



# Wasafiri

International Contemporary Writing

## An interview with Shiva Rahbaran



### An interview with Shiva Rahbaran – Winner of the Wasafiri New Writing Prize for Life Writing

**Shiva Rahbaran** was born in Tehran. She was eight years old when the last Persian monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, left Iran giving way to the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Together with her family she left Iran for Germany in 1984, where she studied literature and political science at the Heinrich-Heine-University Dusseldorf. She continued her studies at Oxford University, where she obtained her doctoral degree (DPhil) in English literature. Having lived in Munich and Zurich for twelve years, she moved to London in 2013 where she is currently living with her family. Her latest project is a novel about the life of an Iranian family during the Islamic Revolution.

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#### Tell us about how you got into writing?

In Iran, where I grew up, story-telling is a central part of our culture. I always liked to listen to stories and to read stories – from myths and fairy tales to life writing and novels. I always felt that stories told me more about reality than news or reports. Whereas news gave me the facts of life, novels provided the truth about life; whereas news informed, novels gave the reader knowledge. I realized quite early on – after having left Iran over thirty years ago – that people in the West (we moved to Germany from Tehran in 1984) were quite fascinated by whatever news came from Iran or the Middle East, but could hardly relate to our experience in/and/out of that region. We had come here with our stories, but nobody knew them, so we felt invisible. And we wanted to be known. What makes people human are their stories.

#### What was the inspiration for your winning competition entry?

My mother's youngest sister was a political prisoner a couple of years after the 1979 revolution in Iran. She was executed at the age of eighteen. I felt very close to her – she was like an older sister. Her being ripped out of our lives so savagely is a central part of my family's story. Over the years I became fascinated with the idea that telling and re-telling her story has been an important way for my family to deal with this tragedy.

**How has winning the prize changed your approach to writing or your plans?**

The execution of young, political prisoners after the 1979 revolution is part of the narrative of many Iranian families. Because of that, I expect that many Iranian readers both in Iran and in diaspora can easily relate to this piece. However, since such a story could not be published in Iran under the current regime, the challenge for me was whether I could depict our story in a way that also a western audience – not familiar with the particularities of the Iranian context – could appreciate it. Winning this prize has shown me that these kinds of stories can work with a non-Iranian audience, which gives me confidence to continue on this route.

**What are you working on right now?**

I am currently working on two pieces. I am expanding *Massoumeh: The Life of an Iranian Family in Times of Revolution* into a book and I am also writing a novel about an Iranian woman living abroad trying to come to grips with the fact that there will be no end to her exile.

**What advice do you have for people entering next year?**

All I can say from my own experience (although it might sound a bit like a cliché) is that stories tend to work only if their subject is deeply felt by the author. Stories have to be authentic – particularly when they are fictional.

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