



# **Saved by Beauty: Adventures of an American Romantic in Iran**

*Roger Housden*

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## **Saved by Beauty: Adventures of an American Romantic in Iran** Roger Housden

Roger Housden traveled to Iran to meet with artists, writers, film makers and religious scholars who embody the long Iranian tradition of humanism, the belief in scholarship and artistry that began with the reign of Cyrus the Great. He traveled to the mountains of Kurdistan to learn from Sufis, whose version of Islam exhorts nothing but tolerance and love. From the bustle of modern Tehran to the paradise gardens of Shiraz to the spectacular mosques and ancient palaces of Isfahan, Housden met Iranians who were warm, welcoming, generous, intellectually curious, and who would recite the poetry of Hafez or Rumi at the slightest opportunity.

*Saved By Beauty* weaves a richly textured story of many threads. It is a deeply poetic and perceptive appreciation of a culture that has endured for over three thousand years, while it also portrays the creative and spiritual cultures within contemporary Iran that are rarely given any mention in the West. It is a suspense story that reflects on the philosophical and aesthetic questions of good and evil, truth and beauty. And finally, it is the story of a man in his sixties on a personal quest to discover if the Iran of his youthful imagination continued to exist, or whether it had been lost forever under a strict totalitarian regime. In Iran, Roger Housden was brought face to face with the reality that beauty and truth, deceit and violence, are inextricably mingled in the affairs of human life, and was forever changed.

## **Saved by Beauty: Adventures of an American Romantic in Iran Details**

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**Roger Housden**

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# **From Reader Review Saved by Beauty: Adventures of an American Romantic in Iran for online ebook**

## **Roberta says**

I loved this book about a culture I know only from the political news. The author is a lover of the poetry of Rumi and Hafez, as I am, and it is sprinkled throughout the book. He finds ironically that even Iranian bureaucrats quote Hafez from memory. There are wonderful descriptions of the ancient mosques and cities of the country. Though the book starts and ends with a disturbing incident at the airport in Tehran where he was detained and interrogated for days and suspected of working for the CIA, most of the book is about the beauty he discovered there in the close-knit communities, the gardens and old mosques. Most Iranians seem to live double lives more than in most countries--they have a public life where they follow the many restrictions and rules, and then their private ones where they enjoy family, good food, music and dance, and a deep religious faith that does not support terrorism. This book shows what Housden set out to find, the "other Iran." Highly recommended, especially if you have a poetic spirit!

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## **David Housholder says**

I came of age in the USA in the middle of the Ayatollah's revolution and the debacle of the hostages. It predisposed me against everything Iranian.

Thus this book was painting its story on a "tabula rasa," a blank slate. I had virtually no concept of what Iran is like, at any level.

My prejudice continued for the first part of the book. Also, I am not used to reading travelogues.

Then it started to grow on me.

Part of it was Housden's unparalleled ability to paint crisp pictures in your mind with words, almost as Jesus did with his parables. Perhaps that comes from his poetic background.

The other exceptional part of the book is Housden's true "fairness" with the complexities of life over there. He writes from the heart, but does so totally free of propaganda. He respects the reader enough to let him/her come to his/her own conclusions.

I love to travel, and am no stranger to "feral" vacations with a tiny backpack, and after reading this book, Iran has gone to the very top of my "must see" list.

Decided to set 1/3 of my sequel to <http://BlackberryNovel.com> in Iran, probably Shiraz, as a direct result of reading /Saved by Beauty/.

The only downside is that the book could use a map. Most of us as unfamiliar with Iran as we are with Middle Earth, and JRRT provided a map :-).

If you don't read this book, you are missing the "trip" of a lifetime.

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### **Sawsan Obeid-zeki says**

Writing a review about Roger Housden's *Saved by beauty* has not been easy. I have to say, I've never felt a strong pull to publicly review a book before, until Housden's *Saved By Beauty*. But if there was a purpose in me reading it, its so that I can share my opinion of the book!!!

