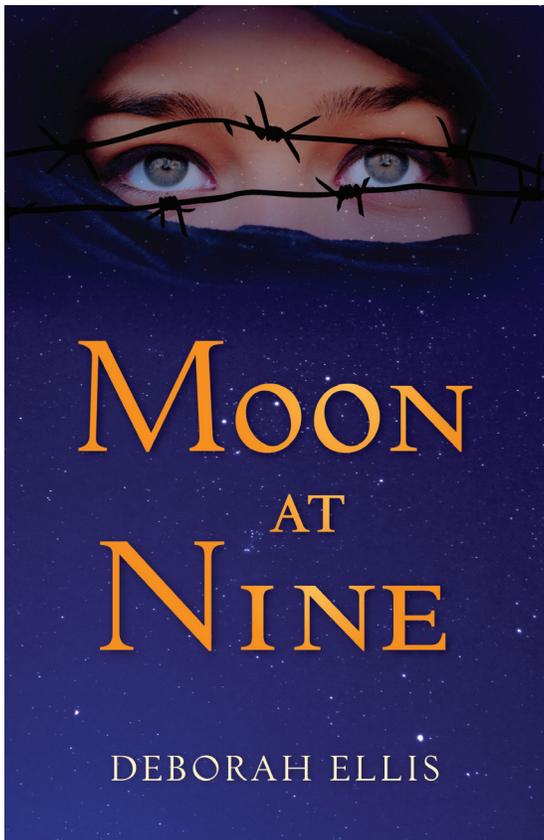


MOON AT NINE

Deborah Ellis

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Created by Erin Woods



**AGES 12+ ★ 224 PAGES
BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

KEYWORDS

LGBT, Iran, 1980s, Social Injustice, Human Rights, Iraq-Iran War, Iranian Revolution, Historical Fiction, Young Adult

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.9, RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.9, RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.6, RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.2, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.5

FURTHER RESOURCES

Reviews of *Moon at Nine*: www.pajamapress.ca/resource/moon_at_nine_reviews

Q&A with Deborah Ellis: www.pajamapress.ca/resource/moon_at_nine_extra_content_2

Deborah Ellis Fact Sheet: www.pajamapress.ca/resource/moon_at_nine_extra_content_2

Moon at Nine Book Trailer: www.pajamapress.ca/resource/moon_at_nine_book_trailer

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org

The Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees: www.english.irqr.net

Homan, Iranian gay human rights group: www.homan.se/English.htm

“Sparse and eloquently-written, this short historical novel is both beautiful and heartbreaking.”

—*School Library Journal*

“A firm grounding in Iranian history, along with the insight and empathy Ellis brings to the pain of those whose love is decreed to be immoral and unnatural, make this a smart, heartbreaking [novel.]”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“...a riveting tale of young girls being true to themselves and their love, set against a political and cultural backdrop few readers will have first-hand knowledge of. Ellis once again proves she is a master storyteller.”

—*Quill & Quire* ★ Starred

Review by Ken Setterington, author of the Stonewall Honor Book *Branded by the Pink Triangle*

MOON AT NINE

DEBORAH ELLIS

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STORY SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Farrin has many secrets. Although she goes to a school for gifted girls in Tehran, as the daughter of an aristocratic mother and wealthy father, Farrin must keep a low profile. It is 1988; ever since the Shah was overthrown, the deeply conservative and religious government controls every facet of life in Iran. If the Revolutionary Guard finds out about her mother's Bring Back the Shah activities, her family could be thrown in jail, or worse.

The day she meets Sadira, Farrin's life changes forever. Sadira is funny, wise, and outgoing; the two girls become inseparable. But as their friendship deepens into romance, the relationship takes a dangerous turn. It is against the law to be gay in Iran; the punishment is death. Despite their efforts to keep their love secret, the girls are discovered and arrested. Separated from Sadira, Farrin can only pray as she awaits execution. Will her family find a way to save them both?

Based on real-life events, multi-award winning author Deborah Ellis's new book is a tense and riveting story about a world where homosexuality is considered so abhorrent that it is punishable by death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Ellis is the internationally acclaimed author of nearly thirty books for children and young people, most of which explore themes of social justice and courage. A peace activist, feminist, and humanitarian, Deborah has won many national and international awards for her books. She lives in Simcoe, Ontario.

To download an information sheet about Deborah Ellis or a Q&A about her experience writing *Moon at Nine*, visit www.pajamapress.ca/resource/moon_at_nine_extra_content_2

PRE-READING LESSON

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

(RESEARCH; HISTORY; PRIMARY, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY SOURCES)

Materials: Chalk- or whiteboard, research materials, writing materials or word processor, "Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources" handout found at the end of this guide

Preparation:

Make copies of the "Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources" handout for your students.

