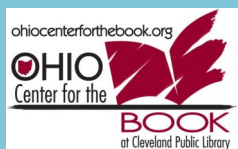


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by *Get Graphic!* with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all those outside and between.

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Get Graphic! Toolkit

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

About the Comic

Persepolis, a graphic memoir by Marjane Satrapi, documents the life of a young girl living through the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath. The memoir, drawn through the eyes of Satrapi, bears witness to living through one of the most significant political revolutions of the twentieth century, the consequences of which continue to impact the international relations of the Middle East.

The first part of Satrapi's memoir draws upon her childhood, including her early desire to be a prophet, her disillusionment with religion after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, living through Iran's war with Iraq, and finally leaving for school in Europe as a teenager. Detailing her life abroad and her return to Iran, the second half of Satrapi's memoir illustrates her adolescent life in European schools and her homecoming to a country which had evolved into a new unrecognizable land changed by the war with Iraq and the more established control of the Islamic Republic.

Satrapi's comic documents the effects of war and revolutionary political change on the life of one young woman. Through her personal story, she succeeds in reminding us of the humanity of the Iranians who were disregarded and dehumanized by so many after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. As Satrapi once declared in an interview: "...when we reduce people or a country to a notion then they become abstract and from the second they stop being human beings, then we can go and bomb them and kill them." Her story imparts humanity into the Iranian "Other."



Who is Marjane Satrapi?

Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian creator best known for her graphic memoir, *Persepolis*, and its film adaptation which she co-directed and co-wrote. Her other works include *Chicken with Plums*, *Embroideries*, and several children's books and films. Satrapi was born in 1969 in the rural town of Rasht, Iran, but spent most of her childhood growing up in the capital, Tehran, in a middle-class family who were politically active. Her family's resistance to the rule of the Shah (and later the Ayatollah), in addition to Satrapi's middle-class upbringing, define much of her early life. The effects of the shock to the political system would lead Satrapi's parents to send her to study in Europe. Satrapi would return to Iran and receive degrees from the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, though in 1994 she left and has not returned. While critical of the current regime that holds power in Iran, she loves her country and hopes to one day return as she makes clear in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* in 2009 entitled "I Must Go Home Again to Iran" where she reflects upon the loss of her native country.



Figure 1 *Persepolis*, p. 117.

Context: The Iranian Revolution

The revolution in 1979 was a response by the Iranian people to a corrupt government which no longer supported its own people as it was accused of being focused on the elite and was considered too "westernized." The accusation of westernization stems from the orchestrated coup d'état of the Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in 1953 by the CIA and the British Secret Intelligence. After ousting Mossadegh, the Western powers elevated Reza Shah Pahlavi as the leader of Iran with a less powerful Parliament. The West would continue to hold great influence over Iran's government and specifically their oil production which in the years after the removal of Mosaddegh became a problem for the Shah who was seen as too influenced by Western government and other elites. This criticism of the Shah reached a tipping point in 1978 due to the great disparity of income inequality. The revolution thus initially began because of severe income inequality (along with concerns about healthcare and other essentials for living) but soon became a battle over the religious soul of the nation. Many of the anti-Shah protestors' initial hope was that this revolution would create a more egalitarian society, but after the Shah left the country in January 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February of that same year after being in exile since 1964. Khomeini's religio-nationalists, spurred by the circulation of his writing and speeches underground for years, would seize upon the populist revolution to solidify his power and install him as the Supreme Leader of the country as he established Iran as an Islamic Republic. As one of his first acts, Khomeini would establish the mandatory veil for women which was a visual marker for the new Islamic Republic. *Persepolis* documents this shift in Iran from a constitutional monarchy to the Islamic Republic through the eyes of Marji the child as she grows up and through the retrospective narration of Satrapi the adult.

