

***We Lived to Tell: Political Memoirs of Iranian Women***  
**by Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr and Shadi Parsi**  
**Toronto: McGilligan Books (2007), 239 pp.**  
*Reviewed by Bethany J. Osborne*

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Although women political prisoners from Iran have written extensively about their experiences in Farsi, as Shahrzad Mojab mentions in her introduction to this volume, this is the first collection of memoirs written in English by women who were political prisoners in the Islamic Republic of Iran (p. 8). The book brings together the stories of three such women who have settled in Canada. The women chose to remain anonymous to protect the privacy and security of all of the different people who enter their stories. The writing of prison memoirs is important to these women and they encourage others to write memoirs, widely and in as many languages as possible, in order to prevent similar events from happening in the future (p. 238). The reader is invited to journey with these women through their prison experiences.

In Sousan Mehr's memoir "Years of Fire and Ash", she writes about the first hours and days of her arrest, and her story continues through the time she spent in prison. Sketches of life in prison and of the different women who were her community punctuate her memoir. Mehr writes of humour and beauty in the midst of a period of her life that was also defined by pain in its many different forms.

In a similar vein, Azadeh Agah's memoir "As Long as There are Poppies", records the experience of her initial arrest and talks about life in the public wards. She writes about the complexity of caring for a child in prison, of resisting torture and about relationships between prisoners. Her story also documents, through words and photographs, the creative ways that women took simple items, which would have been considered garbage outside of prison walls, and transformed them into pieces of art. These creations brought beauty, in a tangible way, into their lives, occupying their hands and minds during long quiet periods of waiting.

Shadi Parsi, in her memoir "The Five Seasons", speaks poignantly of the way that politics affected how she and her fellow prisoners related to each other. Like Mehr and Agah, she writes of the intrusive presence of *tavaabs* – fellow prisoners who had broken under torture and now served as informants to prison authorities. While she was in prison, Parsi vowed that one day she would write the story of her imprisonment. Her story and accompanying poem are the fulfillment of that vow, serving as an elegy for her lost years.

This collection of memoirs is dedicated to all those who have fought for justice including parents, siblings, husbands and children. Their words to their children are hopeful for the possibility that the telling of the stories may open up new possibilities for the future:

We dedicate this book to you and the next generation, so that you may understand, remember and learn from it.

The breaking of silence can be jarring; initial words can create sounds, colours and images that are difficult to hear. This is true of the stories of torture, betrayal, loss and endless waiting that are shared by Agah, Mehr and Parsi. However, even the act of articulating their experiences is life-affirming. Their narratives also powerfully demonstrate the incredible resilience of the human spirit and the sustaining power of community. Although the Islamic regime created the structure that imprisoned these women, it was not the regime that had the most profound effect on their lives. Instead, it was the presence of others to share their journey that caused a transformation. Stories like this open up the possibility of hope for each of us as we face the different challenges that are inherent on our own journeys.

#### **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

*Bethany J. Osborne* has recently completed her MA in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT). Her thesis, *The Learning of Embattled Bodies: Women Political Prisoners of Iran*, looks at using narrative and visual art as tools to enable learning and mitigate the effects of trauma in women who have experienced violence.