Directions:

1. Ask your students whether they are familiar with the Iranian Revolution. If they are, ask them to share what they know and make point-form notes on the board.
2. Explain that you are now going to have the class do further research into the Iranian Revolution. Ask the class for suggestions about places where they might seek more information. Write down every suggestion.
3. For each suggestion, discuss:
 - Is this a reliable source of information? Why or why not?
 - What benefits might this source have over others?
 - What disadvantages might this source have over others?
4. Distribute and discuss the handout "Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources."
5. Identify which category each of your sources falls into.
6. Discuss:
 - Which kind of source would give us the most accurate information about a historic event?

Why might it be an advantage to use multiple kinds of source?

How many sources do you think you need to check before you can be sure of your information?

Why is it important to document the sources you use in your research?

7. As a class, come to an agreement about how to learn more about the Iranian Revolution. You will need to decide what kinds of sources to use, how many, and whether each student will write about one aspect or an overview of the whole.

Make sure the students know how to properly document their sources as they conduct their research. When they have finished, have them write a short distillation of what they have learned and hand it in with a thorough bibliography.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Before you read *Moon at Nine*, did you expect to have much in common with Farrin? Did you find more or fewer similarities than you expected?
- The author does not give many physical descriptions of people or places. Why might she make that choice?
- Principal Kobra says to Farrin, “Just be careful you don’t end up with too much confidence.” (14) Why would she say that? Considering the world Farrin lives in, do you think it is good advice?
- Farrin’s mother, annoyed with the female Revolutionary Guards who enforce the revolution’s clothing rules, says, “All the things that need fixing in this country and they worry about hair.” (16–17) Are there rules and laws in your own life that make you feel the same way? Why do you think those rules and laws exist?
- Though she won’t admit it to Principal Kobra, Farrin’s story is not an allegory: “Just an exciting story about a girl battling demons and winning.” (17) Why might this story be so important to Farrin?
- Thinking about the way Sadira diffused the situation with Pargol’s chador, what can we learn about ways to cope with bullying? (23)
- What was your first impression of Principal Kobra? Did that impression change by the middle of the story? By the end?
- At the beginning of the story, why does Farrin take advantage of Ahmad? At the end, why does he take advantage of her? What similarities can you see between these two characters?
- Dealing with her parents and with Ahmad, Farrin often thinks about whether a particular interaction might bring her any advantage. Why do you think she learned to think this way?
- Farrin describes her parents and their friends as “celebrating the end of the world with a stiff drink and a bit of fun.” (43) Why does Farrin hate these parties? How do Farrin and Sadira cope with the uncertain future?
- Reading the argument between Farrin and her mother on page 49, who do you think is in the right? Why?
- During the bombing, Farrin’s parents sit with their arms around her as if their bodies can protect hers. Does this make you feel any differently about them? Why or why not? (54)
- Pargol and Rabia both hold power in the school. What are the differences and similarities between the ways each girl gets power? The ways they each use it?
- “I don’t have to like her to admire her,” Sadira says of Pargol on page 62. Are there any people in power whom you admire but don’t like? Who, and why?
- Why do you think Farrin is so attracted to ghost stories, authors like Edgar Allen Poe, and television shows like *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*?
- What is it about the moon that makes it a perfect symbol of Farrin and Sadira’s relationship? By the end of the story, how does the moon take on additional meaning for Farrin?
- When the girls perform the *faal-e Hafez*, the passage they point to is: No death invades a heart that comes alive in love / Our immortality is etched in the book of life. (118) Sadira and Farrin find nothing but

beauty in the words. How do you think they interpret this as a prediction of their future together?

18. What did you feel during the scene where Farrin, her father, Sadira, and Ahmad are forced to watch a hanging? Why do you think the author gave so few details about this scene?

19. Why might Farrin not have realized how risky it was to recite a love poem to Sadira in front of the school, or to be caught kissing her?

20. When Pargol informs on the girls and the principal calls their parents, how does Farrin react? How does Sadira react? Why do you think they had such different responses?

21. Why is Principal Kobra, who seems to want the best for the girls, so determined to keep them apart? What implications might it have for her school if they are allowed to express their love?

22. Farrin often imagines her demon story being turned into a film or television series. Think about the similarities and differences between a story on the page and on the screen. How might your experience of *Moon at Nine* change if it were filmed instead of printed?

23. This story, which is closely based on true events, has a difficult ending. Why do you think the author chose to keep the true ending instead of writing one that is more enjoyable to read?

24. The author writes that being gay or lesbian is currently a criminal offence in more than seventy countries. And homosexuals face the death penalty in seven countries. At a time when gay rights have finally made some progress in the West, why do you think other countries have lagged behind so significantly?