Questions for Discussion

1. Satrapi's comic explores distinct uses of religion, offering a complex understanding of Islam, and challenging the negative monolithic vision of Muslim identity for many Westerners. For the young Marji, her religion inspires a desire to be a prophet (Fig. 2). In contrast to Marji's love of God, though, is the Islamic Republic's weaponizing of religion to control the people of Iran which leads Marji to reject God. How does Satrapi challenge the caricaturing of Islam yet also ask us to contend with the violence the government acted out in the name of religion?
2. While Satrapi's story documents the effects of political trauma on one girl and her family, her story also resembles a "coming of age" story, a narrative recognizable to many readers across the world. How does Satrapi's use of this storytelling model facilitate connection to non-Iranian readers and challenge the stereotypes of Iranians?
3. *Persepolis* opens with a scene of many young girls in veil with a portrait shot of Satrapi herself in a *chador* (p. 1) Below the image, she shows the girls acting out protests by ripping off the veils, setting the stage for the comic which is about the impact of political trauma on young children. How does this opening orient the reader to think about the revolution not simply as a historical event but as filtered through the life of a young child? How does her memoir reframe the study of history?
4. The black and white line art cartooning style used in *Persepolis* invokes the history of Persian miniatures. This artistic allusion along with naming the book, *Persepolis*, the ancient capital of Persia, situates Satrapi's book as continuing that ancient empire and its cultural productions which has a much longer history than the Islamic Republic of Iran. What does Satrapi's deliberate attention to Persian history tell us about how we should read this book?
5. While Satrapi's comic reflects the influence of Persian art, she also turns to the great images of Western art, including Michelangelo's *La Pieta* (Fig. 3), which she recreates toward the end of the book. What does Satrapi's cosmopolitanism tell us not only about her education but about the role of art in cultural connection?
6. Satrapi's story notably visualizes the life of a young girl and the effects of political trauma, the murder of her uncle, the bombings and death of her friends, and her self-imposed exile. How does the comics form grant access to these unspeakable events? How should we understand Satrapi's own processing of these events through the comics form as opposed to other media?
7. Satrapi's time in Europe is painful as she finds herself alone, scared, and mentally unwell. While Satrapi no longer lives in Iran, she lives in France, what does her depiction of her time in Europe tell us about the need for human connection whether in the East or West?
8. The Iranian revolution captures a nationalism vs. populism divide. The revolution was a populist uprising against corruption, but it was co-opted by religious nationalism (a point Satrapi makes clear through her parents who supported the uprising but did not support the Ayatollah). How do we understand the difference between these two? How does Satrapi help us to understand other populist vs. nationalist struggles that have occurred across the world in the past decades?

Interviews & Additional Questions

If you want to take this book discussion a step further, below are recommended interviews with the creator and suggested supplemental questions.

- Emma Watson, "[Emma Watson Interviews Persepolis Author Marjane Satrapi](https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi)," *Vogue*, August 1, 2016. <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>
 - In the interview with Emma Watson, Satrapi explains the use of the minimalist style of her art as she states, "I always thought that what I had to say was too much; it was complicated with lots and lots of words. So I had to go very mellow on the other side because otherwise the rhythm of reading would be destroyed. That's why I went for something black and white, completely, with an extremely minimalistic emphasis, because I thought that was the best for the rhythm of the reading."
 - Satrapi's attention to the split narrative levels here remind us that the comics reading experience is not one that is supplementary, rather the two modes of representation can be in contest with one another, which is different, then, say a picture book. For example, the young Marji dances as children are killed in the Iran-Iraq war, while the adult Satrapi reflects on the trauma of the history that she did not fully understand yet (p. 102). Discuss the reading experience of the reflective adult narrator and the young Marji who we know through her dialogue and actions.
- Nermeen Shaikh, "Marjane Satrapi: ['I Will Always be Iranian.'](https://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian)" *Asia Society*. <https://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian>
 - In this interview, Satrapi makes a distinction between the two books of *Persepolis* and the "two" characters she creates, young Marji and the young adult, Marjane. She says, "Of course the relationship that you have with the Marji in the first book and the second book cannot be the same. In the first book, you're absolutely charmed by this little child; in the second book, there is nothing to be charmed about. So, of course it changed. But it's about life. I was not going to go on forever pretending I was cute."
 - As a reader, how did your relationship to the character change throughout the two books? How did your connection to young Marji and the young adult Marjane change with your reading? Did your empathic connection change?