To call it a travel log is an understatement. Also, to say that the book speaks of his romantic notion of Iran is wrong, because it is not a notion any more. His enthusiasm radiates intensely throughout the narrative, loved the details, in fact I didn't want it to end.

This book is a rare occurrence, where a capable author, with special skills, met with the ,once in a God knows how long , opportunity to travel to some place, and write about his experience. This place happened to be Iran. He did not blind him self to the difficulties or the negativities of living there, he chose not to let it obscure him from seeing the beauty. And there is beauty every where on earth, beauty and soul in every nation, every civilization, and every religion. Housden's place of choice to explore to bring a piece of to the rest of the world to see, was Persia/Iran. And that is why I wish there will be a Roger Housden out there to write about every nation in history for the rest of the world's delight. A delight that happens to be a necessity as well.

This is a master piece in its beauty. And I hope you know how instrumental this book is, especially this time of our history.

One of the most beautifully written books I have ever put my hands on. And the great part, is that non of it is fiction.

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### **Lisa says**

This was okay, but a little too much poetic waxing for my taste. I do love the subject though.

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### **Rebecca says**

Take a trip to the world of Rumi with this American journalist to today's Iran. Mr. Housden's journey across this mysterious country unveils the dichotomy of perception and reality. Where a people living amidst poverty, war and other depressing conditions strive because of one thing, the perspective of Rumi and other ancient Iranian poets. The Iranian people see the world through the same romance Mr. Housden found while reading these poets. Oases for the senses, found in secluded cafes or temples. *Saved by Beauty* takes the

reader to the other Iran, the true Iran, where the people are human and live with analogous romantic visions of the way life could be. This is a book to read again and again.

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## **Phillip says**

This book is about half a travelogue and half a personal journey of sorts for the author (by that I mean, he spends a lot of time musing about his own place in the world, as he travels throughout Iran). As a travelogue, there are a lot of lucid, well-written descriptions of the areas he visits (Isfahan was particularly vivid for me, and it was fun to follow-up a chapter of his descriptions with visits to flickr or similar sites, to put the descriptions in context). I came at this book with a background similar to the author's, in that my interest in Iran comes from being introduced to the poetry of Rumi through Coleman Barks. The people Mr. Housden meets on his journey really bring the book to life. They have such a passion both for their work (either as artists, spiritual leaders, or political thinkers) and their country. A worthy piece of writing to illuminate Iran to the masses of Westerners who might otherwise only know it through the less flattering portrayal it gets via the mass media.

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## **Nichelle says**

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

I have always enjoyed reading books about cultures that are so very different from my own. I've enjoyed other books about Iran: *Funny in Farsi* and *Persepolis* for example. I looked forward to this book which focuses on one American's journey into Iran after the revolution of 1979 (the other two books deal with growing up during that time). I was not disappointed.

Iran, to Roger Housden, is his dream place. He's dreamed of Iran while growing up and had a very romanticized version of the country. He decided to find out how much of that is true to this day. Housden, ever the poet, describes Iran in beautiful, elegant descriptions which brought life and color to his book. I've never had a book cause so many colors and shapes meet in my mind before like this book. It was beautiful! His goal was wonderfully met. He sees that his idea of the "old Persia" still exists in some ways, but he also shows that there is a lot of discontent as well. He shows the people of Iran to be passionate, connected to their past, committed to family, and showing a strong will to live. He does this very beautifully. Being from America, I hear only one part of Iran and Islam through our media and it's normally not a positive view. This book brings a light to how the people of Iran live and feel. It's something we don't normally get to see and it's a shame that more people don't get to see that as well. I wish it was something more people would understand. Just like other religions, there are always the extremists. That doesn't mean the majority of the people want this or believe to such a point. It's an enlightening book.

Another plus to this book is Housden's use of the poets Rumi and Hafez. I have sadly never heard of these poets until I read this book! I loved the connection he makes with the poets and his adventures throughout. After reading this, I want to read more about these two poets and their poems.

Housden doesn't shy away from the negatives though- it's there. Quite a scary bit with his own journey as well. But just like in all cultures, there is the dark and the light. The light portrayed here is one I didn't know existed. One day, I think it would be great to see the history and culture of Iran. I don't think I'll be able to go

anytime soon but I hope that one day, I'll be able to see these wonderful places that Housden describes.

