

Funny in English, Too: *An Interview with* **FIROOZEH DUMAS**

*Iranian American Author of Funny in Farsi
Uses Humor, Optimism to Build Bridges*



How much is Firoozeh Dumas looking forward to addressing the NCTE Annual Convention audience?

"I have literally for the last five years wanted to speak at the NCTE Annual Conference," she said. "I cannot tell you the number of teachers I have asked whether they knew the people who made those decisions. I would have bribed if I had to."

Of course, this author of *Funny in Farsi* is laughing as she says this. It's unlikely that the writer of one of the most popular books read in classrooms today would have to pay anyone to get an audience with some of her most ardent admirers. The admiration is mutual. Dumas says she's excited about presenting at NCTE's Secondary Section luncheon because she thinks that teachers are "the absolute last group of people in this country who believe in the transformative power of books."

"Teachers have told me that when they use the book, their students want to write their own stories," she said. "From the point of view of somebody who loves to read, I'm very excited that they read it and they relate."

That's especially important now, Dumas says, when the images of the Middle East in the United States are overwhelmingly negative and frightening. Dumas hopes that her readers will remember the human side of the Middle East when they encounter these media images, which she says depict "the worst of the worst."

Born in Iran, Dumas came to the United States at the age of seven, when her father, an engineer with the National Iranian Oil Company, was assigned to consult with an American firm. After two years, they returned to Iran, living for a time in Tehran before returning once again to California. She was, she says, "the only Iranian immigrant in a blond beach town." *Funny in Farsi*, a collection of essays about her family's experiences, was originally written as a gift to her children. Published in 2003, it was a final-

ist for the 2004 PEN/USA Award and the Thurber Prize for American Humor.

A Double Life

Because anti-Middle Eastern sentiments are running high, Dumas says she sometimes feels like "a tiny, tiny voice up against people with megaphones" and thinks, "Maybe I need to find another hobby." Then she opens her mail.

"I recently received a packet from a teacher in New York of letters from students who'd read the book," she said. "All I have to do is spend 10 minutes with someone who's read my book, and I know I'm doing exactly what I need to be doing."

She truly believes that being exposed to a first-person story from another culture makes a difference, especially when it shows that there is more that binds us together as human beings than divides us as members of different cultural groups. "We all have a story to tell, and I like that empowerment, that we all have a story of value," she says. When she speaks in classrooms, students always want to tell her which parts of the book were exactly like their lives. Teachers tell her in amazement that some of the most vocal students are ones who have never before spoken in class.

Dumas believes the appeal of *Funny in Farsi* is universal because it's really about being an outsider, something almost everyone has experienced at one time or another. Dumas felt it most keenly as an adolescent in the Southern California beach town, where she says she led a double life. She was "Julie, the American" at school. "Then at home, I was Firoozeh the Iranian with a house that smelled different from everyone else's house," she said. She dropped Julie during her college days at the University of California at Berkeley, although she continued to

feel like an outsider, but because of her socially conservative rather than Iranian background.

Working with Those Who Plant the Seeds

Dumas recalls with fondness and is still in contact with the first teacher she encountered in the United States, Mrs. Sandberg, whom she describes as stern and loving. "I'm not kissing up to teachers just because I'm going to be speaking to them—I think being a teacher is the hardest job in the country," she said. "Mrs. Sandberg was a wonderful teacher, and I think there's a universal appreciation for dedicated teachers, even today."

Traveling to classrooms across the country, she sees that the challenges teachers face are enormous. They are still the ones who plant the seeds, however, and that's why she's eager to work with educators.

"I'm glad I'm doing what I do, but I speak to 200 people at a time," she said. "Look at how much power two minutes of CNN has. When they air something horrible and frightening, millions of people see it instantly."

Teachers expand her audience by using *Funny in Farsi* in their classrooms, and they may catch people at a time when opinions are more malleable. Dumas is hoping that through these efforts, society may be able to put the "civil" back into civil discourse, which she fears is disappearing.

"Now, people hurl insults at each other, making things up and not listening to what the other person is saying," she said. "People are so sure of their hatred and their fear that there's no point in even trying to talk to them. Their minds are made up. 'I hate you; we're done.'"

Her optimism that this can change comes from her interactions on the lecture circuit, which has taken her across rural America, to places such as Arkadelphia, Arkansas and Olivet, Michigan. "I go to a lot of places where residents have never met or spoken to an Iranian. Their idea of an Iranian

is completely based on the news," she said, "and after my talks, I often get the comment, 'You are not at all what I thought you were going to be.'"

Building Bridges

In a commentary for National Public Radio, Dumas recalled the days after November 1979 when the news about Iran was perhaps at its worst, the days after the staff of the United States embassy in Iran were taken as hostages by a group of Muslim student followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Suddenly, people who didn't know her and her family looked at them with suspicion and distrust. "Leave the country," they were telling these baffled, law-abiding, and thoroughly Americanized immigrants. Dumas was surprised by how quickly people "jumped on the hate bandwagon." She says she has thought about that a lot and wonders if the ability to turn on someone isn't a universal human flaw. Perhaps, she says, that's the difference between an enlightened person and one who isn't.

She counts among the enlightened individuals former hostage Kathryn Koob, whom Dumas met many years after the crisis, and her own father. Though born and raised miles apart, both geographically and culturally, each has had ample reason to harbor hatred, but both have refused to be burdened by it. As Dumas's father puts it, "Hatred is a waste of time." It's that philosophy that Dumas follows in her own life, and shares with others through her writing.

As Dumas herself has put it, she has dedicated her life to building bridges. When she speaks at the Secondary Section luncheon on November 20, she may ask teachers in the audience to think about how they can put up a truss or two themselves.

Anna Flanagan is a freelance writer based in Urbana, Illinois.

LOG
ON

Firoozeh Dumas will speak at the Secondary Section Luncheon on Saturday, November 20, at 12:30 p.m. Read more about this year's Annual Convention Speakers at <http://www.ncte.org/annual/speakers>
Visit Dumas's website at <http://firoozehdumas.com>