

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West*** by Lesley Downer (NY: Gotham Books, 2003), 321 pp., \$13.00.

This biography of Mme Sadayakko by Lesley Downer achieves a portrait that is both intimate and thoroughly contextualized. Born Sada Koyama in 1871, this extraordinary woman achieved unheard-of fame and glory on stages in Japan and the West, rising from poverty to a position of wealth, status – and notoriety. This biography traces the vicissitudes of her life, from her youthful training and great success as a geisha, to her marriage to penniless actor Otojiro Kawakami and their eventual triumphs in Europe, including the Paris Expo of 1900. On their return to Japan she met with further success introducing Western dramas to the kabuki-dominated Japanese theater. Following the death of her husband, she renewed connections with the great love of her youth, Momosuke Fukuzawa, who had become a wealthy business tycoon, and finally retired into obscurity before her death in 1946.

The full import of Sadayakko's career can only be understood in its context of Meiji Japan and *fin de siècle* Europe, which Downer conveys by, among other techniques, vividly describing the actress's encounters with known figures such as Count Hirobumi Ito and Pablo Picasso, not to mention presenting Sadayakko's own reaction to seeing a performance by the legendary Sarah Bernhardt (to whom she was often compared). The fascinating evolution of her career is mirrored in the various names she was known by, and which her biographer lucidly explains: Yakko was her geisha name; she combined that with her given name to produce Sadayakko, her stage name; later, on retiring, she became Sada Kawakami, the name of a respectable wife and widow.

Without ever losing admiration for her subject, Lesley Downer carefully indicates the many perspectives and opinions of Sadayakko's work – ranging from the breathlessly overblown reviews of her performances in Europe to the snide comments of the Japanese press towards the end of her career. Sadayakko and her heirs seem to have wished to —spinll her story away from the more lurid elements of her love affairs, also de-emphasizing her theatrical ambitions, since acting was an extremely low-status occupation, nor were women supposed to take the kind of initiative that she seems to have done. The Japanese press, very concerned that Japanese culture and traditions be portrayed to the West as highly civilized, lambasted the Kawakami troupe's performances, which were designed rather to attract the largest paying audiences possible (having arrived in Europe penniless and swindled by various managers and promoters on the way, who can blame them?). The Western press, on the other hand, was caught up in its own Orientalist fantasies – as one of the first groups to attempt to bridge the cultural differences between Japan and the West, the Kawakami troupe, and Sadayakko as its main attraction,

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seem to have ridden a fantastic wave of mutual fascination and misunderstanding between Europe and Japan during the first decades of the twentieth century. Like many who have broken new ground for women's participation in the arts, Sadayakko garnered praise as well as unreasonable criticism, poverty and social ostracism — this biography, accessibly written for a general audience, introduces us to a forgotten heroine of both East and West.

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***Between Faraway.*** By Val Goldenbrook. (Bloomingdale: 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library, 2001. 142 pp. Paper, \$12.50, ISBN 0-7596-8322-0).

Every now and then a vanity press such as 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library publishes a gem. Unfortunately, Val Goldenbrook's ***Between Faraway*** is not one of them. She begins with a great concept: a band of aliens pursuing a bad guy land on earth in 1824 in New Mexico Territory. The locals assume that this odd assortment of travelers must have come from California. In the hands of another writer this premise might have exploded into an incandescent psychedelic romp across a region of the imagined landscape of Area 51, Roswell, where strange lights appear in the night sky, and people are driven to sculpt oddly shaped mash potato mountains that emanate from their dreamtime. Unfortunately, Goldenbrook takes us in another direction.

Aral, the narrator and main character, is Warrior Queen of the planet Nukyron. Although just 19, she is expected to lead her people against the Marduk, who have managed to destroy several worlds, including their own. Just in case this is not enough to make them appear evil, it is also revealed that they have reptilian skin, an ability to gobble up beauty and spew out waste, walk on three legs, have slits for eyes, and great foaming mouths. These beast men and hate mongers are led by Jonin, a vivisectionist and mad geneticist in a class with the truly vile, Dr. Moreau. As a result of the Marduk invasion, Aral falls into the clutches of this interplanetary Mengele. In his lab, Jonin experiments only on females and produces various hybrids, including Mycen, Aral's female lover, and Tarsus, an intersexual who looks like a man but possesses female genitalia. On Marduk, Aral is sustained in her resistance to Jonin through her telepathic connection to River Raven, a mystic priestess. Eventually Aral and the other prisoners find a way to kill off several Marduk, escape from the laboratory, and begin their pursuit of Jonin, who takes refuge on earth in 1824. On earth, the extraterrestrials encounter good old boys who spit tobacco, have missing teeth, greasy hair, drink —cups of joe, and say phrases like, —yews lookin' mighty fine on that hoss, Miss Sofa. Other human earth creatures include Mexican *brujas*, hybrid Choctaws, and the Genizaro people.