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## **Vera Marie says**

Roger Housden's *Saved by Beauty* combines an enticing travel guidebook with a philosophical memoir as he travels in Iran, seeking the beautiful culture he first fell in love with (at a distance) as a student.

If I am right, and poetry provides the key to Westerners understanding the Middle East, particularly Iran, then Roger Housden will be the perfect person to unlock that meaning.

Before visiting Iran, he wrote several books about poetry, including one about Rumi, a revered Iranian poet of the 13th century. So in 2007, about to turn 60, he sets off with Rumi in his pocket to find what he calls 'the other Iran.' What he finds confounds some of his prior assumptions about a deeply complex society.

The book has a chilling prologue in which police interrogate Housden about his real reasons for being in Iran. This scene sharply contrasts with the world he plunges into when he arrives in Iran.

This is a pilgrimage to ancient poets and contemporary artists—to the intellectual, expressive part of a culture that in America generally conjures up only forbidding images of the Ayatollah and “Kill all Americans” slogans.

I will leave it to you to discover how that interrogation turns out, because I would like to lure you into adding this lovely book to your library.

This is a portion of my review at [A Travler's Library](#). You can read the entire review, including quotes from the book [here](#).

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## **Kristi says**

Roger Housden has a wonderful, descriptive way to write about beauty in the world and how beauty affects us. This is such an interesting story about his travels to Iran and the east, but what spoke to me most in this book was his love and appreciation of beauty.

I would like to quote some of my favorite passages in this book, and would like you to know that the quotes are taken from the uncorrected proof.

On the subject of art-

“Art's only mission is to make people feel closer. This little phrase had in fact touched the essence of art. When we recognize ourselves in a work – when we feel seen, completed in some way – it is because it includes but also transcends our personal story. It joins the personal with the universal, and so brings us closer to every other living thing.”

While in a historic place-

“All the traders here sold antiques and curios; tiles, samovars, jewelry, painting on wood, turquoise and lapis lazuli. No one was pushing to sell, most were sitting down in the sun, a glass of tea close to hand, gossiping idly with their neighbors. I began to dream I was in old Persia, in a time before the mullahs, even in a time before the shahs. A time out of an illustrated book; a time out of time.”

“For centuries, traders coming to the bazaar from other cities and farther afield would have unloaded their camels right here in this spot where I was now. Countless stories from across the whole region, personal and tribal dramas, must have been exchanged here in this little enclosure. People would have propped themselves up on a blanket under the stars and eaten, gossiped, argued, and traded together through all the twists and turns of this city's political fortunes. They would have recounted tales of their fathers' times, when life was more honest and simple; bemoaned the sorry conditions their rulers obliged them to live under now; and they would have dreamed of happier days ahead. Life would have gone on, as it always does.”

Gardens were important in old Persia, and our word paradise derives from their word for garden.

“The gardens were not intended to be mere decoration. Nor were they planted as a food source. They were a mirror of the glory and beauty those early Persians saw in the created world about them, and a witness to the creative role of human stewardship. They were an act of imagination through which the first gardeners consciously sought to create a heaven in a little corner of the earth.”

“Evidence suggests that the first gardeners had a grander vision in mind. They wanted to do nothing less than imitate the work of God, to create a dynamic harmony of the four elements available to the original Creator – earth, air, fire, and water. With these elements they wanted to generate life, as the Creator had done; to pay homage to the fertility of this blossoming world. The garden, then, was a form of devotion, an offering in honor of the original creative, fertile force. It was a sacred space, literally an earthly paradise set apart from the mundane concerns of the world – a place where man could return to his original nature, in harmony with the rest of life.”

Moments of beauty-

“Beauty recognized as sovereign value. Beauty as a moment of harmonious proportion, everything in its place. In those moments I felt my ego and self-awareness fall away. The only thing missing in moments like those was myself.”

