

The Rest of the Story –Local author experiences a different side of Iran

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My plane touched down in Tehran during the week last February when newspaper headlines warned, “Iran plans for a possible attack,” in reference to threats by the U.S. and Israel of air strikes on Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities.

My arrival coincided with the 6.5-magnitude earthquake that shook Kerman Province, killing 600 people in and around the city of Zarand. It leveled several villages not far from Bam, the national heritage site that suffered the loss of roughly 30,000 lives from an earthquake in December 2003.

I was traveling to Bam to speak at Iran’s first International Children’s Book Festival because I have written a young-adult novel about 19th-century Persian nomads, “Anahita’s Woven Riddle,” which will be published next year.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance chose Kerman Province as the site for the festival to help raise awareness of the ongoing needs of Bam, to bring revenue to this city where tourism has dropped markedly since the earthquake destroyed the ancient citadel, and to foster a brighter future for their youth.

I met no Westerners on my plane between Istanbul and Tehran, except for a German gentleman. My blondish hair, blue eyes and my accent must have stood out because he asked me, “Are you American? Aren’t you afraid to go to Iran now? Are you alone?”

His question was echoed by people with whom I spoke about my trip before leaving the U.S., as well as by those in Istanbul en route, most of whom held images of Iran painted with unrest: martyrs with bombs in backpacks, and streets full of bloodied, self-flagellating young men.

Ironically, I recall thinking that what frightened me most was the possibility that my own government would launch an airstrike and that I might be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I had been extended an invitation to a land with which I have long since bonded – one whose history and culture I had spent nearly 10 years researching and contemplating for my novel.

I had been invited to visit a nation of people whom I felt I could trust, based on friendships I have made with Iranians at home, on the friendly and professional e-mails I shared with editors and translators in Iran before going, and on previous experiences in the Middle East that left me believing that the world is a far friendlier place than the Bush administration and its notion of “evil axis” would have me believe.

The snow-capped mountains of the southern Zagros mountain range flanked our minibus as we hurled south toward Bam from the city of Kerman in southeastern Iran. To the east, brown escarpments and white peaks served as a shimmering backdrop for the blue-green minaret which rose above the mosque and tomb of Shah Nematollah Vali, a beloved sufi who settled in the town of Mahan. The barren landscape in this region reminded me of Utah, only its sand is more brown than red and the air a bit dryer.

Lyrics by Iraj Bastami, a popular national singer who was killed in the 2003 quake, filled the bus. The soft drumming and the somewhat mournful, soul-searching melody conjured images of the camel trains that used to travel this lonely stretch of the ancient Silk Route.

Today the road is traversed by buses, mostly green-and-orange trucks, and often-battered beige-and-white Paykan cars. Gas guzzlers, though

compact, their colors were chosen in the interest of modesty by the Iranian government after the 1979 revolution.

Sharing the same tarmac with us were opium and heroin smugglers (transporting some 3,600 tons per year from Afghanistan, up from 165 or so tons before 2001). At two checkpoints, the highway patrol was busy searching dozens of cars per hour.

These motorists played a daring game of highway leapfrog. We passed the occasional car wreck or full-sized bus crunched to half its size. I stopped watching after the first handful of near-misses that involved the fate of our own vehicle.

We were invited by the local Ministry of Culture on an excursion to Bam before the book festival began, and I was happy because I had hoped to go there. I was deeply affected by the news of the 2003 quake and donated the advance money for my novel to the rescue efforts.

Because my story is about an Afshar rug weaver – and Afshar nomads still migrate in this region – I felt a kind of empathy for these people. At the time of the quake, donating money was one way I could combat my feelings of total uselessness from halfway around the world.

While in Bam, I had hoped to meet with people who ran handicraft enterprises for women to discuss the possibility of donating my future book royalties to a project such as cloth embroidering (patteh) or carpet weaving. (My mission would be realized in a roundabout but fruitful way when I later met a woman who teaches at a university in Kerman and runs a development project for 500 of the most destitute single mothers in Bam.)

The sand alongside the highway gave way to an oasis of date palms in the distance. Piles of rubble, once houses outside of Bam, came into view. Men still sifted through the debris for belongings – or, from what I gathered, to continue separating stone from mud bricks and wood, and in some cases, rebar from steel. I felt overwhelmed as the magnitude of the

destruction registered before my eyes. Fifteen months after the quake, this area looked like it was hit just yesterday.

We drove over a newly constructed bridge as we entered the modern city of Bam. More rubble lay everywhere. The scene reminded me of how snow is removed at home – pushed aside or heaped in front of shop fronts – only Bam’s piles wouldn’t melt into groundwater and trickle away. It would take years for the mud bricks to crumble or erode from the wind and blow away as sand.

Beside the stack of stones that had once been his store, a fruit merchant set up a makeshift stand with branches and a green tarp to protect him from the sun. The bank beside it was a skeleton of steel. Most stores were missing their second floors. A window frame stood erect with no walls. Sprinkles of rocks still sat on top of storefront awnings, where they had fallen more than a year ago.

I was told that the wealthy moved out, leaving the poor to rebuild. Some people still are living in the canvas, completely dust-blown, Red Crescent tents that were given out just days after the quake. Others own a combination of tents and corrugated metal sheds. A handful were draped with carpets or have textile door flaps and resemble rectangular nomad’s yurts from an earlier century. Only the plastic tarps covering the homes and the family car parked beside them give away their modernity.