The audience for science fiction is generally easy to please: a good idea, a few battles, a telepath or two, and some technobabble are enough to satisfy most readers. So, here there is a spiral vortex, protection matrix, psychokinetic power, and a soloton automat that dispenses food and drink. There is also a shaman-type spirit priestess, and a planet called Quetzalcoatl that is the home world of the Bird Clans. One area of promise in the book is Aral's effort to understand her sexual identity. Caught between her love for Mycen and her affection for Parris, the earthman who Goldenbrook describes as part Hopi, Spanish, and Negroid, Aral realizes that she can never really love another until she loves herself. ***Between Faraway*** contains several good ideas that never get developed. As such, it is a good draft in need of revision.

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***Anna Chennault: Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations* by Catherine Forslund.** Biographies in American Foreign Policy, No. 8 (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2002) xxxiii, 180 pp., \$65.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

*Biographies in American Foreign Policy Series* editor Joseph Fry finally eschews dead white men in favor of a living Asian woman--albeit one whose early claim to fame was as a widow of a dead white man--in his eighth release, Catherine Forslund's *Anna Chennault: Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations*. The dissertation-turned-book contains more than the title allows, highlighting Anna Chennault's involvement with the Republican party as a donor, fundraiser, Asian authority, and token minority leader until a 1989 falling-out.

Journalist, businesswoman, airline consultant, foreign relations expert, presidential trade promoter, hostess, and author, Chen Hsieng-mei--as the Chinese still know her today--became a Republican through her anti-communism stance and the influence of her much older husband, General Claire Chennault. The general, founder of the "Flying Tigers" and war hero to the Nationalist Chinese, introduced his young wife to her first key contacts, members of the "China Lobby," an informal group that advocated total support of the Nationalist Party in its civil war with the communists before and after its escape to Taiwan as the Republic of China (ROC). After her husband's death in 1958, Chennault supported Richard Nixon in his three campaigns for the White House. She played an integral part in the oft-told story of the 1968 October surprise, when she cautioned South Vietnam's leadership about attending the Paris peace talks. When Nixon later started Vietnamization and withdrawal, Chennault felt betrayed, as she did when Nixon went to China. But due to her practical nature, or because she realized the error of her previous ways, she

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did not let anti-communism stand in the way of better relations, not only between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China (PRC), but between the U.S. and the ROC, and the PRC and the ROC.

Forslund emphasizes the difficulties Chennault faced as a refugee in wartime China and as a widow fighting for respect in the male-dominated business and political worlds. The author explains that Chennault used her femininity and "exotic allure" as an Asian as an advantage rather than a liability. She appropriated the racist or sexist views some held and inverted them. For example, after being called the "Dragon Lady"--a reference to a character in Milton Canniff's "Terry and the Pirates" comic strip--Chennault commissioned Canniff to draw her portrait that she later hung in her apartment for all to see.

The book succeeds as more than merely a brief biography of Chennault. First, Forslund has shed more light on the previously obscure but quickly growing body of literature about women in the history of American foreign relations. Secondly, her discussion of informal diplomacy points out something most U.S. foreign relations historians tend to downplay as "too revisionist" in their more military security centered works: the importance of the intersection of big business and government. In Chennault's case this intersection was obvious, occurring as it did in regular parties she hosted in the living room of her Watergate apartment! To Forslund, informal diplomacy is more than just direct business dealings; it is the wide range of contacts that tie together citizens of different nations. The author points to Chennault's parties as places where American and Asian officials and business executives could meet and informally discuss ideas or agreements that they could formalize later. Due to Chennault's continuing discretion, however, Forslund can cite few examples of specific influence concerning these dinner parties.