25. Why might the author have chosen to write this story as a fictionalized novel rather than a biography?

26. The young woman on whom the character of Farrin is based can't reveal her real name without putting her family in danger, but she wanted her story told. Why might that be important to her?

I RECOMMEND... (PERSUASIVE WRITING, READING COMPREHENSION, MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEXTS)

Materials: Reading journals or lined paper, pencils

Directions:

Have students write a persuasive letter to a friend recommending that they read (or, if they prefer, do not read) *Moon at Nine*. The letter should address the following points:

a) What is the story about?

b) Why do you/do you not recommend reading *Moon at Nine*?

c) What is one subject or historical event discussed in *Moon at Nine* that you think your friend would find interesting? Suggest some other resources (informational texts, other novels, videos, etc.) where he or she could learn more about it.

REALISTIC FICTION: A DEBATE (ORAL COMMUNICATION, CRITICAL THINKING)

Although *Moon at Nine* is a novel, it is closely based on the true experiences of two young girls who met in Tehran in 1989. While the author did exclude the most difficult details of the girls' imprisonment, she chose to tell the ending as it really happened. Many readers find this troubling. In this activity, students will debate the merits of happy endings and accurate endings in realistic fiction.

You may come up with your own premise for the debate or use one of the following:

In Moon at Nine, it would have been better for Deborah Ellis to write a satisfying ending than a truthful one.

In realistic young adult fiction, it is better to have a realistic ending than a happy one.

Materials: Research materials, pencils, paper, stopwatch

Directions:

Divide the class in two and instruct half of the students to research and prepare arguments in favor of this statement (Pro), while the other half prepare a

case against it (Con). Have each side elect representatives to deliver their arguments. Appoint a timekeeper with a stopwatch to time each segment of the debate.

You should choose a debate format appropriate to the age and needs of your students, but one possible format, which uses three members on each team, is the following:

1. The premise is stated.
2. Pro representative #1 delivers opening arguments (3–5 min)
3. Con representative #1 delivers opening arguments (3–5 min)
4. Pro representative #2 delivers further opening arguments (3–5 min)
5. Con representative #2 delivers further opening arguments (3–5 min)
6. Pro representative #3 offers a rebuttal to the arguments of the Con team (2–4 min)
7. Con representative #3 offers a rebuttal to the arguments of the Pro team (2–4 min)
8. Each team may ask the other three questions. Each question should take no more than 15 seconds to ask and 1 minute to answer.
9. The audience and/or the teacher may ask questions of both teams. Each question should take no more than 15 seconds to ask and 1 minute to answer.
10. The audience or an impartial judge votes on which team was more successful in defending its position.

MEDIA AND BIAS **(CRITICAL THINKING, MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEXTS, NEWS ARTICLES)**

Materials: Sample news articles, Elements of a News Article handout, paper, pencils

Preparation: Select some recent news articles from various sources that discuss progress or setbacks in LGBT rights. Include some from organizations with a declared bias one way or another. Photocopy the Elements of a News Article handout found at the end of this guide.

Directions:

1. Share the articles with the class.

2. Discuss:

What is media bias?

Do any of these articles make you feel that the writer has a strong opinion about LGBT rights?

If yes, how does that influence the way you read the article? Are you inclined to agree with the writer? Once you stop and think about the possibility of media bias, do you still agree?

How can you find out whether a writer is likely to be writing from a biased perspective?

If you suspect a writer is biased, how can you verify whether the facts they have presented (or the way they have presented them) are accurate?

Are there any potential advantages of media bias? Are there any dangers?

3. Distribute the Elements of a News Article handout and discuss the basic format of a news article.

4. Instruct students to write a news article as if they are covering the story of Farrin and Sadira’s arrest. They should try to avoid any bias in their writing.

5. Have students hand in their news articles along with a paragraph discussing whether they found it easy or difficult to avoid bias in their own writing.

ALLEGORY **(WRITING, SYMBOLISM, CURRENT EVENTS)**

Farrin tells Principal Kobra that the demons in her story represent the antirevolutionary forces who are trying to put the Shah back into power in Iran. If this had been the truth, Farrin would have been writing in the tradition of many authors who use allegorical stories to deliver political messages, including George Orwell with *Animal Farm* and Richard Adams with *Watership Down*. In this activity, students will choose a current event or a political or moral message to represent with an allegorical story.

Directions:

1. Explain that an allegory is a piece of writing in which the writer deliberately uses fictional characters, situations, and symbols to deliver a message about the real world. You may wish to point out to the class that although students are often exasperated with teachers for reading meaning into a work that the author may not have intended, allegories are deliberately crafted to relay a specific message.

2. As a class, brainstorm a list of allegories your students are familiar with. Some famous examples they may have read as children include Aesop’s fables, “Yertle the Turtle” by Dr. Seuss, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, and *The Missing Piece* by Shel Silverstein.

