

## **The Age of Orphans**

**by Laleh Khadivi**

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Age of Orphans*, a lyrical novel that follows one Kurdish boy's rise to power during the birth of Iran as a nation.

### **About this book**

The boy wants nothing more than his maman's lap and a view of the birds that soar over his Kurdish village. Nameless, impressionable, and watchful, the boy soon becomes a man in a mountaintop ritual with his baba, uncles, and cousins. And as a man, he must join the male villagers when they march to war against the shah's army. But the Kurds, fierce protectors of their homeland against centuries of invasion, fall to the shah; the boy's father is massacred before his eyes. As the only survivor, adopted by the very soldiers that murdered his father, the boy begins a new life as Reza Pejman Khourdi—conscripted soldier for the new Iran.

Ten years later, in Tehran, Reza is notorious within the Iranian army for his cruelty against Kurds, so-called rebels who fight against an Iran they cannot believe in. Promoted to captain, Reza is ordered to find a Tehrani bride and move back to Kermanshah, his homeland, to enforce the shah's rule. Reza tells no one he is a Kurd, suppressing all memories of his maman's tenderness and his baba's bravery. He weds Meena, secretly hoping to banish his orphan loneliness in her genteel breeding. But Meena has other ideas: when she sets foot in Kermanshah, she is horrified by the lot of a captain's wife, living among Kurds who look

suspiciously like her husband. Reza and Meena fight savagely for dominance—over each other, over the Kurdish villagers, and over the mountainous land itself.

Poetic in its dark beauty, *The Age of Orphans* casts the clash between tradition and modernity in a new light—as a doomed war within one orphan’s psyche.

### **About the Kurds**

The Kurds are one of the oldest cultures in the world. Numbering more than forty million, they are the world’s largest ethnic group without a nation of their own. They live in the mountainous regions between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, where they have been for as long as explorers and emperors have traveled through and conquered the land.

Under the Persian Empire, the Kurds operated as an autonomous tribe, with loose associations among local chiefs. With the rise of Reza Shah and the development of the modern nation of Iran in the 1930s, Kurdish autonomy was challenged. Inspired by the example of Ataturk in nearby Turkey, who sought to create a “nation of homogeneous citizens,” the shah determined that all separate tribes were a threat to the newly burgeoning national identity of Iran. He mandated that their languages, cultures, and organizations be abolished, and forced all who lived within the borders of the new nation to swear loyalty only to Iran.

Forever an independent people, the Kurds resisted these edicts. The backlash was violent. *The Age of Orphans* captures these early and determined days of nation-building, and the Kurdish resistance that followed.

### **For discussion**

1. A Kurdish proverb, “It is more difficult to contend with oneself than with the world,” serves as an epigraph to *The Age of Orphans*. How does this proverb speak to Reza Khourdi’s life?
2. Reza’s fascination with birds—from the boy’s flying fantasies to the captain’s pet falcon—endures throughout his lifetime. What is the source of his bird obsession? When the birds speak in the novel, proclaiming, “Of earth, we see all” (47), what do they see in the boy and his people?
3. Maman tells her own story of orphanhood and coming-of-age. What qualities has Maman passed along to her son? How does her story resemble her son’s, and how does it differ?
4. Describe the boy’s emotions during his father’s violent death. What is the source of the boy’s shame, as well as his choice to banish his father to “a damp purgatory of forget and never-remember”? (67) What impact will these forgotten emotions have on the boy’s future?
5. Images of boots recur throughout *The Age of Orphans*. Discuss passages where boots appear, and consider what they might symbolize to Reza at different times in his life.
6. Consider the significance of Reza’s name. Why is he nameless until he is conscripted into the army? What is the meaning of his new name? Why is he assigned the third name “Pejman,” in addition to “Reza Khourdi”?

7. Discuss Reza's military training and social life in the army barracks. When is he able to find community with his fellow cadets, and when does he part from his peers? Why do the boys reassert ethnic differences after a like-minded period as "sameskins, brethren"? (88) Why does Reza ultimately lie to betray a fellow conscript, the Baluch twin, and what are the consequences of his lie?
8. When Reza believes he is fifteen years old, the number is actually "an orphan age, as declared by the spurious newlyweds Baba Shah and Maman Iran." (114–15) What is the difference between a calendar age and an "orphan age"? How does this "orphan age" assert itself upon Reza's identity?
9. Describe Reza's experience in Saqqez, the Kurdish village he invades with the shah's army. How do Reza's actions in Saqqez determine his future as a soldier and as a Kurd? How do his victims, particularly the little boy with a similar face and the girl he rapes, respond to his violent acts?
10. What are Reza's first impressions of Meena as he watches her father's funeral procession from a rooftop in Tehran? What does he see in Meena? Which of her qualities does he not yet see?
11. The Khourdis' wedding night is narrated from both Reza's and Meena's points of view. Compare their descriptions of the marriage and its consummation. How do their

perspectives of this event differ? How do their different experiences bode for the future of the marriage?

12. Why does the shah's army command Reza to return to Kermanshah? What is the reasoning behind this "rare move ... to put [him] back so close to the nest?" (202) Does Reza fulfill the army's expectations in Kermanshah? Why or why not?
13. How do the Kurds in Kermanshah react to the formation of Iran as a nation? How do they view outsiders like the shah's soldiers? How do outsiders view the Kurds? What is their attitude toward Reza and his changes to their schools, farming practices, and other elements of daily life? How do they handle the open secret of Reza's Kurdish identity?
14. Discuss Reza's connection to the land, from the farmlands of his childhood to the winding streets of Tehran to the Zagros Mountains outside Kermanshah. At what points in his life is he particularly attached to nature and the land? In the end, does Reza have a true homeland? Why or why not?
15. The struggles of Reza and his tribe are representative of the larger Kurdish struggle of the twentieth century. What does Reza's experience show us about some of the personal elements at work behind larger geopolitical developments? How do the tribal populations of the Middle East and ancient internal conflicts play a role in the current crises that plague the region?

16. After Meena's death, Reza says of his children, "I have orphaned them just as I was once orphaned and now they have absconded from these stone palaces and abandoned me in the shadows of their escapes." (286) What are Reza's motivations for orphaning his children? What consequences, if any, does he suffer for the murder? What are some possible futures for Reza and Meena's six children—how might this cycle of violence and orphans continue or end?
17. Discuss Laleh Khadivi's unique writing style, and point to passages that are particularly poetic or moving. What is the effect of the multiple perspectives that contribute to the novel? How would the novel be different if it were narrated solely from Reza's point of view?

### **Suggested reading**

Mahbod Seraji, *Rooftops of Tehran*; Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*; Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*; Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*; Kader Abdolah, *My Father's Notebook: A Novel of Iran*; Iraj Pezeshkzad, *My Uncle Napoleon*; Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino: A Love Story*; James Buchan, *The Persian Bride*; Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*; Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*; Anahita Firouz, *In the Walled Gardens*; Nahid Rachlin, *Persian Girls: A Memoir*.