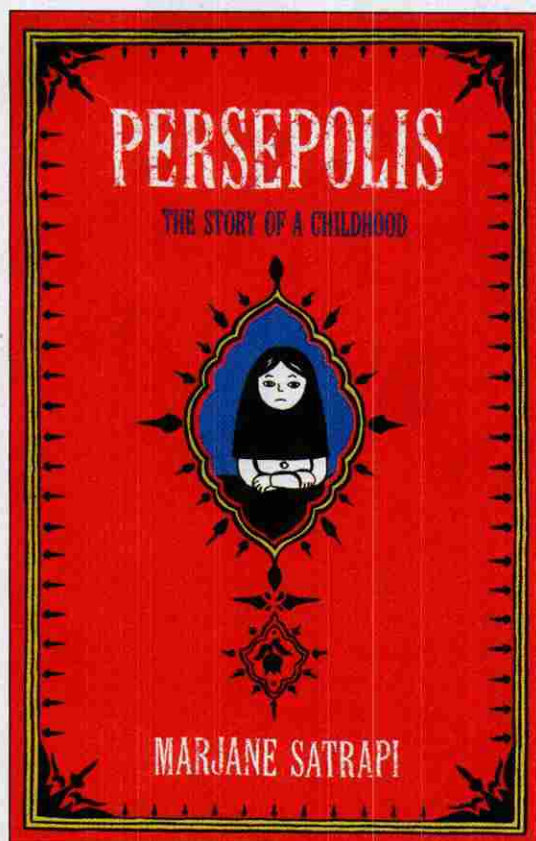




## A Graphic Novel Memoir

# Why I Wrote *Persepolis*

Writer **Marjane Satrapi** faced the challenges of life in post-revolutionary Iran. She used the graphic novel format to tell her unique story.



**M**arjane Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969—which means she was ten when the revolution of 1979 transformed Iran into an Islamic republic. She lived for years in Tehran, Iran’s capital city, under the repressive regime of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other Islamic extremist leaders. A free spirit, Marjane chafed under the restrictions that were placed on young people, especially girls, including the edict that all women must wear veils and chadors (long shawls or cloaks) and that girls’ education be limited. She also rebelled against the censorship that barred young Iranians from music, entertainment, and other aspects of American and Western culture.

Earlier this year, Marjane, now living in the United States, published *Persepolis*, a memoir in the form of a graphic novel. *Persepolis* (the name of the capital of the ancient Persian empire) has been widely praised by readers and other authors, including Sandra Cisneros and Phillip Pullman. Writer and editor Gloria Steinem captured the unique quality of *Persepolis*: “the intimacy of a memoir, the irresistibility of a comic book, and the political depth of the conflict between fundamentalism and democracy.” In this brief essay, Marjane Satrapi writes about how using the graphic novel helped her tell her story with great impact. →



# THE VEIL

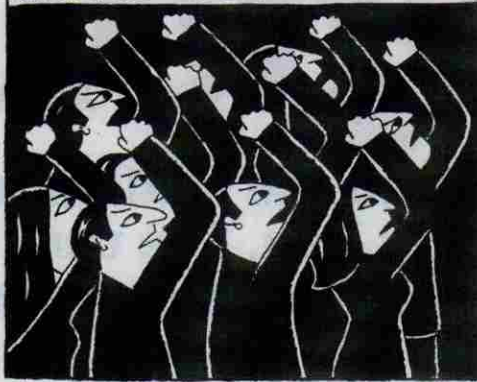
THIS IS ME WHEN I WAS 10 YEARS OLD. THIS WAS IN 1980.



AND THIS IS A CLASS PHOTO. I'M SITTING ON THE FAR LEFT SO YOU DON'T SEE ME. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: GOLNAZ, MAHSHID, NARINE, MINNA.



IN 1979 A REVOLUTION TOOK PLACE. IT WAS LATER CALLED "THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION".



THEN CAME 1980: THE YEAR IT BECAME OBLIGATORY TO WEAR THE VEIL AT SCHOOL.



WE DIDN'T REALLY LIKE TO WEAR THE VEIL, ESPECIALLY SINCE WE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY WE HAD TO.



From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We'd see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn't represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, "No, it's not like that there." I've been justifying why it isn't negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years. How strange when it isn't something I did or chose to be?

After I finished university, there were nine of us, all artists and friends, working in a studio together. That group finally said, "Do something with your stories." They introduced me to graphic novelists. Art Spiegelman [author of the Holocaust fable *Maus*] was first. And when I read him, I thought, "It's possible to tell a story and make a point this way." It was amazing.





If people are given the chance to experience life in more than one country, they will hate a little less. It's not a miracle potion, but little by little you can solve problems in the "basement" of a country, not on the surface. That is why I wanted people in other countries to read *Persepolis*, to see that I grew up just as other children do.

It's so rewarding to see people at my book signings who never read graphic novels. They say that when they read mine, they became more interested in the subject. If *Persepolis* opens people's eyes, I feel successful.

### Like Making a Movie

People always ask me, "Why didn't you write a 'book'?" But that's what *Persepolis* is. To me, a book is pages within a cover that are related to the same thing. Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that does not mean they are second-rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw, it seems a shame to choose only one. I think it's better to do both.

We learn about the world through images all the time. In the cinema we do it, but to make a film you need sponsors and money and 10,000 people to work with you. With a graphic novel, all you need is yourself and your editor.

Of course, you have to have a very visual approach to the world. You have to perceive life with images—otherwise it doesn't work. The point is that you have to know what you want to say, and find the best way of saying it. It's hard to explain how *Persepolis* evolved once I started writing. I had to learn how to write it as a graphic novel by doing it.

### What I Wanted to Say

I'm a pacifist. I believe there are ways to solve the world's problems. Instead of using money to create arms, I think countries should invest in scholarships for kids to study abroad. Perhaps they could become good and knowledgeable professors in their own countries. You need time for that kind of change, though.

I was brought up open-minded. If I didn't know any people from other countries, based on news stories, I'd think everyone was evil! But I know a lot of people, and know that there is no such thing as stark good and evil. There are good and evil everywhere.

### The Freedom to Think

My parents were very proud when they read *Persepolis*. If I criticize them once in a while in the book, it's because it's the truth, and they laugh. My father always says, "Only an idiot never changes his mind." My parents accept that times change. They've taught me that you can make mistakes.

They were extremely open-minded about what I said, and they were demanding. They were magnificent parents. They gave me the most important thing—the freedom to think and decide for myself.

—Marjane Satrapi

## WRITE AWAY

"Of course, you have to have a very visual approach to the world. You have to perceive life with images—otherwise it doesn't work." Practice having a visual approach by thinking back to some key moments in your life. For instance:

- The first time you met someone who would become an important friend
- Your first day of school, or in a new school
- A memorable athletic event that you witnessed or took part in
- September 11, 2001—how you found out, and how you reacted
- The funniest/saddest thing that ever happened to you.

For each of the above, or for any idea of your own, write a few phrases or sentences that describe both what happened and how it felt.

Then, for each, write a description of a single panel (box) for a graphic novel that you feel would capture the moment. Who (besides you) would be in the panel? What would the character(s) be saying in their speech balloons? What environment would be drawn in the background?

Then, use a ruler to draw a six-inch-by-six-inch box. Sketch a comic book panel for each of the key moments you are recalling.

