

“A welcome, illuminating peak behind the 21st century's equivalent of the Iron Curtain.”  
— *Kirkus Reviews*

# IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS

## *A Memoir of Iran*

**Christopher de Bellaigue**

A journalist born in London and educated at Cambridge, Christopher de Bellaigue first came to Iran in 1999 in search of a story about human rights abuses or nuclear weapons. A year later, on the cusp of his thirtieth birthday, he had an Iranian wife, a house in Tehran, and a deep sense of home in a country largely feared and reviled by Westerners.

What is life like for a rare outsider inside the Islamic Republic of Iran? What happened to the fierce revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah in 1979, held the United States hostage, and fought Iraq for eight years? How is today's Iran, under the supreme leadership of Ali Khamenei, different from when the Ayatollah Khomeini ruled with a fundamentalist iron fist? What are the values, customs, pastimes, and hopes of a people obscured by chadors and stereotypes? **IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS: *A Memoir of Iran*** (HarperCollinsPublishers; January 4, 2005; \$26.95) is de Bellaigue's personal answer. While offering his own vivid impressions, he lets local taxi drivers, kabob vendors, teachers, doctors, mullahs, mystics, and sundry “burned-out revolutionaries” speak for themselves. Ultimately, he brings to life a people of striking contradictions—who cherish their children yet glorify death, torn between their abiding faith in the Shi'a Islam faith and the disappointing reality of a revolution that wound up exploiting its sacred tenets for political gain.

Filled with arresting insights into Iran's recent turbulent past, including the Iranian side of the Iran-Contra affair, **IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS** focuses on the human stories behind the headline news of political upheaval, oppression, and bloodshed. Among many strange and enlightening encounters, de Bellaigue recounts his:

- Experience of the elaborate annual mourning ceremonies for the Imam Hossein, Shi'a Islam's supreme martyr, who was murdered more than thirteen hundred years ago
- Visit with the proud parents of the Imam's sacred descendant, Hossein Kharrazi, who happily sacrificed first his arm and then his life to the cause of fighting the infidel Iraqis

- Pilgrimage to the shrine town of Qom for startling lessons in Shi'a law, including guidelines for sanctioned trysts, or "temporary marriages," between clerics and widows
- Conversation with Paratsu Forouhar, a remarkably fearless young female activist seeking to avenge the murders of her politically dissident parents
- Meeting with an American fugitive, known as Hassan Abdolrahman, who grew up on Long Island in a large, loving black Baptist family, converted to Shi'a Islam in 1969, and murdered an Iranian counter-revolutionary—a Shah spokesperson—in Maryland in 1980
- Heartfelt talks with disabled war veterans, including victims of Saddam's gas attacks nearly fifteen years ago who continue to suffer painful, debilitating aftershocks

Along the way, de Bellaigue introduces his wife, Bita, who attended a French school before the revolution and held on to her passion for exotic cultures and colorful décor, and two former soldiers—one a teacher, the other a seminarian—he considers friends. Like most who fought for the Revolutionary Guard, these mellow middle-aged men neither boast about nor regret their youthful violence—even if it was marked by yelling "God is Great!" while smashing the skulls of Iraqi soldiers or throwing acid in the face of a girl who dared to paint her lips red.

Opening a window into Shiite Muslim life, **IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS** reveals Iran as a complex, conflicted country whose hardworking professionals and laborers, visionary artists, doting parents, and restless teenagers are, at heart, not so different from the people with whom we share our sense of home.

#### About the Author

**CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE** has been working as journalist in the Middle East and South Asia for over a decade. He writes for *The Economist*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Granta*, and *The New Yorker*. He lives in Tehran with his Iranian wife, Bita, and their young son, Jahan.

