (Laughter).

SIMON: ...Good for you.

AKBAR: Thank you. I appreciate it. It's the hardest thing I've ever done and the most worthwhile thing. And everything else is made possible by that - the cat on my lap, the phone in my hand,

the book that we're talking about.

SIMON: You turn over the last page of this book. You know a lot more Iranian poetry than you did when you first started out (laughter).

AKBAR: Yeah. That's the...

SIMON: Was that also...

AKBAR: ...The secret.

SIMON: ...In your grand design?

AKBAR: Well, I mean, the poet Li-Young Lee says syntax is identity - right? - which means that the way that I talk is inflected by all of my geographies and all of my genealogies and all of my histories and every movie I've ever seen in the order that I see them and every book that I've ever read in the order that I read them, right? And obviously, Persian poetry looms large in my consciousness, as does Sonic Youth and EPMD and Erykah Badu and Jean Valentine and all the other cultural reference that appear throughout the book.

SIMON: Do you have particular regard for the Iranian poet Ferdowsi?

AKBAR: Of course. There's a large biographical beat in the book that orbits him. But he's the great. He's the progenitor of so much else in Persian culture. The joke is every Iranian household has two books, the Quran and the Shahnameh - you know, Ferdowsi's great book - and only one of them gets read.

(LAUGHTER)

SIMON: The poet and now novelist Kaveh Akbar. He's written a novel, "Martyr!" Thanks so much for being with us.

AKBAR: Thanks so much, Scott.

Biography

Kaveh Akbar's poems appear in The New Yorker, The New York Times, Paris Review, Best American Poetry, and elsewhere. He is the author of two poetry collections: Pilgrim Bell (Graywolf 2021) and Calling a Wolf a Wolf (Alice James 2017), in addition to a chapbook, Portrait of the Alcoholic (Sibling Rivalry 2016). He is also the editor of The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse: 100 Poets on the Divine (Penguin Classics 2022). In 2024, Knopf will publish Martyr!, Kaveh's first novel.

In 2020 Kaveh was named Poetry Editor of The Nation. The recipient of honors including multiple Pushcart Prizes, a Civitella Ranieri Foundation Fellowship, and the Levis Reading Prize, Kaveh was born in Tehran, Iran, and teaches at the University of Iowa and in the low-residency MFA programs at Randolph College and Warren Wilson. In 2014, Kaveh founded Divedapper, a home for dialogues with the most vital voices in American poetry. With Sarah Kay and Claire Schwartz, he wrote a weekly column for the Paris Review called "Poetry RX."

https://kavehakbar.com/

A Death-Haunted First Novel Incandescent With Life

In "Martyr!," the poet Kaveh Akbar turns a grieving young man's search for meaning into a piercing family saga.

by Junot Díaz

Cyrus Shams, the aching protagonist at the heart of Kaveh Akbar's incandescent first novel, is a veritable Rushdiean multitude: an Iranian-born American, a "bad" immigrant, a recovering addict, a straight-passing queer, an almost-30 poet who rarely writes, an orphan, a runner of open mics, an indefatigable logophile, a fiery wit, a self-pitying malcontent. But above all else Cyrus is sad; profoundly, inconsolably, suicidally sad.

His oceanic sorrows are fed by many Styxes, but the deepest and darkest is his mother Roya's "unspeakable" death. Just a few months after Cyrus was born, Roya boarded a plane from Tehran to Dubai to visit her brother Arash, "who had been unwell since serving in the Iranian Army against Iraq." Soon after her plane took off, it was blown up by a missile fired from a U.S. Navy warship: "Just shot out of the sky. Like a goose."

The reference is to the notorious real-life destruction of Iran Air Flight 665 by the U.S.S. Vincennes in 1988. Sixty-six children were aboard Flight 665 — Cyrus should have been the 67th, but Roya decided to leave her son home because he was so young.

It is her tragic death that shatters the Shams family irrevocably, plunging Arash deeper into his unwellness — "He began seeing ghouls out the windows, demons, angels, Iraqi soldiers" — and driving Cyrus's father, Ali, to immigrate with his son to the United States to start his life again. If you think the condition of a native is a nervous one, try the condition of the immigrant who settles in the country that vaporized his loved one. The other American dream.

A numbed Ali, turned granite with resignation, ends up at an industrial poultry farm in Fort Wayne ("a chicken hadn't shot his wife out of the sky") and lives only for his distraught son, who grows up racked by night terrors, by insomnia, by irrational fears of deportation and lethal root beer. Young Cyrus tries to hold it all together, first by chatting with famous people in his dreams (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Madonna, Batman) and later through art, intoxicants, recovery and friends. But none of these palliatives eases his survivor's guilt or stills the "doom organ," as he calls it, "throbbing all day every day" in his throat, the siren song of the suicidaire.

“Martyr!” opens with Cyrus at a breaking point: Unable to escape from his doom organ, and now an orphan after his father’s death (from a stroke during Cyrus’s sophomore year of college), he seems to be edging himself toward his big exeunt. He causes trouble with his A.A. sponsor and at his hospital job, going on about a suicide attempt in which he soaked himself in alcohol and nearly set himself ablaze. Cyrus appears hellbent on joining his mother and gaining his rightful place as child No. 67 on Flight 665.

