FICTION

One Man's Complicated Quest for Connection in Contemporary Tehran

Salar Abdoh's latest novel, "A Nearby Country Called Love," explores the complexities of relationships, sexuality and cultural norms in modern Iran.

By Lysley Tenorio

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A NEARBY COUNTRY CALLED LOVE, by Salar Abdoh

At the start of Salar Abdoh's fifth novel, "A Nearby Country Called Love," Issa, the protagonist, has just concluded a failed, four-day search in Beirut for an "Arab poetess" with whom he's corresponded via email but never actually met. His reason for the pursuit: "The possibility of love," he says. The desire for connection — romantic, familial, platonic — propels Issa's emotional trajectory, while simultaneously creating a complex portrait of interpersonal relationships in contemporary Iran.

Issa isn't in the best of circumstances. After a decade in New York City, he's returned home to Tehran, where he now spends his days selling washing machines and teaching English on the side, living in the old apartment he once shared with his father and older brother, Hashem. Both are now deceased, but when they were alive Issa's father had abused Hashem for being gay, a turbulent relationship that continues to haunt Issa.

With no family and few friends, Issa lives life at a low and lonely hum. But things amp up when he runs into an old acquaintance named Mehran, a young gay man who was once a member of Hashem's theater troupe. Mehran invites Issa to a play

he's performing in; Issa attends and brings along his friend Nasser, a temperamental man who's always ready for a fight. To Issa's surprise, Nasser — who Issa presumed was straight — is immediately taken with Mehran, and the two suddenly (and to this reader, inexplicably) become a couple. Soon after, Nasser drops the news that he intends to marry Mehran.

But there's a critical snag to his plans: Since Islamic law forbids same-sex marriage, Nasser demands that Mehran undergo gender transition surgery, which, as Nasser explains, the law does allow: "It's legal in Islam, at least our Islam. A man who is not really a man can get surgery and become a woman." Mehran, who is not trans, is resistant but Nasser continues to pressure him, becoming abusive in the process, prompting Issa to step in as Mehran's protector, a role that prompts in Issa a possible attraction — both physical and emotional — to Mehran.

It's an unexpected development, but it's nonetheless compelling, and it explores the ways contemporary Iran can be seemingly progressive one moment, then discouragingly regressive the next. The state "doesn't want men who like men on their hands," Issa says to Nasser, "so they turn them into women. You think this is just?" The book is at its most impactful when examining gay relationships and trans life in this cultural context, and while the characters' clashing views can sometimes feel like heavy-handed political messaging, they ultimately force Issa to confront his own relationships (or lack thereof) and consider how far he's willing to go — and with whom — to fill that empty space.

The Issa-Nasser-Mehran plot is the novel's most intriguing, but it's hampered by other competing dramas: A family friend struggles against her tyrannical ex-husband, while the aforementioned Arab poetess suddenly appears and falls in love with a trans man. There's also a recurring thread about a local woman who dies from self-immolation, a story line that seems superfluous. Consequently, Issa, and our emotional investment, sometimes feel splintered among too many concerns.

But one could argue that this, simply, is life, particularly in a place as complicated and tumultuous as Tehran. For Issa, turmoil is everywhere — in the city streets, in the confines of one's apartment. But "A Nearby Country Called Love" raises the

possibility that love — or more vitally, *connection* — can still be forged in a difficult world. Reflecting on his own neighborhood, Issa thinks, “It was the kind of place that made you imagine apocalypse had actually arrived, and it wasn’t impossible to live through it after all.”

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