“Moments de beaute. Impossibly, shamelessly romantic, the phrase sounds today, forty years later (than when he first heard it as a teenager), so very nineteenth-century, yet it still captures the spirit of a moment like that . The power of Now, you might say today; or just being. Whatever you call it, being in the moment is life's simplest, most available treasure.”

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## **Diane C. says**

Roger Housden takes you on a tour of Iran, the people and some of their homes, the attractions, the culture and spiritual practices, the poetry in a way that is easy to infuse yourself with the beauty that is Persia/modern day Iran.

What most of us know of Iran is the revolution unseating Shah Reza Pahlavi back in the late 70's and the advent of strict Islamic fundamentalism. Yet 21st century Iran is not a bit like Afghanistan, Al Quaeda or ISIS. It's a place full of self expression, art, film, socializing and peaceful public gathering. That's not to say they have the general freedoms that the USA has (or will until 1/21/17), but this book is an eye opener, written by someone who really makes you feel you are there.

He starts out a bit self-indulgently, but I soldiered on and it is so worth it. Just a chapter of telling you about

himself, then the fun and enlightening starts.

Highly recommend!

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## **William says**

Finally someone pays appropriate homage to the wonders of this country.

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## **Kim says**

Roger Housden and I have something in common: a fascination with Iran which pre-dated going to that country. My own interest in Iran was of relatively recent date when I first travelled there in 2000. It had been awakened through my work only a few years before, whereas Housden - in his sixties when he went to Iran in 2008 - had been interested in the country since his youth. Housden and I also differed in the source of our fascination with the country: he came to his interest through an appreciation of the great Persian poets, I arrived there because of an interest in Iran's modern political history.

So it was with great anticipation that I started reading this book. I have now visited Iran twice - the second time in 2004 - and Housden went to some of the same places I visited on my own trips. His description of Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd accorded with my memories of those cities. Because of the vividness of my memories and Housden's skill as a writer, it felt as if he was walking in my footsteps. Housden stayed in hotels I had stayed in, he drank tea in teahouses I had visited, he described locations in bazaars I had wandered in. However, as Housden described these places, I saw them again with fresh eyes. This is because he experienced them with an entirely different sensibility: he saw them through the eyes of a poet.

I enjoyed re-experiencing Iran through different eyes which saw things which I know so differently. I have read many books on Iran. However, most of them deal with the perspective with which I am most familiar - that is, the politics and the history of the country. Experiencing Iran - a country in which poetry is the major literary form - through the eyes of a poet was both refreshing and interesting. In addition, Housden writes well. His prose is clear and easy to read, but vivid and full of captivating imagery. Parts of his own history are woven into the narrative in an unforced manner and assist the reader to better understand the author's reaction to what he experiences Iran.

Housden does have his weaknesses as a chronicler of Iran. For example, his experience of the consequences of entering Iran with the intention of writing a book - with funding from an external source and which involved meeting a variety of prominent people who would be considered suspect by the reigning political elite - demonstrates his naivete about the political realities of the country. After all, this was Iran in 2008 - prior to the devastating effects of the most recent presidential election, but after the defeat of the reformist agenda in the election which saw Ahmadinejad become president.

I have some other quibbles with the book. There are, for example, problems in the way in which some Persian words are transliterated. However, these are minor problems which did not effect my overall appreciation of the work.

I would recommend this book to those wanting to learn something of Iran who have an appreciation for the

poetic imagination. However, there are many better books to read for those who are interested in more detailed information about Iran's history and politics.

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### **Jennifer says**

Housden carries with him a long cherished, admittedly romantic notion of Iran, which he wants to experience firsthand, and then share with the rest of us. He travels to Iran shortly before Obama's inauguration, choosing his British passport over his newly acquired American one. He has a few contacts there, which inevitably lead to a few more, and a list of must-see places to visit. He states that he "wanted to look beyond the political wrangling altogether, to the truth and beauty of an ancient and sophisticated culture; to know something of life as it is lived there, beyond the slogans and the headlines; to touch the creative spirit of Iran and to be touched by it in turn."