Figure 2 *Persepolis*, p. 6.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

If you want to advance your discussion further, consider pairing the comic with one of following scholarly articles and supplemental questions.

- Hillary Chute, "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1/2 (2008): 92-110.

- In this article, Chute makes the useful observation that Satrapi both presents her story through the reflective narration of the author as an adult and in the voice she gives to Marji the child. So, as author she is "narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject" (p. 94).
- How does the comic allow for a visual and verbal representation of history that is both reflective and active through these two narrative tracks?

- Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 353-80.

- In this article, Malek places *Persepolis* in the context of memoir as a genre, specifically focusing on the burst of Persian exile narratives in the 2000s. More specifically, she writes, "the democratic nature of memoir, giving voice to the minority experience, has appealed to a culture obsessed with democracy, equality, and individual representation, while journalists in particular have become proponents of the more practical argument: 'it's the market'" (p. 360).
- Satrapi's story situates itself definitively in the genre of graphic memoir. How would this story have been different had she included documentary evidence or other external materials to support her story? What is it about the memoir that allows the reader to connect with Satrapi?

- Golnar Nabizadeh, "Vision and Precarity in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1/2 (2016): 152-67.

- In this article, Nabizadeh places the drawn comics image in conversation with photography. As she says, "Like photography, the hand-drawn narrative records an indexical mark in the midst of death—and here, the mark is linked directly to the hand of its creator, rather than the surface of the photographic plate or digital screen" (p. 154).
- With the Iranian Revolution being such a well-photographed and documented event, how does the drawn image ask us to rethink or connect differently with the event than photography?



Figure 3 *Persepolis*, p. 277.

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund offers a [“case study”](http://cbldef.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-persepolis/) of *Persepolis* which can be paired with this toolkit. (<http://cbldef.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-persepolis/>)
- PEN America, [“Conversation with Marjane Satrapi and Art Spiegelman.”](https://youtu.be/rUmSAq5uNLY) (<https://youtu.be/rUmSAq5uNLY>)
- PEN America, [“Conversation with Marjane Satrapi.”](https://youtu.be/crhUI5zZzi8) (<https://youtu.be/crhUI5zZzi8>)
- Movieweb, [“Persepolis - Exclusive: Marjane Satrapi.”](https://youtu.be/v9onZpQix_w) (https://youtu.be/v9onZpQix_w)
- TCDPhil (Trinity College Dublin, The University Philosophical Society) YouTube Channel, “Marjane Satrapi | [Full Address and Q&A](https://youtu.be/-HN0J1noluw) | The Phil.” (<https://youtu.be/-HN0J1noluw>)
- Patricia Storage, [“A Double Life in Black and White.”](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/04/07/a-double-life-in-black-and-white/) *New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2005. (<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/04/07/a-double-life-in-black-and-white/>)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other works (including films) by Marjane Satrapi:

- *Embroideries* (Pantheon, 2005).
- *Chicken with Plums* (Pantheon, 2009).
- *Persepolis* (Sony Pictures, 2007).

If you are interested in reading more about Middle East history:

- *Zahra’s Paradise* by Amir and Khalil (First Second, 2011).
- *The Arab of the Future* by Riad Sattouf (Metropolitan Books, 2015).
- *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* by Sarah Glidden (Drawn & Quarterly, 2016).

If you are interested in other comic memoirs by women:

- *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (Abrams ComicArts, 2017).
- *One! Hundred! Demons!* by Lynda Barry (Drawn & Quarterly, 2005).
- *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris (Fantagraphics, 2017).