

# (Not So) Funny in Farsi

by Firoozeh Dumas

For the past year and a half, the Persian edition of my memoirs, *Funny in Farsi*, has been one of the top-selling books in Iran. If a book sells 2,000 copies there, it's considered a bestseller. In its first year, my book sold over 30,000 copies. The government is not happy.

Like all books published in Iran, *Funny in Farsi* had to receive permission from the censor's office. Iran is an Islamic theocracy, and topics like sex, political satire, or anything offensive to Muslims must be avoided in print. Beyond that, there are no rules. Since there are no written censorship guidelines, every book is at the mercy of the individual censor.



My manuscript was processed and returned after only six months, which was a quick turnaround. A translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* has been with the censor's office for seventeen years!

Anyone who has read *Funny in Farsi* knows that it is a humorous and gentle memoir about shared humanity and the love of family. It is currently on the reading list of many junior high, high schools and colleges in the United States; Touchstone Studios has optioned it for a sit-com. It would be difficult to find anything offensive in the book, but the Iranian government has managed to do so.

I consider the soul of my book to be a chapter entitled, "The Ham Amendment." In that chapter, my father, a Muslim who developed a taste for ham as a Fulbright Scholar in Texas, tells me that it doesn't matter what we eat, it's how we treat our fellow man that matters. He also says that there are good and bad people in every religion, and that each person must be judged individually, not by his or her religion.

The Iranian government found my father's words so scandalous that my publisher was forced to remove that entire chapter. He had no choice but to comply. After a few other minor changes, my book was finally published.

That should have been the end of the government's involvement with my book, but it wasn't.

The book was an instant hit in Iran and quickly went through multiple printings. Everyone was talking about the book about the Iranian family who moves to the United States and has all sorts of adventures in the land of freeways, clean bathrooms and huge supermarkets. I received endless emails from readers in Iran telling me that my life is their dream.

After the third printing, government employees came to my publisher demanding proof that he had received permission from the censor's bureau. My publisher showed the official permission certificate. My book had gone to the censor's office at the beginning of President Ahmadinejad's term, at a time when the government was more lenient. One would think there was nothing the government employees could do once the book was cleared by the censor, but one would be wrong. . . .

The government controls the paper supplies in Iran and, from time to time, they claim there is not enough paper for my book. Between printings, there is occasionally a gap during which my book is available only on the black market. This has, of course, made it even more popular.

Most recently, a news website run by the government featured a long article condemning me and my book. My translator in Iran no longer wants to work with me. He, after all, lives in Iran. My publisher is not sure that my next book, *Laughing Without an Accent*, will receive permission from the censor's bureau. This makes me very sad. Judging from the emails from Iran readers, I know that my stories have brought much needed levity and laughter to a population suffering under restrictions unimaginable in the West. Who would have thought that a tale of love and family—humor could be so scandalous? ■

#### About the Writer

*FIROOZEH DUMAS* was born in Abadan, Iran and moved to the United States at age seven. Aside from writing books, Firoozeh travels the country reminding everyone that our commonalities far outweigh our differences, and does so with humor. She and her French husband are raising their three American-born children in Northern California, where they regularly enjoy dim sum.



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A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America  
by Firoozeh Dumas  
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