

Award-winning novelist Nemat makes long-list for CBC prize



Novelist Marina Nemat came to international acclaim with the publication of her novels, *Prisoner of Tehran* and *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed*.

The Iran-born Aurora resident has received numerous awards for her writing and advocacy on the world stage, but was recently on the receiving end of further homegrown recognition when her short story, *Red Shoe*, was long-listed for the 2023 CBC Nonfiction Prize.

"My mother stirs the stew simmering on the stovetop, and my eyes fix on the blue flames dancing under the cast iron pot," writes Nemat as the story opens. "I breathe in the scent of beef, tomato paste and dried Persian limes. Mama wipes the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. I wish my hands were like hers with long fingers and perfect nails. There are a few age spots on her skin, and they make me think of memories turning into tattoos, or henna patterns telling stories like a living book."

Nemat tells *The Auroran* she was inspired to pen *Red Shoe* in the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"At the time, one of my students was a journalist in Ukraine [who joined via Zoom] and I could sometimes hear stuff exploding in the background," says Nemat, who has encouraged her own students to enter the very contest in which she placed. "I think that triggered a memory and that memory was of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s."

Nemat, who spent time in jail during that era as a political prisoner, says that when she was released, "Tehran was being attacked by Scud missiles and I started thinking about that, which I hadn't done in ages. The memories came back to life and I thought, 'I should sit down and write it.'"

And so she did.

Nemat has written extensively about the personal trauma she endured over the course of that era and has spoken openly about the PTSD she lives with today.

While there is no cure for PTSD, she finds writing "allows me to move forward."

'It's not that the weight becomes lighter; I always look at my life through the lens of experiences, of life lived. I cannot change that and it will remain that way. I always compare it to a backpack filled with rocks; it's still on your back, but I find that when I write about it, I feel I am better equipped to carry the weight. There is a sense of satisfaction that comes with being able to put it on paper, to stare the dragon of past traumas straight in the eye and say, 'I know you, I see you, I acknowledge you, and you're difficult to deal with, but I am not scared of you.'

Red Shoe may not have made the short list in this particular CBC contest, but Nemat is confident it's not the end of the road for this particular narrative.

She hopes to publish a collection of short stories down the road, is considering the possibility of submitting Red Shoe to short story anthologies and doesn't rule out submitting it to the CBC again in the future.

In the meantime, she is working on another novel, this time focusing on the life and experiences of her grandmother, Zina. Entitled 'Mistress of the Persian Boarding House', the story follows Zina, her escape from the Russian Revolution, and building a life for herself after her husband, Esa, was murdered by thieves shortly after they settled in Iran.

'I have been working on a manuscript for years which is the story of my paternal grandmother who escaped from Russia in the 1917 revolution and ended up in Iran,' she explains. 'She lived a very difficult life but at the end of it she ended up doing quite well for herself. I have written that I had to fictionalize it because I don't have all the details, just snippets of what happened and what people have told me. I have been working on that and it is right now sitting with my publisher at Penguin Random House Canada, still waiting for them to tell me if they are going to publish it or not.'

'I am really looking forward to hearing from them and hopefully this will be good news and it will be published because it would mean the world to me. I will feel quite relieved if that book is published. My grandma is smiling in heaven right now.'

By Brock Weir
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