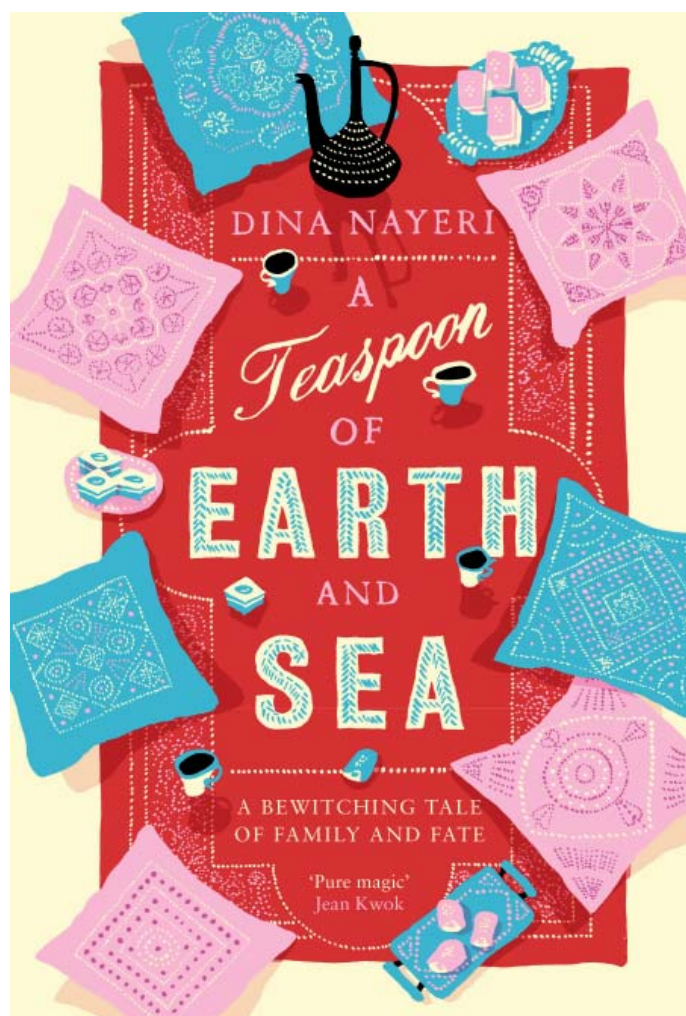


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About the author (2)
The author on writing (2) Reviews and quotes (3)
Suggested points for discussion (4) Further reading (4)

About the book

Growing up in a small fishing village in 1980s Iran, 11-year-old Saba Hafezi and her twin sister, Mahtab, are fascinated by America. They keep lists of English words and collect contraband copies of Life magazine and Bob Dylan cassettes. So when Saba finds herself abandoned, alone with her father in Iran, she is certain that her mother and twin have moved to America without her.

All her life, Saba has been taught that ‘fate is written in the blood,’ which convinces her that twins will live the same life, even if separated by land and sea. As she grows up in the warmth and community of her local village, falls in and out of love, and struggles with the limited possibilities available to her as a woman in Iran, Saba envisions that there is another way for her story to unfold. She imagines a simultaneous, parallel life -- a Western version, for her sister, filled with a freedom and control that Saba can only dream of.

A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea is told in a bewitching voice that mingles the rhythms of Eastern storytelling with straightforward Western prose, to tell a wholly original story about the importance of controlling your own fate.

About the author

Dina Nayeri was born in Iran during the revolution and emigrated to Oklahoma at the age of ten. She has a BA from Princeton and an MBA and Master of Education from Harvard. She is currently a Truman Capote Fellow and Teaching Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

Author, Dina Nayeri, on writing *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*

I wrote *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* at a time when, after years of becoming what I thought was the ideal Western woman, I began to develop a deep longing for Iran.

I had immigrated to the US at age 10, and I spent my adolescence and a large portion of my adulthood perfecting my new identity. I earned multiple Ivy League degrees, worked in business, spoke fluent English, and after a while, I happily forgot that I was Iranian.

