



A CONVERSATION WITH MARJANE SATRAPI

Heather Hartley

Among stanzas by eleventh-century poet Omar Khayyám, screaming children, the Angel of Death, obese Iranians in 1980s California, opium, whirling dervishes, a hairy daughter-in-law, prayers, late-night buses, cigarettes, unrequited love, and Sophia Loren's breasts, you will find Nasser Ali—a virtuoso of the tar (a stringed Persian instrument). Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Chicken with Plums* portrays Ali in the last eight days of his life—a man resigned to die because he has lost all pleasure in life. No more eating, no more sex, no more family or friends, and, most tragically for Ali, no more tar.

The only child in a privileged, intellectual family, Satrapi grew up in Tehran and studied at the Lycée Français. During the upheaval that followed the 1979 Islamic Revolution, she moved, alone, to Vienna at age fourteen for her personal safety and her studies. Her parents stayed behind in Tehran. Almost overnight, Satrapi went

from being an adored, pampered child to an exiled, confused, brilliant, and miserable adolescent. This is the story told in *Persepolis*, the first Iranian comic book in history—a chronicle of Iran during and after the revolution, as well as a compelling narrative of adolescent rebellion depicted in Satrapi's seemingly simple yet powerful black-and-white style.

After *Persepolis* came *Embroideries*, also a graphic novel but with a somewhat different approach: it is an intimate, humorous, and occasionally sarcastic story of Satrapi's female family members, friends, and neighbors, who drink tea while conferring about love, sex, clothes, and, of course, men. If the artist's country and her family are the main subjects of these earlier books, *Chicken with Plums* explores a new theme—the portrait of an artist.

Though the book is set in 1958 in post-Mossadegh Tehran, politics is not its main focus but rather serves as a framework for the story, as do scattered references to Islam. As to politics, religion, child care, or salary earning, the Ali couldn't care less: he's just obsessed with finding a new tar. In a fit of rage, his wife breaks his beloved instrument and eight days later he is dead. In the intervening week, some things still rouse Ali's desire: his favorite dish, chicken with plums; his adored daughter, Farzaneh; Sophia Loren's heaving chest; and, most significantly, his search to find a new tar. The stories of his life fence to and fro in time between the present and the past—often differentiated by a simple change in background color from white (representing the present) to black (representing the past). Although the subject matter is one of despair and renunciation, a sense of humor runs throughout the book—even the Angel of Death is a little bit funny. In 2005 *Chicken with Plums* won the Prize for Best Comic Book of the year at the prestigious Angoulême International Comics Festival—one of the few books written by a woman to receive the award since its inception in 1976.

Satrapi eventually moved to Paris, where she joined l'Atelier des Vosges, an artists' cooperative with many well-known French cartoonists, including Christophe Blain, Emmanuel Guibert, and David

B., author of the highly acclaimed graphic novel *Epileptic*. There is more than one connection between David B. and Satrapi: not only have they masterfully depicted their respective childhoods in graphic novel form, but they are also both represented by the same pioneering French publishing house, l'Association, formed in 1990 by a group of French cartoonists including Jean-Christophe Menu, Lewis Trondheim, Stanislas, and David B. In a short time, l'Association has transformed the European comics market with its innovative approach to subject matter, format, and style. Satrapi has found a home both with her publisher and at l'Atelier des Vosges, as well as in Paris itself—a city where you can smoke absolutely everywhere. She spoke with Heather Hartley, *Tim House's* Paris editor, on the phone from the studio where *Persepolis* is being made into a film.

Heather Hartley: In an earlier interview, you speak of the image as an international language. In terms of your work, would you say that an image translates more easily and more powerfully than language, and if so, how?

Marjane Satrapi: Absolutely. I have a pictorial way of thinking—I like to express myself in images. Whatever the facial or corporeal expression is, it looks the same in every culture—a sad man, a screaming woman, a baby crying. It's an international language—like a pictogram. Images are a bridge between my culture and the West and that's what has given me the power to assimilate.

HH: You've also said that you don't come from a culture of comics.

MS: That's right. And I wasn't in love with comics growing up. I never had any dream of becoming a cartoonist. I'm still not a big reader of comics. But what I do read is mostly American—I prefer American cartoonists much more. Like [Art] Spiegelman.

HH: What are you reading now?

MS: A book about religion by an Iranian author who destroys every myth of religion one after the other. And I'm also reading one hundred fifty film scenarios in the next nine months—three scenarios per day.

HH: Your books have been translated into more than twenty-four languages. How do you think your work—and words—translates?

MS: Words are words and we speak the way we think. When you have a language without masculine and feminine [grammatical gender], like Persian or English, there is a culture that goes with it. In French, I always have to find rules as to why the masculine object always takes over the feminine. [In French two singular nouns of dissimilar gender always become masculine in the plural.] And the smaller object is often feminine and the larger object is masculine. Like *la bite* [dick], *la merde* [shit], or you've got *le cerveau* [the brain], *le corps* [the body], *l'esprit* [the mind]. [laughs]

Language goes into culture. Sometimes words don't exist in another language—like the word *fun* in French—in French they have no *fun*. Or *excited*. Because in French you can't say you are excited about a book, because *excite* is always sexual. With images you don't have that problem.

HH: Why did you choose the graphic novel form to tell your stories?

MS: I wrote *Persepolis* to teach people what Iran is. *Embroideries* is like a conversation—more open on the page and one image flows into other ones. *Chicken with Plums* is about the life and the death of an artist. It's dense and short—eight pages of a life.

HH: When did you start drawing?

MS: I've been drawing my whole life. I can't remember a time when I wasn't drawing. I was drawing before I was writing and reading.

HH: And have you followed any specific training?

MS: Yes—lots. I went to art school in Iran and then in France to l’Ecole des Arts Décoratifs for seven years. But you know, everything is related in the arts. Comics is just a medium between other media. I’ve already made a big mural in Barcelona and we are now turning *Persepolis* into a movie.

HH: Your publishing house, l’Association, has a unique, independent vision in the world of French comics. It represents a wide variety of authors and has original distribution procedures, diverse book formatting, and a strong preference for black and white—tenets that seem to complement your work in its vision and scope. How did you find each other?

MS: Coincidence. Coincidence and luck. I was sure no one wanted to publish *Persepolis* but l’Association took it right away.

HH: And it was at l’Atelier des Vosges, the studio where you now work, that it all began. What’s the connection between l’Atelier and l’Association?

MS: I knew people who knew people and there was an open space in l’Atelier des Vosges and we were sharing rent. They were all cartoonists. “Oh,” I said, “it’s so boring and so obsessive.” In each frame, you know, there is an obsessive quality and just one page is made up of something like six to twelve frames. I didn’t want to do it then—not like my friends . . . They told me I could write about my childhood.

HH: Did you grow up listening to stories?

MS: Absolutely. I was involved with old people a lot—I love old people. What bores other people is that old people’s stories are long and they repeat them two or three times and that is what I love about it. I spent lots of time with old people in my family. I have a good oral memory. And what makes old people’s stories interesting is how one story moves into another one. Like with Nasser Ali.

HH: What role did stories and storytelling have in your family life?

MS: My parents were obsessed that I become an intellectual. I watched Bergman films at seven and eight years old and I was reading Emily Brontë when I was eleven . . . I could have as many books as possible in my house.

I didn’t read children’s literature so much—all those abused, working, depressed children. Not Mark Twain. Agatha Christie was more fun. But I read everything—philosophy, novels, Iranian poetry too—it’s so rich.

HH: Poetry is directly integrated into *Chicken with Plums*. The book is framed by the poetry of Omar Khayyám—Nasser Ali quotes him at the beginning and the Angel of Death quotes him at the end. There’s also Rumi and *Romeo and Juliet*. With all of these direct references to poetry, what influence would you say that poetry has on your work?

MS: Poetry is the basis of language. The role of poetry is to not close down a culture. The whole basis of a culture is in its poetry. In *Chicken with Plums* there’s Khayyám and Rumi. Sufism was the basis of my education.

HH: Throughout *Chicken with Plums* there are also a lot of stories contained within other stories, like a *mise en abyme*. For you, what makes a story work?

MS: One of the biggest masters is Vittorio de Sica with *The Bicycle Thief*. It’s the importance of the anecdote. Otherwise it’s just a story about a bike and nothing else. The small anecdotes describe the whole drama and catastrophe in *The Bicycle Thief*. If the anecdote is well treated, then the story comes through.

HH: In France, *Chicken with Plums* has been called a book about absence in many forms (absence of love, of food, and of music at the beginning of the story). You countered that the book is a portrait of an artist.

MS: With this book it’s the story of an artist and maybe of myself . . . It’s me behind Nasser Ali.

I censor myself a lot . . . When I draw a woman I'm much more aware that it will be compared to me. When I draw a man I'm more at ease—it's much freer.

It's not a true story. My uncle died for some strange reason. He was very good-looking. I chose him because he was a man and good-looking and as a plastic artist I'm attracted to beauty. Nasser Ali is an unbearable, complete asshole and also a sensitive, nice man. I have never been as honest about myself before as with Nasser Ali.

It's important to talk about who an artist is—the basis of an artist is narcissism. Think of publishing. You have these books the public must like, plus they have to buy them and then applaud and love you. It's a nice kind of creative narcissism. You're in love with yourself. But egocentrism—*that* is bad.

HH: Humor runs throughout *Chicken with Plums* and often in the details—the look on a character's face, a well-timed one-liner. What place does humor have in art?

MS: Humor is subversive and against all hating. The highest level of understanding is laughter. We laugh at something when we understand it culturally.

HH: The idea of pleasure is also central to *Chicken with Plums*.

MS: Absolutely. Eating is the last pleasure. You will die if you don't eat. It's not the same with sex or some other pleasure. Nasser Ali starts really dying when he's not eating. Lack of pleasure is a symptom of a conservative culture . . . I wanted to underline pleasure in this story.

HH: Exile has shaped and informed your work. Why have you decided to make France your home, and Paris in particular?

MS: I grew up in French schools from the time I was four or five. I can smoke here anywhere I want. I've become very French myself and I don't really like it . . . I'm an exiled person. I would go to the States except for two things: number one: smoking [not as accepted], and number two: George Bush.

Iran is my mother: psycho emotional blackmailing, and I would do everything for her. France is my wife: I have children with her, I can be unfaithful to her, divorce her. The U.S. is my other wife . . . or maybe my lover. [laughs]

HH: What do you make of the riots in France this past fall and the rising political right?

MS: I started laughing when people were so surprised. What do you expect? You colonize a country: now you are French, now you are not. Now you are Arab. All the soccer people are French. Everybody else isn't. This is a secular country with Catholic holidays. Excuse me but Sarkozy is a motherfucker. [Nicolas Sarkozy is head of the conservative party UMP, Union for a Popular Movement, Minister of the Interior, and a leading candidate for the 2007 presidential elections.] Thank God that a government doesn't represent the entire people of a country. I mean look at George Bush. You must fight stereotypes all your life and cannot give up.

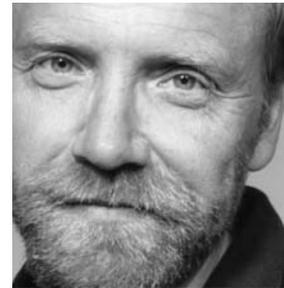
HH: Yet racism in France seems to be on the rise.

MS: Democracy is extremely fragile. You see how politically correct we are now in Europe—there is so much racism in that. You have to call people one thing, then call them in another way. Censorship and racism are so related. Why do we make jokes about the Americans but not about the Arabs? Because Americans have money. Arabs don't and that means they are not considered equal.

HH: There's a lot of discussion in *Embroideries* about sexual mores in Iran, and sex and sexuality appear in both *Persepolis* and *Chicken with Plums*. Could you speak about the differences in views of sexuality with regard to Iran, France, and the States?

MS: Sex is always a problem in all religions where women are objects of attraction. In my culture, sex is not related to something dirty. It's a macho culture, much more macho than in France. In my culture there is the taboo of virginity, and where virginity is important it means a patriarchal culture and a patriarchal culture is the biggest

enemy of a democracy. In France it's definitely better. And in the U.S. the men have big necks and muscles—the U.S. can be macho in a very different way than my culture. Mine is a taboo culture and there's lots of frustration. In the U.S., it's dental floss and no germs. The States are more open about guns [than sex]. There's a love of weapons and you can have all you want and then sex shops are forbidden. More masturbation and fewer guns.



A CONVERSATION WITH
GEORGE SAUNDERS

James Schiff

George Saunders's work is a whirlwind of tremendous verbal energy, inventiveness, and, most importantly, humor. His short stories, which have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Esquire*, can reduce a reader to uncontrollable laughter. When teaching his volumes of short fiction, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), *Pastoralia* (2000), or *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), or his novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005), I often feel the urge to read aloud long passages. This is fiction you want to share with others and a voice that seems to want to get off the page and fill a room.

At the heart of Saunders's success is his talent for depicting the internal lives of his characters, capturing the mind as it speaks to itself: fantasizing, strategizing, countering, reversing, worrying, doubting, and continually vacillating. Sometimes described as "losers," Saunders's characters have cruddy jobs, live in "dangerous crapholes" with