



Stills from the animated film *Persepolis*, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud

## SHE'S SO UNUSUAL

IN HER RIVETING GRAPHIC MEMOIR *PERSEPOLIS*, MARJANE SATRAPI LIFTED THE VEIL OFF WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE A SMARTASS IRANIAN GIRL IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD. NOW AS HER STORY IS PREPARED FOR THE BIG SCREEN, SHE LOOKS BACK ON HER JOURNEY FROM HERETIC TO COUNTERCULTURE HEROINE  
BY CORRIE PIKUL

**MARJANE SATRAPI DOESN'T** like to be told what to do. "I've always had problems with authority," says the author and illustrator turned director. "If you want me to do something, just tell me not to do it. Everyone is like that. It's the story of Adam and Eve."

It's also the theme of Satrapi's acclaimed graphic memoirs, which tell the story of her life as a rebellious young girl coming of age in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. In *Persepolis* (the name refers to the ancient capital of Persia, now Iran) and its sequel, *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi uses simple black-and-white line drawings to depict herself prowling the black market, looking to buy contraband cassette tapes, telling off her religion teacher, and outsmarting the Guardians of the Revolution, the largest branch of the Iranian military, after they harass her for dressing "punk." A lovably precocious child who begs her parents to let her join them at protest rallies, Marjane the character matures throughout the books into a sassy, self-assured woman whose idealism is both inspiring and terrifying. Her audacity would be impressive in any culture, but it's especially courageous in postrevolutionary, fundamentalist Iran, where failure to follow the rules can lead to imprisonment and even death (the fate that befalls Marjane's activist uncle).

Since *Persepolis* was released in France in 2000 (it hit U.S. shores three years later), Satrapi's plucky doppelgänger has been charming literary critics, comic-book fans, and even teachers—the books are required reading at more than 100 American schools, including the United States Military Academy at West Point, because of their empathetic insider's perspective on Iran. This winter, Marjane the comic-book character becomes Marjane the international film star, leaping from the books' pages to the big screen in *Persepolis* the movie, opening nationwide at Christmas. An exhilaratingly unique animated work that won a jury prize and lengthy standing ovation at Cannes and was chosen to serve as the finale for the New York Film Festival, *Persepolis* creates a new cinemat-

ic language to express an old message: the personal is political.

According to Satrapi, now 38 and living in self-imposed exile in Paris, the books began as a way to preserve the authenticity of her life story after she'd become weary of hearing herself talk to friends about her extraordinary childhood. "I'd been telling the same stories forever and ever, and I started to feel like a preacher," she says. "Eventually, I was old enough and mature enough and had enough distance to write about them."

By putting into words—and pictures—what it was like to grow up in Iran during the tumultuous postrevolutionary period, Satrapi also hoped to erase some of the stereotypes about her native country (Iran isn't a desert, she points out, but rather "very high up in the mountains—we even have ski resorts") and its citizens ("People would ask me how many wives my father had; he fell in love with my mother when he was 14, and they only have one child—me," she says). With wit and irreverence, Satrapi also shows in her books the subversive ways in which Iranian women struggled for autonomy under the chauvinist rule of male conservative religious leadership. "People would say to me, 'Oh, you Iranian women are so miserable,'" she remembers. "Yeah, the law is not with Iranian women, and I'm not saying the contrary. But Iranian women study, work, and do all sorts of things. The laws are very repressive, and it's a daily fight to deal with them, but the women do it."

While all Iranians were oppressed under the ayatollah's regime (for example, all social gatherings were likely to be broken up by armed guards), women had it particularly rough. They faced harassment or worse from authorities if their veils weren't exactly the right length, if a smudge of rouge could be detected on their cheeks, or if they made a comment deemed unpatriotic. Yet in Satrapi's film, women not only study and work, they dance, drink, do aerobics, flirt, party, and shout. A riotously off-key rendition of "Eye of the Tiger" becomes Marjane's battle cry against the strict Guardians of the Revolution, who try to keep women in line.

Satrapi has often been asked if she thinks her depiction of Iran as oppressive and fundamentalist will actually provide justification for U.S. military efforts. Her response is typically outraged. "I haven't heard of anybody who saw this movie and said, 'We should absolutely bomb Iran!'" she says. "On the contrary, I think this movie is trying to start a dialogue between Iranians and non-Iranians. That's why it's very important to me to release the movie in America. This movie shows that Iranians are people, just like anyone else: they have families, they have a sense of humor, they have thoughts, they can be good, bad, whatever. People who see this movie are not going to be scared of the Iranians any longer. That should make it very difficult to go and throw bombs on their heads."

Still, Satrapi insists that the film adaptation of *Persepolis*, which she co-directed with friend and fellow comic-book artist Vincent Paronnaud, wasn't part of her original plan. "In the beginning, I thought it was the worst idea in the world," Satrapi says, explaining that when film executives first approached her about capitalizing on the books' success, it felt gauche and opportunistic.



**"THERE WERE SOME SCENES WHEN I HAD TO SHOUT AT HER. HOW CAN YOU SHOUT AT CATHERINE DENEUVE? I HAD TO DRINK SOME COGNAC IN ORDER TO CALM DOWN."**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Her hesitation is understandable. There are some books that seem destined for cinematic treatment—but *Persepolis* isn't one of them. Satrapi's bold line drawings are starkly filled with black and white, and battles, demonstrations, and party scenes involving large groups of people look more like ancient Persian tapestries than "BAM! POW!" action sequences. In the wrong hands, a film adaptation could become a disaster. Satrapi says that one studio suggested a *Beverly Hills, 90210*-type television series, and another wanted to make a movie with Jennifer Lopez as her mother and Brad Pitt as her father.

Despite these off-base ideas, Satrapi admits she was intrigued by the challenge of experimenting with a new medium. When Marc-Antoine Robert, a friend, offered to raise money and act as a producer, Satrapi started talking to Paronnaud, with whom she shares a studio, about collaborating. Satrapi and Paronnaud had very specific ideas of what they wanted the

film to look like (she swears they're so simpatico that they didn't argue once about this project). As other producers signed on, the directors demanded total creative control of the film—and to their surprise, the producers agreed. "Vincent and I thought, 'How many times does this happen in your life, to have the opportunity to make exactly the work you want?'" she asks. "So we said, 'Let's try it!' The result might be crap, but in the years that it would take us to make the movie, we'd learn something new."

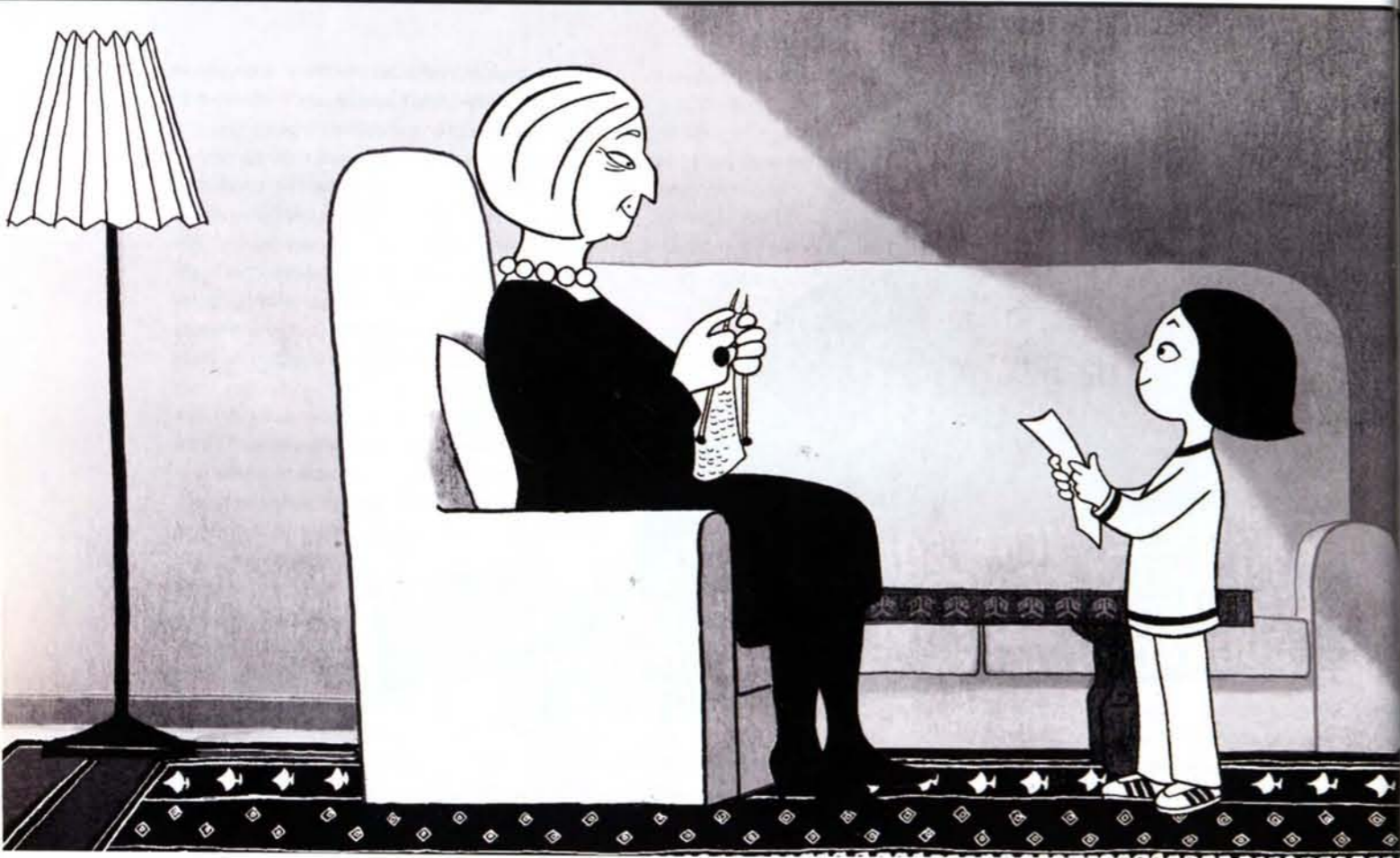
Satrapi and Paronnaud, both first-time feature directors, made some very unusual choices. They wanted the film to be animated, in the same blocky black and white as the books. "As soon as you put the story in a specific

geographical place with a specific type of face, like with black eyes," says Satrapi, "that will become the story of 'those

Middle Easterners—they're crazy! We don't know about them.' With animation, the drawings are more abstract, and people can better relate."

The final film, told as flashbacks, is almost entirely devoid of color and, at least in the version shown to festival goers and to the press, is in French with English subtitles; an English-language version will eventually be released. In both versions, Marjane's mother is played by the iconic French actress Catherine Deneuve. The usually unflappable Satrapi recalls that she was so nervous to direct Deneuve, she couldn't eat lunch. While recording Deneuve's part, Satrapi filled in and read the lines for some of the characters. "There were some scenes when I had to shout at her. How can you shout at Catherine Deneuve? I had to drink some Cognac in order to calm down."

The creative risks paid off as everything came together. Satrapi's personal story is beautifully told in her books, but the addition of voices (Deneuve's real-life daughter, Chiara Mastroianni, plays Marjane) and movement (Satrapi herself was the figure model for every character, "even God") in the film make the funny parts funnier and the sad parts almost unbearably moving. We gain a better understanding of the depth of Marjane's relationships with her spitfire grandmother, her devoted parents, and the loving sanctuary they created for her amid the violence. The scenes when she leaves her family at the airport to depart for Vienna and later, France, will have the entire theater sniffing.