Often these dwellings are shaded beneath a date palm or two. As each tree is worth about \$500 to \$1,000, families are reluctant to relocate.

Bam was an important stop along the Silk Route, known for its date palms, cotton and textiles. Its name is believed to have been derived from Bahman, one of the heroes of the “Shahnameh,” compiled by Ferdowsi, considered the greatest Persian epic poet.

Our first stop in Bam was the ancient citadel of brown sand. The damage done to this largest mud-brick and clay complex in the world

was disheartening. Roughly half of the buildings, watchtowers and ramparts were still standing.

I picked up an unearthed pottery shard and a green stone. Holding them, I imagined this place in its former glory. I also tried to fathom the strength of the natural forces that caused its demise in just seconds, how precariously we tread upon this earth.

We spoke briefly with an archaeologist and restorer in Bam who said that one positive thing about the earthquake was that it unearthed artifacts which they previously were not permitted to dig. They have since discovered that the site is older than 2,000 years, as originally thought. I also learned that this ancient city was inhabited up until 60 years ago. Electric switches visible on some walls attested to this.

It is remarkable that despite the tragedy of the earthquake, the Iranian people's love for literature and the arts, and their respect for children, compelled them to hold a children's book festival amid this immense devastation.

After the citadel we visited the newly constructed, corrugated metal warehouse where the event in Bam would be held. It stood in a bend in the road beside a grove of date palms, many of which had shaken to the ground in the earthquake. A woman wound in a black chador smiled at me as she passed. She held a silver tray propped on her right shoulder on which she had stacked nan – large, round pieces of flat bread.

The strong March sun penetrated my head scarf, seeping into the pores on my face and hands, the only part of my skin that I was allowed to expose. I felt uncomfortably warm in my knee-length black coat and wondered how this woman with the bread dealt with the heat of the summer dressed in all of her black cloth. (I had noticed that in the cities that many women did not wear the chador, but more Western-style clothing and loosely fitting head scarfs.)

In a few days this street would be filled with families and children

engaged in perusing books, storytelling and street painting. Publishers would give 10,000 books to local schools and libraries, and to the children who would attend, and 40,000 books to the province at large. During this festival they would inaugurate the first children's library in Kerman Province.

Television, radio and newspaper reporters from Tehran, Isfahan and Kerman covered the event. At the time of the festival, my novel set in Iran was unpublished, but it did not seem to matter. The fact that I had written a book to share with the world about the richness of Iranian culture spoke volumes to them, and they reciprocated through unparalleled generosity and warmth.

“You are our guest,” I heard repeatedly every time I tried to pay for something such as a bottle of water, or extra camera batteries – never mind my new airline ticket home bought by the Ministry of Culture so that I could stay to enjoy four more days of their festival.

After a week of drinking tea in ancient bathhouses, visiting cozy dens beneath pedestrian bridges where people gathered to smoke hookahs, and climbing many stories into the sky up one of the blue-tiled minarets of Masjid-i Imam in Isfahan, I met with Iran's most revered authors, illustrators, translators, publishers, critics, children's literature scholars, filmmakers and young readers.

Banners depicting books, children and elephants flew in the roundabout near the government building which hosted the children's book conference in the city of Kerman. Balloons lined the sidewalks along with teachers and droves of students. Families by the thousands strolled among the acre-wide square that brimmed with books from 110 publishers.

Except for the impressive showing of men who attended this conference – at least half – I found that the landscape of children's literature in Iran shared much in common with that of ours at home.

Speakers voiced concerns that reading was taking second place to television, video games and the Internet. They examined tough social problems such as sexual relationships, marriage, divorce and child abuse and how these topics should be dealt with in children's literature. They spoke about the necessity of reading, particularly translations of foreign literature in order to reach out to the world.

I found the people friendly, some more shy than others and clearly not used to having an American in their midst. Many, after asking me where I was from, smiled and said, "Welcome." One woman wrapped in black with whom I initiated a conversation in a tinsmith's booth thanked America for our help during the rescue efforts of the Bam earthquake.

Many also asked me, "What do you think of Mr. Bush?" Children and adults alike wanted to know if I thought "he" would bomb or invade Iran. One adult confided that she had been having nightmares about this for two years.

As I looked into those Iranian children's eyes, and saw those of my own children, I felt sad, angry and embarrassed that I could only offer in response to their fears about an imminent attack: "I don't know. I hope not."

As I boarded my KLM flight in Tehran for home, I noticed how the flight attendants' uncovered heads looked bare, and smiled at how my perspective shifted somewhere during my travels. It would take some time to shake off the lightness of being, the vigor that accompanies any experience in which one steps far enough outside of the ordinary, that it wakes up their senses – including the perceptive abilities of the soul. I was in no hurry to leave Iran and the people whose personal and professional concerns seemed much like my own.

"You traveled to Iran alone? Weren't you afraid?" the customs officer asked me in Seattle, eyeing the knee-length tunic I had bought in Kerman to cover myself – a teal green linen outfit that one of the flight attendants complimented and asked where she could buy one.

No, I wasn't afraid of the people who greeted me with a bouquet of roses. Sent gifts to my room each day of oranges, pistachios or homemade date cookies.

“You went to Iran for a children's book festival?” The customs officer crossed his arms and squinted. “How do you know so much about Iranian culture so as to write a novel about it? Did you meet people there with whom you will have further contact?”

Dozens, God willing, I thought. Dozens of friends with whom I hope I will never lose contact.