

A Spoonful of Humor Gets the Pages Turning

by Firoozeh Dumas

When *Funny in Farsi* was published in the summer of 2003, I started receiving lots of emails from readers. The emails had a common theme: “Your family is just like my family!” followed by “But ‘I’m Mexican’, ‘Chinese’ or ‘third generation American from Minnesota.’” I was thrilled to see that the theme of my book, shared humanity, was reaching such a diverse audience.

Then I started receiving emails from an entirely different group—educators—who told me that *Funny in Farsi* was a great classroom tool, particularly with “reluctant readers.” I had never heard that expression and I didn’t know what it meant. So when the term “reluctant reader” entered my life, I was intrigued.

As a kid, I was as an eager reader, one of those people who always checked out the maximum number of books allowed at the public library. In fact, books saved my life. When I was growing up, my family moved constantly. By 6th grade, I had attended eight different schools. The only constant in my life was the love of reading. I often felt that I had more in common with the characters in books than anyone I actually knew. And as long as I had a good book to read, I never felt alone. So I couldn’t understand how anyone could be reluctant to read when there are so many great books out there. What does the phrase even mean? Little did I know that the biggest clue would come from my own son.

When my son entered sixth grade, he came home from school one day and asked me if books have to be depressing to be on school reading lists. I looked at the list handed to him that day. It was certainly an impressive compilation, but every single book was, indeed, depressing. That year, my son, who loves to read, barely

made it through the chosen books. I was amazed that a kid who, every single night, has to be told repeatedly to turn off the lights and stop reading, could be given a series of books that did not interest him at all. All of a sudden I realized that my son had become, with that particular reading list, a reluctant reader. A light bulb went off in my head: If a kid who every year for his birthday asks for gift certificates to bookstores can become a reluctant reader, then the opposite must be true. There must be a way to turn reluctant readers into avid ones.

The emails from educators continued. A common theme emerged. "Every one of my students loved reading your stories, even the ones who normally refuse to read." I heard from teachers in inner city schools; affluent private schools; a school in California for teenage mothers; a high school on an Indian reservation; and junior high, high schools and colleges from California to New York. The students wrote to me themselves telling me how much they laughed at my stories and how much they related to my experiences. Who, after all, has not been an outsider? It's not an experience limited to Iranian immigrants. If you've gone through puberty, you've experienced being an outsider.

Soon I started receiving invitations to speak in schools and educational conferences. I love the opportunity to meet the students firsthand, especially the reluctant readers. Oddly enough, they often are the most enthusiastic group because for many of them, *Funny in Farsi* is the first book they ever enjoyed. Although as a writer, that is a big compliment, as a reader, it makes me sad. I always tell the students to keep looking for books that they love and I assure them that there are many.

In the last chapter of my book, I say that everyone has a story and everyone's story counts. Teachers often tell me that after reading my book, students often want to write their own story. Yes, these are the same students who were reluctant to read and now they want to write. I often receive stacks of these stories.

In my book, I write, among other things, about being seven years old and becoming lost at Disneyland. I write about my odd relatives, about wanting to go to college, especially since my mother never graduated from high school. I write about kids making fun of my nose and I write about outsmarting the kids who always wanted me to teach them “bad words in my language.” I have received stories from students about their experiences being lost somewhere, about their disappointments and dreams, about their quirky families. We all have embarrassing relatives and how fun it is to write about them and describe them in words and bring them to life on a printed page! Boy, do students love writing about things that interest them. And they should. After all, one does not have to be English and dead to be a writer. I can’t explain how thrilling it is to read a story written by a student who claims, “I never like to read or write but I want to tell you a story.” After all, isn’t that what reading and writing are all about, exchanging stories?

I firmly believe that being a reluctant reader is a temporary state. It reminds of people who claim they don’t like Chinese food. “But have you tried every Chinese dish there is?” I ask them. Of course they haven’t but the two they did try, did not appeal to them. I tell teachers with reluctant readers, “Read the story about my first name, Firoozeh, to your class out loud. It’s the chapter entitled “The F-word.” If they don’t want to read the rest of book, I will take you all out for Chinese food.