In my mid-twenties, I moved to France, a place that was neither my first home (Iran) nor my second (America). To pass the lonely days I researched the village outside Isfahan where my father grew up and I visited every Friday as a child. I learned about its food, its storytelling culture, and its unique music. I spent entire afternoons in cafés reading old folktales. Later, by chance, I became interested in the north of Iran, Shomal, the leafy humid region by the Caspian Sea. There, wealthy Tehranis ski and swim, while a few miles away villagers live in the mountains and among rice paddies in a style that hasn’t changed much in centuries. I started to remember things from my childhood—sweet lemons, unripe almonds eaten with salt, the strange old-world phrases, and the loving, decadent culture I once knew. Iranians inhale life. They suck the marrow, and carve joy out of even the most terrible times. Their attitude toward romance is exquisite.

The moment I left Iran was the moment my life could have turned either way. I thought often about the life I would have led if I'd stayed—full of setar music and saffron rice heaps and native comforts under the terrifying eye of the Islamic Republic. What kind of person would I be there? Would I recognize myself in that Dina?

I began to write a novel about two lives: twin girls, one growing up in Iran and one in America. As I wrote, I was overtaken with the idea that one of the sisters should be dead. Naturally I thought “the one in an Iranian village is dead, because that part of me is dead.” But the more I discovered my native side, the more I pulled away from the Western life I had built, everything I had tried to become. As the novel evolved, it became clear that the story I wanted to tell was that of the Iranian sister. I wondered what she would think of me, the exile. In the end, the story captured both sides of me, and yet—to my surprise—it was the American sister that was dead, the Iranian who lives on.

Reviews & Quotes

‘Lovely.’ - *Vanity Fair*

‘A feel-good family tale.’ - *Cosmopolitan*

‘Nayeri’s highly accomplished debut is a rich, multilayered reading experience. Structurally complex, the overriding theme is storytelling in all its forms, and the fine line between truth and lies. Each one of the large cast of characters is fully realized and sympathetic. Saba is a captivating heroine whose tragedies and triumphs will carry readers on a long but engrossing ride.’ - *Library Journal* (starred review)

‘...embracing and embraceable culturally far-reaching fiction.’ - *Booklist*

“[An] elegant aspirational novel of life in post-revolutionary Iran.... Richly imaginative ... Lyrical, humane, and hopeful.” - *Kirkus*

‘Charming and engrossing, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* is a vivid and evocative story about the places we love, the places we long for—and the places we can only imagine.’ - Karen Thompson Walker, *The Age of Miracles*

‘*A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* is pure magic: lyrical, captivating, funny and heartbreaking. Entering the world of the intriguing Saba Hafezi and her friends in a seaside village in northern Iran, I lost my heart. Powerful storytelling kept me riveted from the first page, but this is also a keenly intelligent investigation into the nature of narrative, the kaleidoscope of stories, dreams, and memories that define us, and how we create our own pasts and futures.’ - Jean Kwok, author of *Girl in Translation*

‘Filled with a colorful cast of characters and presented in a bewitching voice that mingles the rhythms of Eastern storytelling with modern Western prose, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* is a tale about memory and the importance of controlling one’s own fate.’ - *Goodreads*

For discussion

- ☞ One reviewer commented that ‘the overriding theme is storytelling in all its forms, and the fine line between truth and lies’ (*Library Journal*, starred review). Discuss. What other themes were apparent to you?
- ☞ Saba, the protagonist, has been taught that ‘fate is written in the blood.’ What do you think is meant by this?
- ☞ Dina Nayeri has used a complex storytelling structure – a combination of a straightforward narrative and a richly embroidered, often metaphorical, multilayered telling. Did you find this structure compelling?
- ☞ In many ways, the novel is a love letter to a place and time that no longer exists. Do you think you have finished the novel with a strong sense of what life was like in that small fishing village in 1980s Iran?
- ☞ Contrasting with Dina Nayeri’s warm and empathetic characters is the uncompromising ugliness of an emerging regime. What other novels have you read that also have an open political message?

Suggested Reading

The Taliban Cricket Club by Timeri Murari

Women of the Silk by Gail Tsukiyama

The One Hundred Year Old Man who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared by Jonas Jonasson

The Storyteller by Mario Vargas Llosa

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini