

# Funny in Farsi

## A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America

by Firoozeh Dumas

Random House Trade Paperbacks

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*New York Times* Bestseller

Winner, National Council for the Social Studies Spirit of America Award

Finalist, PEN Center USA Award for Creative Nonfiction

Finalist, Audie Award for Biography/Memoir

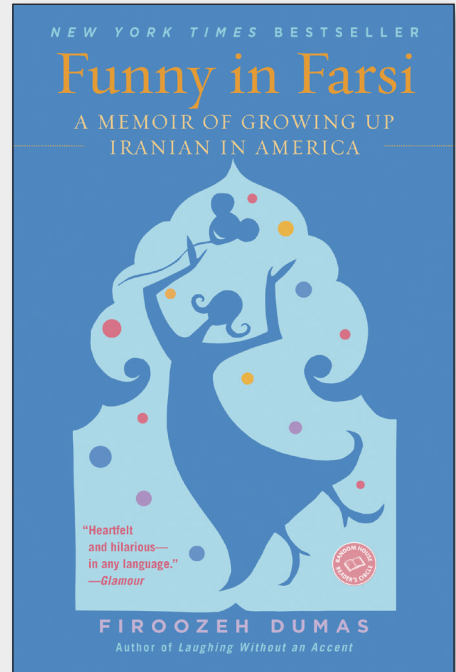
Finalist, Thurber Prize for American Humor

### NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Thank you for choosing *Funny in Farsi* for your classroom. Since its publication in 2003, educators have embraced this enchanting book, always remarking on its timeliness, a comment that somehow becomes truer every year. This teacher's guide has been created after almost twenty years of feedback from educators around the world. Its goal is to provide a starting point for conversations and written assignments.

A student once asked, "Do books have to be depressing to be on school reading lists?" A quick glance at any school reading list validates this question. Your students will initially want to read *Funny in Farsi* simply because it's funny. The fact that it involves people from a part of the world not currently associated with humor or joy instantly challenges our notion of stereotypes, readily providing the first topic of conversation. But that is just the beginning. There is a whole other layer of discussions and information beneath the surface of these deceptively simple stories.

*Funny in Farsi* is intended for middle school, high school, and university students and is currently used in English, Social Studies, Creative Writing, History, World Studies, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, Middle Eastern Studies, ESL/ELL, and Ethnic Studies classes, as well as in Common Reads and Summer Reads. It is an excellent choice for reading out loud in classrooms, especially for reluctant readers. Educators find *Funny in Farsi* easy to use because students of all backgrounds willingly read it and see themselves and their families in the stories. Even though *Funny in Farsi* chronicles the adventures of an Iranian immigrant in America, it is the story of an outsider and her family, trying to make sense of the



## NOTE TO THE TEACHER (CONTINUED)

world. And who among us has not felt like an outsider trying to figure out life's answers? You may be surprised by how much your students relate to Firoozeh and her family. It might be some students' first experience of shared humanity, their first experience of connectivity with the other.

The real magic, however, happens after your students finish the book. Reading these stories sparks a desire, among students of all ages, to share a first-person story. Your students will realize, perhaps for the first time, that everyone has a story to tell and everyone's story counts. This opens the door for writing projects or oral storytelling. Many creative classroom projects have sprung up organically around the sharing of these first-person stories.

The following questions are merely guides to beginning conversations. Discussions can be had at basic, intermediate, or advanced levels. Where and how deep the conversations go depends entirely on the ability of the students.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Firoozeh wrote this book? What is the central theme? Are there recurring motifs, and if so what are they? Discuss the role of wordplay in the chapter titles. Why might the author have chosen to include references to songs in some of these titles?
2. What is the difference between a memoir and an autobiography? *Funny in Farsi* is like a photo album, each story a snapshot of the author's life. Why do you think she chose the particular stories? Which stories from your life would you choose if you were to write a memoir?
3. Rewrite one of Firoozeh's stories without using humor. How is it different? In what specific ways does humor enhance the story?
4. Firoozeh and her family struggled to understand American comedy shows on television. Does humor translate from one language to another, from one culture to another? Are there universal themes to humor? Give an example of something that is funny in one country but not in another.
5. Give examples of ironic, self-deprecating, and anecdotal humor found in Firoozeh's stories. Firoozeh's humor is gentle, but in books, television, and social media, humor is often used as a mask for mean and hurtful comments. Discuss your favorite type of humor and describe why it's funny. Have you ever regretted laughing at a mean comment? In what way can you encourage or discourage certain types of humor?
6. Firoozeh is embarrassed to be with her mother at school. Is being embarrassed about one's parents a universal experience? Why or why not?
7. English is a confusing language. Discuss the phrases that might confuse non-native speakers. Every language has expressions that make no sense if translated literally into another language. Give an example. There are words such as wabi-sabi, duende, or schadenfreude that exist in one language only and yet convey universal concepts. Can you name other words like this?
8. Firoozeh writes about being lost at Disneyland. Have you ever been lost? Describe what happened and how you felt.
9. How and what we eat differs from culture to culture and from family to family. What is in your pantry? What might we find in the pantry of a Japanese family? Or a Kenyan or Swedish or Nicaraguan family? Does your family eat together? What role does food play in your culture? Discuss your family's food traditions. Discuss the different approaches towards meal preparation in Firoozeh's life in Abadan and in Whittier. Do you eat locally or is your food imported? If so, from