It was that last part, "the creative spirit," which made it difficult for me, the reader, to feel that I had seen the truth. Most of the people we meet are gracious, beautiful, successful, and western educated. Many maintain residences in both Iran and Europe or America. While Housden marvels at their ability to switch between two such different cultures, I find myself wondering how people live who do not have the option of spending half the year in America, people who could not afford to send their child to Oxford, people who are not among the elite. Is life in Iran as beautiful and sophisticated for a housemaid as it is for a filmmaker? These questions distract me, but this is not the book for them. This is a book to charm us, and it does. The descriptions of the beauty of the gardens, the domes, the people, the food - everything (except the hookas) sounds lovely in Housden's beautifully descriptive words.

A spiritual window shopper in his youth and now a secular humanist, Housden is especially interested in Sufism, the mystical side of Islam. Visiting shrines, watching whirling dervishes and swallowers of rocks and razors, Housden sees not "blind faith," but "an imaginative leap," which he says is in short supply in the West. It is remarks like these that made me sad for Housden. He sees so much beauty in a place to which he knows he will never belong. He can believe in miracles, but only in a land unlike his own. It feels like so much misplaced longing, and, for me, it obscured Iran. I never felt like I was seeing life in Iran; I was seeing Housden, as he experienced Iran.

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### **Emily says**

I really enjoyed the first half, but the last few chapters dragged some for me. This was a lovely look into a culture I know next-to-nothing about, though, and as far as memoirs/travelogues go, I enjoyed it.

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### **Jeannie Mancini says**

As a lover of travel literature, I recently came across Roger Housden's *Saved By Beauty* in my favorite used bookstore, and immediately opened the book the moment I arrived home. This memoir of Roger's meanderings from city to city uncovering the true heart of Iran's people and culture left me in awe. From Tehran to Tabriz, from Shiraz to Isfahan, from the heart of the ancient ruins of Persepolis, to dusty deserts and mountain citadels, Housden's ability to evoke the beauty and integrity of Iran's soul pours out in poetic and heartfelt prose. Meeting people of all walks of life, merchants, muezzins, politicians and poets, readers

will become thoroughly engulfed in Iranian history, myth, religious beliefs and current affairs amidst it's people young and old. As Roger navigates through the snaking streets of merchant bazaars, and gracefully steps into the serene yet vibrant spirit of Iran's infamous blue mosques, he surrounds the reader and himself with the lore and legend and the people that live in the heart of the Middle East.

As the reader of this wonderful armchair travel gem, you are sure to feel the intricately woven carpets beneath your feet, smell the spices of the open-air market place, hear the jingle of bells, and the call of prayer from every steeped minaret. Housden shows us the appreciation and dedication to surrounding their lives with beauty as only the Iranians can. Once known as Persia, Iran's history that travels back in time to the era before Christ, is rich in a world of renowned poets such as Rumi and Hafez, intriguing mystics, ruling shahs that had foresight into philosophy way ahead of their time, musicians and scholars, and a country full of people that still today live moment to moment believing in their ability to treasure each day as it comes and that following the values and beliefs of the ancient Persians is what makes their culture and country strong. ? ?

Roger introduces you to many people along his way that all believe in their hearts that although their political and religious ways can be often prohibitive to a modern way of life, their roots and hearts belong to the soil of Iran. Many of their young leave for American or European soil, but most eventually return back to the Persian way of life that is deeply embedded in their blood.

Housden is a fine journalist with an incredible ability to make you feel at home in this land of veiled women and blue domed architecture. You will feel you are right beside him bumping along in a jeep crossing the desert, and will feel his enthusiasm as his heart swells each time he comes across a little piece of beauty whether it be a poem, a song, or a painted ceramic bowl.

Come along to one of the most luscious countries of the Middle East. Learn for yourself that not all of what our media tells us is all there is to know. Not all people from the Middle East are hell-bent on religious jihad wars, suicide bombings, or are all terrorists. This book opened my eyes to the Persian people and I found nothing but wonder to behold. Five stars for an enchanting tale told with honesty, humor, and faith that all people everywhere are beautiful, vibrant, and enduring.

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