Although well-written, the book suffers from some surprising, nagging errors. The chronology section in the introduction lists the second Sino-Japanese war as starting in 1935 rather than 1937, the text itself misstates the end of World War II in Asia as August 10, 1945, instead of August 15, and has Strom Thurmond a Republican in 1964. Even more egregious is the author claiming that the refugee flow into Hong Kong in 1962 was caused by the Cultural Revolution rather than the famine after the Great Leap Forward. Yet these minor flaws hurt only the early chapters and do not detract from an interesting account of a fascinating cross-cultural political figure. Forslund succeeds at pointing out the importance of informal diplomacy through Chennault's many and varied business and journalistic ventures.

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***Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*** by Azar Nafisi. New York: Random House, 2004. 356pp, Paperback. \$13.95.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, part memoir, part literary criticism, and part political analysis, is a highly readable account of Azar Nafisi's eighteen years living and working in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Educated in Switzerland and the United States, Nafisi returned to her homeland with her architect husband after the 1979 revolution and took up a post teaching contemporary fiction at the University of Tehran. The site of continuing political debate and endless protests, Nafisi lost her university job for refusing to veil, though she returned to teaching several years later at a different university where she developed a following, especially among young Iranian women.

She begins her 'memoir' in 1995, less than two years before she left Iran, when she invites seven of her —best and most committed students— to hold class again in the privacy and security of her own house. This reading group, and the books discussed, are the compass points of the memoir. However, she discusses much more, including aspects of her students' lives, much autobiographical material, and reflections on both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. That alone makes for a riveting read.

The book is divided into four sections: *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, *James*, and *Austen*, and in each section Nafisi employs the literary works and their authors as thinking points for her students to reflect on their own lives--what they have gone through and what they are going through--in contemporary Iran. Although this pedagogical technique does not always produce the desired result, Nafisi's passion for literature shines through.

The story within the story in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* turns out to be that of the eclectic and vibrant mix of women that Nafisi has picked for her literary —club—. These seven women are a veritable cross-section of the female cadre in Iran's universities. From the devoutly religious to the red lipstick wearing secular Marxists, they are engaging personalities--both in their critique of literature and in their response to the Islamic Republic. The genius of Nafisi is in her eye as an observer of post-revolutionary life in Iran. Her students serve as metaphors and (not-so-subtle) allusions to the hypocrisy of life under the mullahs and their blind film censor.

In an episode early in her tenure, Nafisi is faced with uber-religious male students who are opposed to the immoral, western-oriented text (Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*) assigned in the class. Responding to these critics with confidence, Nafisi suggests that the class put the novel on trial. In a brilliant coup, she corners the most zealous revolutionary in the class to serve as the prosecutor. In that role he has to present and defend his ideological position and can no longer thoughtlessly level accusations about corrupt Western values. What ensues in the mock trial is an illustration and critique of his (and by default, the Islamic Republic's) twisted logic and *raison d'être*. Nafisi utilizes the classroom to showcase the duplicity of the Islamic revolutionaries that paraded the hallways of most Iranian universities in the

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early 1980s: men who would accuse women of being—decadent floozies! for showing a strand of hair, but all the while would gawk at them through their Raybans.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a joyous and at the same time moving reading experience. What shines through, even more than the student's passion for literature is the unique strength of spirit that Nafisi and her students display when faced with religious demagoguery and an irrational political establishment. When towards the end of the book I realized that she was going to leave Iran for the United States, I felt sad and letdown. Her mere presence in Iran served as a reminder to the mullahs, that much like the trial of *Gatsby*, they can be humiliated using their own rules.

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***The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith***  
by Irshad Manji. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. 240pp.  
Hardback. \$22.95.

Irshad Manji self identifies as a television journalist, media entertainer, lesbian, feminist, Westerner, Muslim and Muslim refusenik. Not shy about her post modern, complex, hybrid subjectivity—she was born in Uganda, fled in 1972 as an infant with her South Asian parents and was raised near Vancouver, BC-- she nonetheless addresses this book to —My Fellow Muslims! with: —I have to be honest with you. Islam is on very thin ice with me. She then invites dialogue: —When I consider all the *fatwa* being hurled by the brain trust of our faith, I feel utter embarrassment. Don't you? The rest of the book, alas, is not a pseudo-dialogue nor an inquiry, asking and answering —tough questions, but a disjointed monologue about a number of aspects of contemporary Muslim social and political practices that supremely annoy her. With some questions, many could agree, —Why are we squandering the talents of women, fully half of God's creation? With others, —Why are we being held hostage to what's happening between the Palestinians and the Israelis? many might disagree with the assertion. The problem with both questions is that the subsequent discussion fails to take account of significant social, political, and historical contexts—beginning with the context of positions of power. Her underlying assumption is that there is a level playing field, whether it is between Palestinians and Israelis or Muslim immigrants and native born citizens.

