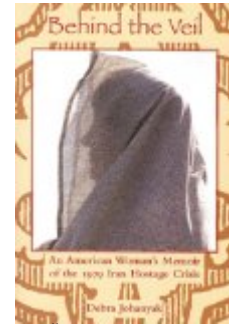


H-Net Reviews

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Debra Johanyak. *Behind the Veil: An American Woman's Memoir of the 1979 Hostage Crisis*. Akron: University of Akron Press, 2007. ix + 251 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-931968-38-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-931968-40-9.

Reviewed by Karen Garner (Department of History, SUNY Empire State College)
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Debra Johanyak takes on the role of cross-cultural interpreter in this memoir of her marriage to an Iranian man and their life in Shiraz, Iran between 1977 and 1980, a period of time that coincided with the capture of American hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by militant Islamist students. Johanyak begins her memoir in 2007 with the wish that “while mutual distrust continues over oil supplies and nuclear capabilities, it is time to put hostilities aside and begin building a new relationship based on mutual respect” (p. 1). The facts that Johanyak discovered she could not live freely and happily as an American woman in Iran and that she and her husband failed to sustain their cross-cultural relationship on the personal level and ended their marriage upon Johanyak’s return to the United States with her two young sons in 1980, does not necessarily generate hope that Johanyak’s wish for a new U.S.-Iranian relationship will soon be realized. Nor does her brief account of the twentieth-century history of Iran’s relations with the West included on pages 94 to 105 of this memoir leading up to the Islamic revolution in 1979, and the subsequent take-over of the American embassy in November of that year, both inspired by the fiercely fundamentalist and anti-modern cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, generate that hope either.

In an introductory chapter, Johanyak wonders why American Christians and Jews know so little about the Islamic faith and why Americans show little respect for Islamic values of honor and modesty. Her memoir seeks to increase the reader’s understanding of Islamic religion and culture, assuming that knowledge brings tolerance, but it does not seek to be a religious primer. Rather it is a personal account of several years in the life of a young American woman who married a man whom she seemed not to know or understand very well and her adjustments

to an alien culture. Johanyak was an “outsider” living briefly within the relatively closed Iranian culture, a culture that was hostile to Westerners in spite of several decades of modernization and economic and political development based on Western models followed by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-allied Iranian head of state who led Iran from 1953 until his flight from the fundamentalist revolution to the West in January 1979. When Johanyak first moved to Shiraz in 1977 to live with her husband’s family after their marriage, she was venturing far beyond the sheltered life she had known, born and raised in small-town Ohio. Although she had already left her parents’ home and had taken a secretarial position at the University of Akron following the birth of her first son, who was born out of wedlock after Johanyak’s relationship with her son’s father ended in a broken engagement, Johanyak asserts that she was not estranged from her family or rebelling against her upbringing. In Akron, she befriended an Iranian woman who also had a young son, and who became Johanyak’s roommate. Through her new roommate, Johanyak met Nasrolah Kamalie, the Iranian man whom she agreed to marry after several months, because, she explained “he had been attentive and respectful to me since the day I had met him, and he was good-looking as well as hardworking” (p. 21). Married in December 1974, Johanyak and her husband attended classes at the University of Akron and both graduated in June 1977. Johanyak gave birth to their son in July, as the couple planned their move to Iran to live near Nasrolah’s family in August 1977.

Johanyak notes that she was not prepared for the cultural differences from the insulated life she had known growing up in Ohio. The first third of her memoir chronicles Johanyak’s encounters with her husband’s Iranian

family, who universally welcomed Johanyak and her sons into their midst seemingly without reservation as she learned the customs and geography of her new home. Nasrolah had several sisters and brothers near in ages to Johanyak, and she enjoyed their company. She found work teaching English and was generally “filled with gratitude for the experience of living in an exotic place where I saw new things everyday” (p. 58). Johanyak’s happiness faded rapidly when she became ill and had to have an emergency surgery. During the slow recovery period, Johanyak became homesick as well and left Iran and her husband behind as she and her two young sons returned to Ohio. Nine months later, Johanyak and her husband decided to reconcile, and he returned to the States. After several months together in Ohio, they returned again to Iran. In summer 1979, after the upheavals of the January revolution deposed the Shah of Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to lead the Islamic nation, Johanyak and her family returned to Iran to “start over,” in the belief that “things were returning to normal in Iran, and there was no need to worry” (p. 71).

The remaining two thirds of Johanyak’s memoir focus on her encounters with the growing anti-Western and anti-American hostility in Iran. Throughout the next seven months of her life in Iran, Johanyak recorded the increasing discomfort she felt as an American woman who refused to don a veil in public or to understand the politics of Islamic fundamentalism. In fact, her political education seems to have taken place at some point after she returned from Iran, in rethinking her personal experiences and in conducting the historical research for her memoir. During her second attempt to live with her husband’s family in Shiraz, Johanyak enrolled in graduate

courses at the university in Shiraz and taught English-language courses at the university as well. She taught with an international faculty, many of whom were foreigners like herself, married to Iranians. During the early fall, the anti-Western protests seemed confined to the student population in Tehran, but Johanyak felt increasingly uneasy. Nonetheless, she had no premonition that growing anti-American militancy would erupt in fury in Tehran with the capture of the U.S. Embassy and its staff taken as hostages in November 1979 by the mob-like Revolutionary Guards.

Johanyak worried for her own and her son’s safety as she saw signs attacking women without veils, but she refused to adopt the veil herself, believing that it would “extinguish [her] identity under a piece of cloth that would cover all that [she] was” (p. 131). By January 1980, Johanyak had determined to leave Iran again, although she stayed in Iran until March when her husband agreed to allow her sons to return to the States with her. Johanyak describes feeling frightened in Iran and very conflicted about her own motives for refusing to wear the veil, variously attributing that refusal to stubbornness and ignorance of another culture, to an expression of pride in her American identity, or to an expression of her reawakened Christian faith. Johanyak felt physically threatened on her university campus during one incident when students briefly confined the international faculty in a classroom, and Iranian colleagues stepped in to defuse the situation and disperse the angry crowd. Johanyak’s story is certainly an interesting personal account set in historic times, but ultimately it does not add much to our understanding of the 1979 Iranian revolution or provide much insight into the possibilities for transforming U.S.-Iranian relations, as Johanyak set out to do.

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