

Building a Reading Community, with Azar Nafisi

Azar Nafisi is a one-woman powerhouse of political and literary force. Her books *Reading Lolita in Tebran*—a long-running bestseller published in 32 languages—and *Things I've Been Silent About* focus on the role of literature in fighting oppressive ideology and championing imagination. Born in Iran in 1955, Nafisi spent 18 years teaching English literature in Iran and now lives in Washington D.C., where she is a fellow at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

Nafisi's new book, *The Republic of Imagination*, uses some of her favorite American novels—Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Carson

McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and James Baldwin's *Another Country*—to explore the crisis in the humanities and the role of fiction in democracy, and to spark a spirited critique of the new Common Core curriculum, which Nafisi feels is hampering imagination. "Standardization of thought does not lead to better thinkers," she says.

In addition to preserving the role of fiction in society, one of Nafisi's great passions is creating community, which will be the focus of her talk at Winter Institute. "One of the unique things about a community of readers is that they transcend time and place," Nafisi says. "It's important to bring together communities of readers and provide a portable home of imagination and thought through books."

The talk will focus on the role of community in helping bring literature

back to the people. "I want to remind people that books were never just for the elite," she says. "The origins of the greatest literature came from within the public. These books are not supposed to be read in academia; literature was written for the people. We need to bring literature back to the public. I'll share my ideas for how we can do that."

Nafisi believes that one way is to expand the role that libraries and bookstores play in their communities. "These places should be where we bring the conversation, not just a place to buy a book

from. We, the public, need to bring what we want from ourselves and the society into bookstores and libraries and hold the discussions there," she says.

Nafisi also notes that young people are thirsty to spend more time face to face: "I've been talking to a lot of young people; they spend so much time in virtual reality that now they are in search of concrete places where they can use their senses. This is a great opportunity for bookstores and libraries to take on that role for them."

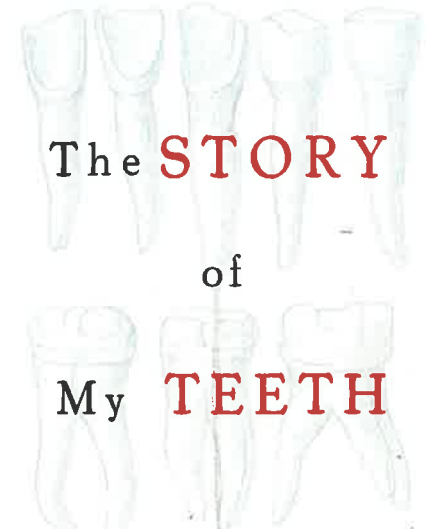
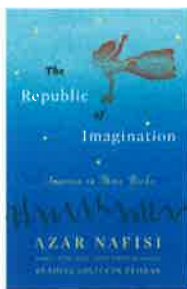
Nafisi says her great hope is that her new book "creates room for empathy, a new way of looking at the world," adding, "ultimately, I want people to see the world through new, fresh eyes."

—Anisse Gross

See Nafisi's breakfast keynote on Wednesday, February 12, 8:30–9:45 a.m., in the Grand Ballroom.



Azar Nafisi



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VALERIA LUISELLI

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September

\$15.95 / PB

978-1-56689-409-8

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