



THE REPUBLIC OF IMAGINATION

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Azar Nafisi (1948-) is an Iranian-American writer and professor of English literature. Born in Tehran, she came to the United States in 1997 and became a U.S. citizen in 2008. She is best known for her 2003 work, 'Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books', a modern masterwork that provided a rare inside glimpse into the lives of women in revolutionary Iran. 'Reading Lolita' also has been hailed as a celebration of the liberating power of literature. In 2014, Nafisi published 'Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books', from which the following passage is taken.

I object to the notion that passion and imagination are superfluous, that the humanities have no practical or pragmatic use or relevance and should thus be subservient to other, more “useful” fields. In fact, imaginative knowledge is pragmatic: it helps shape our attitude to the world and our place in it and influences our capacity to make decisions. Politicians, educators, businessmen – we are all affected by this vision, or its lack. If it is true that in a democracy, imagination and ideas are secondary, a sort of luxury, then what is the purpose of life in such a society? What will make its citizens loyal or concerned about their country’s well-being, and not just their own selfish pursuits? Imaginative knowledge is indispensable to the formation of a democratic society, its vision of itself and its future, playing an important role in the preservation of the democratic ideal.

The way we view fiction is a reflection of how we define ourselves as a nation. Works of the imagination are canaries in the coal mine, the measure by which we can evaluate the health of the rest of society. And yet I was not unaware that our current state of affairs was partly due to the fact that many of our dreams had been fulfilled. America is far more inclusive now than it was even four decades ago, when I was a university student. Technology has opened many different vistas; it has connected us to the rest of the world in unimaginable ways and created possibilities for education and knowledge on a vast scale.

Our current crisis is, in some respects, the outcome of an inherent contradiction at the heart of American democracy, one that Tocqueville so brilliantly anticipated. America’s desire for newness and its complete rejection of ties and traditions lead both to great innovations – a necessary precondition for equality and wealth – and to conformity and complacency, a materialism that invites a complete withdrawal from public and civic spheres and disdain for thought and reflection. This makes it all the more urgent, in this time of transition, to ask new questions, to define not just who we are but who we want to be.