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
(CONTINUED)

- where? Is what we eat a political act? Some say it is a form of voting. How does what we eat affect the world?
10. The America Firoozeh describes in the early 1970s is vastly different from America fifty years later. How would her experience be different if she had immigrated in 2020?
  11. Firoozeh's French husband, Francois, had a very different experience as in immigrant in America. Do you make assumptions about people based on their names or countries of origin? What role does the evening news play in creating images of other countries? What role does Hollywood play? What is the image of America, or your native country, as conveyed by the evening news? Tell us something positive about your country or hometown that we would never see on the news.
  12. Firoozeh's experience at sleepaway camp did not match the description in the brochure. Have you ever gone to camp? If so, was it a positive or negative experience?
  13. For many years, Vietnam was an unimaginable vacation destination for Americans. Today, it is a popular and beloved choice. Do you think Iran will ever be a popular vacation destination for Americans? If so, which sites might be popular?
  14. In sixth grade, Firoozeh changed her first name to simplify her life. This is very common among immigrants. Do you know someone who changed his or her name? How might having a difficult foreign name negatively impact one's life? How might it have a positive impact?
  15. Discuss this quote from Firoozeh's father, Kazem: "It's not what we eat or don't eat that makes us good people; it's how we treat one another. As you grow older, you'll find that people of every religion think they're the best, but that's not true. There are good and bad people in every religion. Just because someone is Muslim, Jewish, or Christian doesn't mean a thing. You have to look and see what's in their heart. That's the only thing that matters, and that's the only detail God cares about."
  16. How did Kazem's experience as a Fulbright Scholar shape his image of America? What role does education play in the attainment of the American dream, and is it still possible for everyone? Discuss why or why not.
  17. What does the Persian New Year, Nowruz, symbolize and how is it celebrated? Are there similar traditions in other countries? How does your family celebrate the New Year?
  18. Kazem believes that every eligible citizen in a democracy should vote. How do we encourage voting? Should voting be mandatory? What tactics have been used to prevent citizens from voting? Discuss a country where citizens are currently risking their lives for the right to vote. Discuss the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, women's suffrage, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in America.
  19. Discuss this quote: "He [Kazem] only said how sad it was that people so easily hate an entire population simply because of the actions of a few. And what a waste it is to hate, he always said. What a waste."
  20. During the hostage crisis, many Iranians in America felt targeted. In 2020, Iranians in America once again felt hostility directed towards them. Is it possible to learn from history or is every generation doomed to repeat the same mistakes? Why or why not? Why is there a global rise in antisemitism, despite evidence of its unimaginable atrocities? How can we combat the spread of hatred in our schools, our community, and our country today? How can we effectively learn from history?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
(CONTINUED)

21. In the years since the Iranian revolution, Iranian immigrants have made many contributions to America. Discuss the contributions of African Americans and Jewish immigrants to music, arts, and sciences. Discuss the role of Latin immigrants in farming in America. Look up the phrase “No Irish Need Apply” and discuss. What have Chinese, Hmong, Japanese, and German immigrants contributed to America? What is the condition of Native Americans today? Where is your family from?
22. What will you title your memoir? Explain why.

**ALSO BY FIROOZEH DUMAS**

*Laughing Without an Accent*  
New York Times Bestseller

*It Ain't So Awful, Falafel* (Historical Fiction for Grades 4–9)  
2016 *Time* Magazine Top 10 YA and Children's Books  
2017 California Library Association's John and Patricia Beatty Award  
2017 New-York Historical Society Children's History Book Prize  
2017 Sunshine State Young Reader Award  
Current Finalist for the California Young Reader Medal

**OTHER WORKS OF INTEREST**

*Taking Cover: One Girl's Story of Growing Up During the Iranian Revolution*,  
Nioucha Homayoonfar

*All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*,  
Stephen Kinzer

*Like a Love Story*, Abdi Nazemian

**ABOUT THIS  
GUIDE'S WRITER**

FIROOZEH DUMAS was born in Abadan, Iran, and moved to California at the age of seven. She is the author of three books, one screenplay, a one-woman show, and many articles for magazines and newspapers, including the *New York Times*. You may have heard Firoozeh on National Public Radio.

When not writing, Firoozeh is active on the lecture circuit. Since 2003, she has spoken at hundreds of schools, conferences, and festivals. She believes that everyone has a story to tell and that everyone's story counts.



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