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'The Lemon Grove'

Book offers glimpse of life in Iran while prompting readers to think closer to home.

Additional Information:

Review - "The Lemon Grove," by Ali Hosseini

By ALLISON ALISON

English instructor, Southeastern Community College

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Ali Hosseini presents a deceptively quiet little novel in "The Lemon Grove," with contemporary Iran as the backdrop.

The book encompasses love, courage, tradition, culture, fear, forgiveness, and family - in short, life. The grove itself is a symbol of childhood, a place where twins Ruzbeh and Behruz went with their family every summer to escape the city. With the lemon trees now dying, the grove also mirrors how any form of life without nurturing withers, a thread we find throughout Ruzbeh and Behruz's stories.

Behruz, who comes home ill from the United States, must decide what to do with the orchard as well as look for his twin, who wanders the streets suffering from post-

traumatic stress disorder. Finally, he must discover if Shiree, the woman each brother has loved since all were children, still lives. At one time, one brother betrayed the other with her and so also betrays himself and his culture. Through Shiree and the consequences of this betrayal, Hosseini reveals how horribly women can be treated in Iran. (Actually, men do not always fare much better.)

Ultimately, the novel is about what people do to and for others. An older family friend, Musa, takes care of Behruz when he returns, saving his life. Musa also provides a traditional viewpoint through his belief in God and his prophet-like musings, which often pinpoint how depressing life in Iran can be.

When discussing the common punishment of hanging people in the public square, Musa says, "Natural death is peaceful. It's like going to sleep. ... But unnatural death is frightening because life doesn't want to go away and fights death with all its might. Watching that sort of death is painful."

We aren't surprised, then, that these characters equate the United States with freedom. Anyone who comes into contact with Behruz asks him questions about living there, as if they cannot believe such a wondrous place exists.

Meanwhile, Kemal, though not a family member, wants to save the lemon grove by fixing the broken water pump. He, too, asks Behruz questions. However, unlike some who would leave Iran, Kemal desires freedom in his own country. He simply wants the chance to provide for his family. Like Behruz, Kamel fights for what he believes. Their desires are basic and should come easily but, alas, do not.

Hosseini deftly presents this story of loss and survival. He writes with tension but avoids outright violence or drama. We cannot mistake this quiet prose, however, for his not writing about something vital. "The Lemon Grove" asks us to contemplate our relationships and our choices, indeed, our very lives.

In The Weekly Read, local book lovers share reviews of their recent reads. To contribute a review, write to features@thehawkeye.com.

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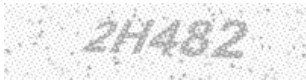
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