



## **The Lemon Grove**

Fiction by Ali Hosseini

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Review by Olive Mullet

Ali Hosseini's *The Lemon Grove*, the author's first novel written in English, is a moving story set in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The characters are well-defined, the landscape vivid and the culture personal—we care about what happens to the characters, and we learn more than most Americans know about the country.

The main characters, Ruzbeh and Behruz, are twin brothers. The book's opening takes place at a summer home with a lemon orchard, Naranjestan, where the boys grew up. However, only Behruz is there now, extremely sick and being tended by the kindly shepherd Musa. Behruz has come back from America, where he went to avoid competition with Ruzbeh over their mutual love for Shireen. By leaving Iran, Behruz had allowed his brother to marry Shireen. But Ruzbeh, injured in the war, has not been seen since he started wandering without his medications. Behruz does find Shireen but then lets her slip away into the hands of the police, whom everyone fears. The tension then comes from the almost impossible goal of bringing these people together again and getting them well.

The original enchantment of the summer home is contrasted by what the drought has made it now. In a memory that reoccurs significantly at the end, Behruz's thoughts talk to his brother:

The stars seemed so close we would try to touch them. I couldn't but you said you did. You said if I stood on my toes and stretched up my arms, I could touch a star. I tried many nights but could never reach them, could never touch anything in the darkness above me. You said, 'Think of your favorite girl and try to catch her star.' You would stand up and raise your hand, twirling it in the dark and then bringing down your closed fist, saying, 'See, I caught one.' When you opened your hand I almost thought I could see a shining spot in your palm.

But now:

The wind is blowing continually. It blows with determination, as if trying to summon up the wandering ghosts of this ancient land and scatter them to the far corners of the earth. It sweeps over the orchard and the fields, picking up dust and dead leaves and rolling them into whirlwinds. . . . As soon as one reaches the edge of the desert, another picks up. One after another they circle over the fields . . . the bare, half-dead trees of the orchard are in a fearful battle with the wind. They bow and bend and every so often a branch breaks away, light and empty, giving way to the flow. While in America, Behruz had an Native American lover who "talked about the way white America romanticizes the Native Americans to give itself a past . . . and the environmental movements draw spiritual guidance from Native Americans—the love of nature and the idea of living in harmony with the natural world." This love of the land has deeper roots in Iran where the twins' property in the beginning becomes a point of contention. But we readers also become familiar with the Naranjestan land, especially its heat and desperate need for water; and the effects of war with the soldiers guarding the city of Shiraz, the blackened windows of the curfew during the endless war, the habits of the kind Gypsies who take care of Behruz as they had his brother in his wanderings. Even details of the Afghan culture become crucial in the story in the plans of escape and reunification.

These people are kind and struggling, hiding from a ruthless regime—yet, like the orchard's few remaining lemons, they are amazingly alive. The setting is austere yet haunting, and this beautifully written book is a page-turner right up to its hopeful ending.