I looked forward to reading this book after I saw Manji as a participant in a roundtable discussion on Islam aired by Canada's NWI channel in late 2003. She was sassy, indomitable, comfortably out as a lesbian and ready to quote Qur'anic verse to a Muslim scholar. However, what comes across in thirty second sound bites as concerned, becomes merely flippant in print form, especially with poorly researched historical material, factual errors, and distorted characterizations of

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others' arguments, theses, and intellectual contributions. Her historical discussions are particularly quixotic: two pages on Maimonides' medical contributions, but no mention of al-Razi or ibn Sina; over five pages on Muslim Spain, but only two paragraphs on the Baghdad based Abbasid Khalifat; and one liners for ibn Khaldun and Edward Saïd, both misportrayed. This is writing by —p.c. mouse,|| *point-and-click*. Most sources Manji identifies in her bibliography are recent, 1994-2003, and apparently read according to the Evelyn Wood Method. She infers that she read Edward Saïd as a searching student in the 1980s, but describes his path breaking work *Orientalism* as —a word (used) to describe the West's supposed tendency to colonise Muslims by demonising us as the exotic freaks of the East.|| Saïd's studies of the way European scholarship on Islam was part of the arsenal of European imperialism and its justifications merits a more accurate rendering, especially since one of her book's primary arguments is about the failings of men in selectively quoting and acting on Qur' anic messages. She justifiably condemns her fellow Muslims for closing down arguments through their selective use or distortion of scholarship (including Saïd's work), but she replicates this tactic in her own offhand treatment of intellectual work--contemporary and historical scholarship.

This is purportedly an open letter to Muslims, not history or political policy, however, Manji does, in the end, make recommendations. She says Muslims need to revive the practice of —ijtihad,|| i.e., independent reasoning or reasoned struggle; in this, she repeats a call that is now over a century old and which she borrowed from Ziauddin Sardar's article, —Islam: Resistance and Reform|| in *The New Internationalist* (May 2002). Sardar lays out the historical factors behind contemporary —militant traditionalism|| (read fundamentalism). He argues that modernist leaders who succeeded departing colonial powers continued to rule through using excessive force, suppressing 'traditional' leaders, and ridiculing 'traditional' cultural values and thinking. Globalizing economic practices further impoverished traditional cultures, contributing to a siege mentality and new expressions of militant traditionalism.

In the last chapter Manji returns to the —woman question|| in her argument for —Operation Ijtihad,|| asserting that —supporting female entrepreneurs would be goal number one. of a campaign to kick-start change in Islam.|| The cash for this would come from the USA, EU, and other rich nations apportioning —part of their national security budgets as micro-enterprise loans to creative women throughout the Muslim world.|| This would globalize the micro-lending model of Bangladeshi social activist, Muhammad Yunus. She's hardly the first to call for that! Furthermore, men will —benefit directly from Operation Ijtihad, since widespread entrepreneurship will encourage foreign investment.|| Her own field, —media will have to be another front line,|| and she imagines a —Western coalition of Muslims and non-Muslims|| supporting women in the Muslim world —to own and manage local TV stations.|| She also imagines Oprah Winfrey leading the coalition, as her —very presence would issue a stark screw-you to men who want to run everything of worth in Islamic countries.||

Today, without question, we need a multiplicity of Muslim voices, and venues in which wide ranging opinions can be heard. There is a paucity of progressive

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voices beyond the confines of academic writing. I am afraid that Manji's book is not a significant alternative to the loud militant Islamist voices heard in all media—print, internet, TV, etc. Perhaps her contribution is simply as *agent provocateur*, and like Qasim Amin whose *The Emancipation of Woman* in 1899 provoked the production of many dozens of works in the following years, Manji will spur many others to have their say. Insh'allah.

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