



## ***The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree, Shokoofeh Azar*** **(Wild Dingo Press)**

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### **Summary**

Shokoofeh Azar's extraordinary first novel recalls many of the elements of consummate story-telling associated with Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, along with Azar's own countrywomen, Porochista Khakhpour and Banafsheh Serov. The story is fresh, original and incandescent in its handling of the impact of the Islamic Revolution on the lives of the ordinary citizens of Iran and in its weaving together of Persian folklore and magic realism. *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* chronicles the lives of five people in a single family as they come to terms with the loss of a son and a daughter, while the country they know and love becomes increasingly hostile and unbearable.

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### **About the Author**

Shokoofeh Azar was born in Iran 7 years before Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution changed the country forever. She inherited a love for literature from her parents and worked as a journalist and short story writer for several years. She was imprisoned for her work and feared for her life if she continued to stay there. Forced to flee Iran in 2010, Azar was accepted as a political refugee by Australia in 2011. She now lives in Perth with her young daughter, where she also exhibits as a visual artist.

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## Questions for discussion

- Azar's lyrical descriptions of life in Iranian cities and villages and the people who inhabit them remind the reader of the universality of the human condition, regardless of geography, landscape and language. Do you agree with this, and if so, how does the novel provide examples of this 'universality?'
- The novel is rich in symbolism and metaphor; the tree that bestows enlightenment, the ghosts who communicate with the living, termites who can be heard eating through houses, forests with jinns. How do these different symbols coalesce and what do they mean?
- "Nobody knew when this insatiable war, fought with the flesh of child mine-clearers, would come to an end." What do think is meant by this statement by the author in this political novel, with its powerful anti-war images?
- "In dialogue he was nothing but a bearded, illogical little boy, stubborn and pompous." The novel portrays Khomeini as a dictator with a "putrid stench" and consigns him to a dishonourable, ignominious death. How does this novel influence your understanding of Iran, its revolution and its people?
- This novel is replete with religious symbolism and describes ancient Iranian as well as Islamic traditions, which inform the lives of the Iranian people. Do you have a better understanding of the customs and traditions of pre-Islamic Iran and its love-hate relationship with Islam? Discuss your thoughts in relation to this.
- How does the I-character's ghostly presence and narration shape the story? What do we know of this child and do we trust this voice? What sense of family dynamics is evident through this POV character?
- Fire is used as a symbol throughout the novel. The house burns, the child narrator burns and books burn. There is a description of the sounds books make when they are burning as well as the names of the books and the characters contained within. "We couldn't bear the wailing of Shakespeare and Rumi, Hafez and Confucius, Zoroaster, Buddha and Khayyam, any longer ..." What does this say about the power of literature to redeem even as it is destroyed?
- At its heart, this is the story of a family, a mother and a father and their three children, caught up in a revolution they did not want and could not reconcile to.

How do you think this story of a family's destruction plays out against the backdrop of war, terror and tragedy, as described by the author?

- What do you think is meant by the symbolism of Beeta's metamorphosis into a mermaid, Bahar's presence as a ghost and Roza's travels through enchanted forests? What do the women have in common and what is meant by their transformations?
- This novel can be read equally as an anti-war story as well as a conservation story, evident in descriptions of the destruction of forests, gardens, homes and lives, and the way people transform into 'other' living beings because the natural world can sustain them when the political world won't. How does the writer convey a sense of optimism as well as futility?

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*Beauty is a Wound*, Eka Kurniawan (Text Publishing)

*The World Without Us*, Mireille Juchau (Bloomsbury)

*The Last Illusion*, Porochista Khakhpour (Bloomsbury)

*Seeing The Elephant*, Portland Jones (Margaret River Press)