### **IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS**

#### *A Memoir of Iran*

By Christopher de Bellaigue

Publication Date: January 4, 2005

320 pages; \$26.95; Hardcover

ISBN: 0-06-620980-3

HarperCollins Publishers

## ABOUT CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE

### *In His Own Words*

Have you ever visited a place and discovered that much of what you have heard about it is wrong? That's what happened to me in 1999, when I first came to Iran. The people were not aggressive, as I had expected, but courteous and friendly. On the streets of Tehran, I felt safer than in London or New York. At the same time, the Iranians didn't reveal themselves fully. They were tantalising, a challenge. I knew that many of them were capable of fanatical acts, but they showed me only kindness. In the West, if you want to know what someone thinks, you listen to what they say. In Iran, speech is often a curtain, and appearances deceive. I accepted the challenge. I wanted to look behind the curtain.

A year later, I was back in Iran, married to an Iranian, living a dual life. I made friends with people who were gentle and cultured. But I was reporting from a state that carried out human rights abuses and allegedly pursued nuclear weapons. I was welcomed into a family that was Westernised in many ways, but traditional in others. I got to know Iranians who did not accept the system of values that we learn in the West. They raised the 1979 Islamic revolution for intangible rewards – God's pleasure, a reckoning with the demons of history. They were sad and confused because their revolution had failed to create the clean, Islamic society that they had envisaged. They seemed uncertain about the right path, but they knew that something had gone wrong.

I decided to write a book about these people, and their collective story, of fervour and fanaticism followed by mellowness and cynicism – a loop of human emotions. But I found it impossible to write about their experiences without writing about mine, impossible to forget my strange, intimate connection with them. So, this is not a history, but a memoir, of a generation of revolutionary Iranians and a Westerner in their midst.

### **Praise for IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS**

“This is a fascinating book, both for its insights into the uncertain contradictions of a closed post-revolutionary society, and also for reminding us just how much Saddam Hussein was a creation of the West, which carefully armed and funded him.”

--Dermot Bolger, Financial Times

“A riveting, and yet also disturbing, book...De Bellaigue has done his research well and reports meticulously...IN THE ROSE GARDEN OF THE MARTYRS is also the intimate story of Christopher de Bellaigue himself, an Englishman who has devoted his life to his new country but is distrusted by almost everyone he meets, and viewed as a possible agent of the imperialists.”

--Hazhir Teimourian, Literary Review

“Invariably entertaining and informative...Christopher de Bellaigue’s thoughtful and quietly assured book underscores what a tragic disappointment the Iranian revolution has been...A fascinating insight into the tiredness, wistfulness and, above all, hypocrisy of the revolutionary generation”

--Justin Marozzi, Evening Standard

“Provides an insight into a proud and misunderstood nation...Anyone wishing to understand Islamic fundamentalism needs to consider Iran. De Bellaigue’s experiences provide a vivid guide.”

--Birmingham Post

“Christopher de Bellaigue’s entrée into Persian life has enabled him to describe the country from within, with lucidity and humour. A mixture of history, reportage and analysis, his book helps us to understand the ‘enigma inside a puzzle’ that is Iran today, as he manages to cut through the barriers of suspicion and win the trust and affection of people of all classes and political views.”

--Shusha Guppy, Financial Times

“An outsider’s incisive analysis of Iran...Through eloquent human stories, Bellaigue frames the murky politics of Iran in a telling, intimate scale.”

--Matthew Hermann, Newsweek (International Edition, Nov. 8, 2004)

“De Bellaigue gives an illuminating portrait of post-revolution Iranians”

--Anthony Sattin, Sunday Times (London)

The title refers to martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), a time when Iran underwent the convulsions of revolution from within and attack from without. The war was a catastrophe for Iran, leading to the loss of hundreds of thousands of soldiers (known as martyrs in the lexicon of the Islamic Republic). I've been in Ira 'In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs' started well but soon went downhill. I liked the early chapters about the author's actual real life experience of living in Iran - tales of things seen and heard in the back of a taxi for example - but soon found he relied far too much on just 'telling history' without much in the way of personalisation.