All that holds him back from the abyss is an obsessive desire for his life and his death to matter. He wants the opposite of his mother’s meaningless end, to sacrifice himself for a higher cause:

“You want to be a martyr?” his incredulous A.A. sponsor asks him.
“I guess. Yeah, actually. Something like that,” he replies.

A fascination with martyrdom takes hold and soon Cyrus is papering his apartment with photos of “people whose deaths mattered”: Bobby Sands, Joan of Arc, the Tiananmen Square Tank Man, his parents on their wedding day. A stray conversation with his roommate and sometime lover Zee sends him on a fateful journey to New York City, to meet a cancer-stricken Iranian artist who is spending the last days of her life in the Brooklyn Museum, talking death to all comers. It is this artist, Orkideh, with her tissue-thin voice and hairless skull, who teases Cyrus about becoming a cliché — “another death-obsessed Iranian man” — and who, with her secrets, will change the course of Cyrus’s life.

In Cyrus, Akbar has created an indelible protagonist, haunted, searching, utterly magnetic. But it speaks to Akbar’s storytelling gifts that “Martyr!” is both a riveting character study and piercing family saga. He traces the Shams family back to Iran, to the people they were before Flight 665. We meet Arash as a boy, unnerved by his sister Roya’s fearlessness, and later as a “zero soldier” in the war with Iraq — “zero education, zero special skills, zero responsibilities outside of my country” — and therefore utterly expendable, a martyr-in-the-making. We meet Ali in the days before chickens, before Cyrus, before heartbreak. Best of all are the chapters that home in on Roya. Dissatisfied with marriage, with motherhood, she stumbles into a friendship that opens her up to other horizons, to emkanat — possibilities.

Akbar, who has also published two collections of poetry, is a dazzling writer, with bars like you wouldn’t believe — “When you are 10, shame stitches itself into you like a monogram”; “Ali’s anger felt ravenous, almost supernatural, like a dead dog hungry for its own bones” — but the novel is not without flaws. There are chapters that don’t hit (the Arash sections in particular feel more researched than vital and often overstay their welcome) and a couple of coincidences too incredible to believe. And yet, in spite of these stumbles, what Akbar pulls off in “Martyr!” is nothing short of miraculous.

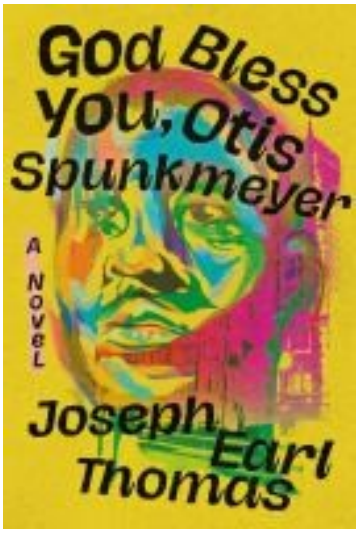
There is a life force coursing through the work, implacably curious, devoted to the small human things, and a recognition that even if we shattered ones don't always put ourselves back together, there is dignity in our brokenness — sympathies and wisdoms that help transform a tale about a grieving young man and a senseless tragedy into a paean of life, of hope.
Like Scheherazade, like all who are fractured and struggling to assemble the pieces, Akbar and Cyrus tell stories — beautiful, tragic, laughing stories — so that the unspeakable will not have the last word. If that is not emkanat, I don't know what is.

Junot Díaz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and a professor at M.I.T.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 21, 2024, Page 9 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: To Die For.

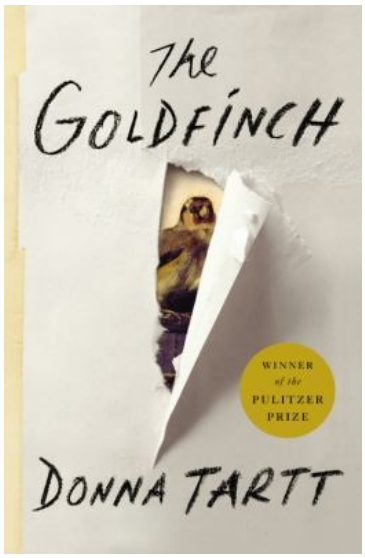
https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/books/review/martyr-kaveh-akbar.html

Read-Alikes



God Bless You, Otis Spunkmeyer by Joseph Earl Thomas

After a deployment in the Iraq War dually defined by threat and interminable mundanity, Joseph Thomas is fighting to find his footing. Now a doctoral student at The University, and an EMS worker at the hospital in North Philly, he encounters round the clock friends and family from his past life and would -be future at his job, including contemporaries of his estranged father, a man he knows little about, serving time at Holmesburg prison for the statutory rape of his then-teenage mother. Meanwhile, he and his best friend Ray, a fellow vet, are alternatingly bonding over and struggling with their shared experience and return to civilian life, locked in their own rhythms of lust, heartbreak, and responsibility.



The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt

A young boy in New York City, Theo Decker, miraculously survives an accident that takes the life of his mother. Alone and abandoned by his father, Theo is taken in by a friend's family and struggles to make sense of his new life. In the years that follow, he becomes entranced by one of the few things that reminds him of his mother: a small, mysteriously captivating painting that ultimately draws Theo into the art underworld. Composed with the skills of a master, The Goldfinch is a haunted odyssey through present-day America, and a drama of almost unbearable acuity and power. It is a story of loss and obsession, survival and self-invention, and the enormous power of art.