"The whole purpose of this movie is to talk about human beings," Satrapi says. "Terrorists, the war, Middle Eastern, Western—these are just abstract notions. If you make the story about a whole nation, again you get into these notions. That's why this story is based on the story of one person. What is more universal than that?" As that pivotal "one person," Satrapi claims it wasn't as hard as she'd expected to keep her emotional distance from the film. "It's not a documentary about my life; it's a story. And from the moment you make a script out of it, it becomes fictional."

The movie hews closely to the books, and one theme that runs through both works is the veil. Satrapi was 11 when the government required Iranian women to start wearing headscarves in public. "I was too young to understand the more sophisticated changes that had taken place in our society," she says. "But from the second the veil became the law, I started thinking that things had really changed." (In one memorable scene in both the book and the film, an outraged Marjane stands up at a university assembly and protests an order that female students wear longer, more restrictive scarves. "Why is it that I, as a woman, am ex-

pected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on, but they, as men, can get excited by two inches less of my headscarf?" she asks a shocked panel of administrators.) Satrapi is quick to point out, however, that she is not against the head covering. "If believers want to wear the veil, then who am I to tell them not to?" she asks. When Satrapi's parents, fearing for her safety, sent her to Austria, she was free to wear her hair however she liked, yet there she felt stifled by other pressures to conform. "I had to pretend to be someone I was not. It felt like a different kind of veil, a veil you couldn't see."

France seemed like a better fit for Satrapi's frankness and unconventionality. At the age of 24, after graduating from college in Tehran with a degree in art, she moved there to study the decorative arts. She got married, wrote a children's book, and picked up seamstress jobs to make money while trying to get her work published. No one was moved by the children's book, but the idea of a memoir sparked publishers' interest. After the French publisher L'Association published *Persepolis*, "everyone thought I was kind of an amazing genius," Satrapi says, and she was able to attract attention for her other work. Since *Persepolis*, Satrapi has written and illustrated several books, five of which have been translated into English, including *Embroideries*, in which her mother and grandmother join other women in her family to dish about men, sex, and love, Iranian style.

Satrapi's parents still live in Tehran, but it's been almost eight years since she set foot on Iranian soil. Although some of her memories of growing up there are brutal, she's still nostalgic. "I miss everything, from the big mountain of Tehran that was the guardian of the city to the pollution," she says. "I have to be near lots of cars and noise. In nature, I become depressed and can't breathe. That's why I smoke so much—to have the same sensation caused by the amount of pollution we had in Tehran, I need to smoke three packs a day." (On the phone, Satrapi's voice does indeed have the burnt edges of a longtime pollution lover.)

While Satrapi has a devoted fan base, not everyone accepts her portrayal of Iran. *Persepolis* has been accused of "Islamophobia" by Iranian officials, who denounced the film's win at Cannes. An Iranian government adviser told a Tehran-based news agency that the movie presents "an unrealistic picture of the achievements and results of the

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glorious Islamic revolution." Another adviser told *Daily Variety* that the film is an example of Western attempts to "encourage forces opposed to the authorities in any way possible." Satrapi doesn't like to talk about these attacks, as she feels they detract from the pacifist message of the film. "My problem is not with Islam. My problem is with people who, in the name of this and that—Islam, Christianity, secularism, whatever—do bad things to other people," she says.

When she was six years old, the astute Satrapi aspired to be a prophet. In the book she recalls one of her reasons was that "no old person should have to suffer." She prayed to God every night and spent her days "demonstrating" in the garden, costumed as Che Guevara, citing Trotsky and Marx. As an adult, though, after all she's seen and experienced, Satrapi says she no longer believes in ideological heroes. But that doesn't mean she's lost her vibrant idealism. "Life is a question of disillusionment. You are meant to become cynical," she says. "But I cannot accept this destiny! I still believe we can change the world." ■

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