For educators, the hard part is finding stories that a diverse group of students want to hear. Luckily, most students love any book that makes them laugh; there are not too many on their reading lists either. Humor is very powerful. It allows me, the writer, to discuss a wide variety of topics in a non-threatening, accessible manner. Remember Mary Poppins singing about “a spoonful of sugar making the medicine go down”? One can easily argue that humor has the same effect. Readers may not be enthusiastic if told to read a book about an immigrant family, but tell them it’s funny, and see what happens.

At the request of educators, I wrote a discussion guide that can be used with *Funny in Farsi*. It contains questions for each of the 27 stories in the book, plus general questions. It can be downloaded from www.firoozehdumas.com.

Teachers tell me that every topic they care to discuss, be it diversity, kindness, plastic surgery or humor, is in the book. *Funny in Farsi* is currently on the California Recommended Reading List for grades 6-12 and is being considered for other states' reading lists. Schools throughout the US are also using it for All School Reads projects, where every student reads the book and various discussions and activities are borne from it. Educators tell me that that finally, instead of talking about the same television show, students are talking about the same book.

Can the love of reading be instilled with just one book? I don't know but I do know that we have to begin somewhere.

About the Author

Firoozeh Dumas was born in Abadan, Iran and moved to Whittier, California at the age of seven. After a two-year stay, she and her family moved back to Iran and lived in Ahvaz and Tehran. Two years later, they moved back to Whittier, then to Newport Beach. Firoozeh then attended UC Berkeley where she met and married a Frenchman. Firoozeh grew up listening to her father, a former Fulbright Scholar, recount the many colorful stories of his life. In 2001, Firoozeh decided to write her stories as a gift for her two children. Random House published these stories in 2003. *Funny in Farsi* was on the *SF Chronicle* and *LA Times* bestseller lists and was a finalist for the PEN/USA award in 2004 and a finalist in 2005 for an Audie Award for best audio book. She was also a finalist for the prestigious Thurber Prize for American Humor, the first Middle Eastern woman ever to receive this honor. *Funny in Farsi* is now on the California Recommended Reading List and is used in many junior high, high schools and universities.

EXCERPT FROM FUNNY IN FARSI

When I was seven, my parents, my fourteen-year-old brother, Farshid, and I moved from Abadan, Iran, to Whittier, California. Farid, the older of my two brothers, had been sent to Philadelphia the year before to attend high school. Like most Iranian youths, he had always dreamed of attending college abroad and, despite my mother's tears, had left us to live with my uncle and his American wife. I, too, had been sad at Farid's departure, but my sorrow soon faded-not coincidentally, with the receipt of a package from him. Suddenly, having my brother on a different continent seemed like a small price to pay for owning a Barbie complete with a carrying case and four outfits, including the rain gear and mini umbrella.

Our move to Whittier was temporary. My father, Kazem, an engineer with the National Iranian Oil Company, had been assigned to consult for an American firm for about two years. Having spent several years in Texas and California as a graduate student, my father often spoke about America with the eloquence and wonder normally reserved for a first love. To him, America was a place where anyone, no matter how humble his background, could become an important person. It was a kind and orderly nation full of clean bathrooms, a land where traffic laws were obeyed and where whales jumped through hoops. It was the Promised Land. For me, it was where I could buy more outfits for Barbie.

We arrived in Whittier shortly after the start of second grade; my father enrolled me in Leffingwell Elementary School. To facilitate my adjustment, the principal arranged for us to meet my new teacher, Mrs. Sandberg, a few days before I started school. Since my mother and I did not speak English, the meeting consisted of a dialogue between my father and Mrs. Sandberg. My father carefully explained that I had attended a prestigious kindergarten where all the children were taught English. Eager to impress Mrs. Sandberg, he asked me to

demonstrate my knowledge of the English language. I stood up straight and proudly recited all that I knew: “White, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green.”

The following Monday, my father drove my mother and me to school. He had decided that it would be a good idea for my mother to attend school with me for a few weeks. I could not understand why two people not speaking English would be better than one, but I was seven, and my opinion didn’t matter much.

Excerpted from *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas Copyright © 2003 by Firoozeh Dumas. Excerpted by permission of Random House Trade Paperbacks, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.

Funny in Farsi

A Memoir of Growing Up

Iranian in America

Written by Firoozeh Dumas

Random House TP, 978-0-8129-6837-8

224 pages, \$12.95