

When Love Divides

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

Jumping Over Fire, by Nahid Rachlin. City Lights Books, 2005.

Surely one reason we read fiction is to be invited into a world we don't know and to have that world made comprehensible. Nahid Rachlin, who lives in New York, has dramatized her native Iran for over 20 years. At a time when Americans are again encouraged to vilify Iran, it's a relief to find a novelist who can portray the recent decades of that country in its complexity. She has enriched the country of her birth further still with the presence of foreign-born or half-American characters, for the clash of cultures emerges as a recurring theme.

Besides being "page-turners," Rachlin's novels render, in abundance, the beauty and sensuousness of Persian culture. We absorb the blue tiles and carpeted rooms, inner courtyards sheltered by palm and tamarind trees, platters of figs and fruit and nuts that accompany the rituals of hospitality, cries of street vendors offering "the freshest chives," the architecture and fabled miniature paintings and love of poetry. Thrilled children jump over Norooz fires (at New Years), and a beloved grandmother inadvertently stains the pages of her Koran with turmeric and saffron (*Married to a Stranger*). Nor does Rachlin skirt the ugly. Oil towns reek of petroleum and polluted water. Foreigners live separate, privileged lives. Fundamentalism looms, accompanied by the politics of fear, blackmail, violence and headscarves.

In *Jumping Over Fire*, her fifth fiction book, the cultural clash is especially prominent. Nora, the young narrator, is the child of a bi-cultural family. Nora is fair, favoring her American mother, while older brother Jahan takes after their Iranian father. In an exquisitely tender opening, Rachlin narrates the children's early childhood. "In

another picture," Nora tells us, "we are embracing so tightly that again we look like two parts of the same person." They are like twins, and inseparable. A beloved housekeeper raises the children, not their parents. "So much love flowed between Maman and Baba that little of it ever seemed to come in my or Jahan's direction." These parents are self-indulgent and seldom home, which throws the youngsters together for comfort and support. In this same well-crafted chapter, the children open a sealed file, revealing Jahan's adoption papers. Why hadn't Maman and Baba told them? The discovery not only makes Jahan more introspective, it is the catalyst to an illicit love between Nora and Jahan that will shape their lives, and the novel.

The first section of the story remains in Iran, where we savor the family's comfortable life under the Shah, in the small oil town Masjid-e-Suleiman. When they spend a summer with Baba's traditional and observant relatives, Jahan feels at home. Nora and her unreligious mother do not. Yet it is here that Nora and Jahan, now teenagers, reach out physically to each other, their lovemaking candidly observed.

Everything around us brimmed with sensuality. Bees sucked at the jasmine blossoms that grew wildly everywhere, a male cat chased a female cat, a bird mounted another bird. Small green grapes hung from a tree. Patches of sunlight dappled the ground, trembled on the tree branches.

Jahan lay down and I next to him, protected from view by the hills. We listened to the sounds of insects, birds, and the flowing water. . . .

Afterward the two young people agree never to tell, and they never do.

As the political situation worsens, the parents realize they must leave the country. The chaos surrounding their flight is palpable. Once settled in Long Island, Nora feels freed, except for Baba's rules. Her mother, however, is exhausted by work and misses her life of leisure. Her father can't find a job, and Jahan is as "stifled" in the United States as Nora was in Iran. Jahan prefers Farsi and misses Persian architecture and art, which have become his great

passion. In other novels as well, Rachlin portrays the discomfort of Iranian men in America, a startling reversal of her women narrators' experiences in Iran. Indeed her men often seem constricted. The family arrives shortly before the Iran hostage crisis, and the men are subjected to abuse. The experience mirrors the anti-Americanism the family left behind. Later, while Nora experiments with boys and school, homesick Jahan discovers Islam. Throughout, the siblings walk on tenterhooks, constantly aware of their complete devotion yet vowing not to touch.

It is in this middle, American section that the novel falters. Perhaps the ambition of *Jumping Over Fire* works against it. Years and experiences fly by with a jarring lack of transition. Explanatory passages abound. In some scenes action is summarized, flattening the drama. Nora's first sexual encounter with a shallow college boy is so rushed, we yearn for a return to Iran where the storytelling feels sturdier. Later, Nora's long relationship with the older Carlo leaves us impatient, even as we realize it is Nora's commitment to Jahan that makes her so undecided. It is Carlo, however, who startles Nora with his own view of Jahan's parentage.

Nora's new life is the focus of the American section, but Jahan casts a long and significant shadow. He is "lost" in America, even from his beloved sister. In desperation, he asks Nora to run away with him and marry, but she cannot. When he returns to Iran surreptitiously, the family is distraught. He wants to fight for his country against Iraq. No word comes for several years until Baba's brother forwards a postcard from Jahan. On this slim evidence, Nora travels to Iran to search for him. The final segment of the novel moves to Shiraz, Jahan's presumed location and the location of the orphanage where he started his life. Has he found his birth mother? Is he even alive? These poignant scenes read like the climax to a mystery, and it would be unfair to say more.

What can be said is that Jahan is the great triumph of *Jumping Over Fire*. He is deep and sympathetic. Although we know him only through Nora, we feel we've been given a character worth knowing, drawn with compassion and integrity.