

ON WRITING PERSEPOLIS

By Marjane Satrapi, as told to Pantheon staff

Chances are that if you are an American you know very little about the 1979 Iranian Revolution. "This revolution was normal, and it had to happen," says Marjane Satrapi, author of **Persepolis**, a totally unique memoir about growing up in Iran after the Shah left power. "Unfortunately, it happened in a country where people were very traditional, and other countries only saw the religious fanatics who made their response public." In her graphic novel, Satrapi, shows readers that these images do not make up the whole story about Iran. Here, she talks freely about what it was like to tell this story with both words and pictures, and why she is so proud of the result.



Why I Wrote Persepolis

From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We'd see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn't represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, "No, it's not like that there." I've been justifying why it isn't negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years. How strange when it isn't something I did or chose to be?

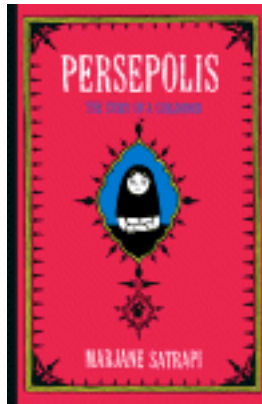
After I finished university, there were nine of us, all artists and friends, working in a studio together. That group finally said, "Do something with your stories." They introduced me to graphic novelists. Spiegelman was first. And when I read him, I thought "Jesus Christ, it's possible to tell a story and make a point this way." It was amazing.

Writing a Graphic Novel is Like Making a Movie

People always ask me, "Why didn't you write a book?" But that's what **Persepolis** is. To me, a book is pages related to something that has a cover. Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that does not mean they are second-rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both.

We learn about the world through images all the time. In the cinema we do it, but to make a film you need sponsors and money and 10,000 people to work with you. With a graphic novel, all you need is yourself and your editor.

Of course, you have to have a very visual vision of the world. You have to perceive life with images otherwise it doesn't work. Some artists are more into sound; they make music. The point is that you have to know what you want to say, and find the best way of saying it. It's hard to say how **Persepolis** evolved once I started writing. I had to learn how to write it as a graphic novel by doing.



What I Wanted to Say

I'm a pacifist. I believe there are ways to solve the world's problems. Instead of putting all this money to create arms, I think countries should invest in scholarships for kids to study abroad. Perhaps they could become good and knowledgeable professors in their own countries. You need time for that kind of change though.

I have been brought up open-minded. If I didn't know any people from other countries, I'd think everyone was evil based on news stories. But I know a lot of people, and know that there is no such thing as stark good and evil. Isn't it possible there is the same amount of evil everywhere?

If people are given the chance to experience life in more than one country, they will hate a little less. It's not a miracle potion, but little by little you can solve problems in the basement of a country, not on the surface. That is why I wanted people in other countries to read **Persepolis**, to see that I grew up just like other children.

It's so rewarding to see people at my book signings who never read graphic novels. They say that when they read mine they became more interested. If it opens these people's eyes not to believe what they hear, I feel successful.

You Have to Think Freely to Know What to Write

My parents were very proud when they read **Persepolis**. If I criticize them once in a while, it's because it's the truth, and they laugh. My father always says, "It is only an idiot who never changes his mind." My parents accept that times change, and they are not right anymore. They've taught me that you can make mistakes.

They were extremely open-minded about what I said and they were demanding. I'm also tender with them because they were magnificent parents. They gave me the most important thing -- the freedom of thinking and deciding for myself. The best present anyone can receive is not being formatted because the world or a religion wants you to be.