3. Discuss why each of these pieces is an allegory. Identify what the symbolism in each one represents.

4. Ask students to choose a subject and write their own short allegory. They may be inspired by current events, social messages, religious or moral teachings, etc.

5. If you have time for peer editing of these pieces, suggest that students trade allegories without telling their partner what message they are trying to communicate. The editor’s interpretation of the allegory will help the writer to strengthen or clarify the symbols used.

WRITING ABOUT DEMONS (MYTHOLOGY, FOLKLORE, WORLD CULTURES, WRITING, RESEARCH, ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY)

Moon at Nine opens with Farrin’s story about Iranian demons, which she wrote after seeing “an episode of *The Night Stalker* that had a Middle Eastern demon in it, and the show had gotten it all wrong” (13). Supernatural themes have become popular in television, film, and literature in recent years, leading to many new depictions of mythical beings—culturally accurate and otherwise. In this activity students will choose a folkloric tradition other than their own and write a piece of short fiction using one or more of its supernatural beings.

Materials: Research materials, pencils, paper

Directions:

1. Read the beginning of Farrin’s story as a class.

2. Discuss:

What kind of images did Farrin’s story paint in your mind? Are you at all familiar with Middle Eastern demon folklore? If not, where did the images come from?

What are some popular films, TV shows, and books that make use of supernatural beings like demons?

Should writers and producers always aim for cultural accuracy in their depiction of supernatural beings from any particular tradition? Why or why not?

3. Tell students they will choose a culture other than their own, learn about its mythology, and write a short story

that draws on its supernatural traditions. Before they can begin writing they must find at least five reliable sources (legends, articles, encyclopedia entries, books, websites, etc.) for their research.

4. Demonstrate the format of your preferred style guide and instruct students to record each source in this format. They should also explain, in two or three sentences, why each source will be helpful in writing their story.

5. After students have handed in their annotated bibliographies and received your feedback, they may begin their stories. If it will help them direct their creativity, you may choose to put certain restrictions on their writing, or allow them to choose from a few options. For example:

Write a story that takes place in a modern high school.

Write a story that takes place in the same time and place as one of the legends you researched.

Write a modern-day adaptation of one of the legends you researched.

FICTIONALIZED BIOGRAPHY (WRITING, INTERVIEWS, ORAL PRESENTATION)

Materials: Pencils, paper

Directions:

1. Ask students to think of an experience they have had that they would not mind sharing with the class.

2. Pair students up to interview each other about the experiences they have chosen. Advise them to take thorough notes about what their partner felt, saw, heard, and even smelled and tasted. Encourage them to ask questions about the context of the event, the location, the weather, other people present, what their partner was wearing, etc. These details will help them to recreate a believable story.

3. Once the interviews are complete, have students use the details they have gathered to write a short story based on their partner’s experience. They may introduce a fictional protagonist, change how events turn out, or even add fantastical elements, but the story must be recognizable the one told to them by their partner.

4. Have students read their stories to the class and then explain what elements they changed from the original story. They must provide thoughtful reasons for the changes.

POINT OF VIEW (DRAMA, NARRATIVE STYLES, CREATIVE WRITING)

Materias: Pencils, paper

Directions:

1. *Moon at Nine* is written entirely from Farrin’s perspective in a close third-person narration.

2. Discuss:

Why do you think the author chose this style of narration?

How would the story have changed if we had seen from other characters’ points of view?

What clues in the text can help us infer what other characters are thinking or feeling?

3. Have students pick a secondary character and think about his/her perspective. What history, relationships, and motivations influence his/her words and actions?

4. Have students choose a scene in the book that affected their character. They will write and present a monologue about the events in that scene from their character’s point of view.

SYMBOLIZING CHARACTERS (ART, SYMBOLISM)

Materials: Chalk- or whiteboard, art supplies, pencils, paper

Directions:

1. Taking suggestions from students, write a list of characters who show development over the course of *Moon at Nine*.

2. In a separate list, ask students to think of characters who are identified with a particular object or symbol. This symbol might be the same throughout the book, or it might change as the character does. For example, Principal Kobra is identified at first with a gun and, in the end, with a blanket. Ahmad may be identified with three different vehicles.

3. Ask students to choose a character from the first list and choose an object or symbol to represent him or her.

The symbol or object does not need to be taken directly from the book.

4. Using an artistic medium of your choice, have students create three illustrations of their object: one representing their character at the beginning of the story, one representing him or her in the middle, and one representing the character at the end.

5. Have students hand in their artwork along with a written argument explaining their choice of symbol and the three ways in which they have portrayed it.

TRADITION AND ARCHITECTURE (GEOGRAPHY, ALTERNATIVE ENERGY, ARCHITECTURE, PERSUASIVE ESSAY)

Materials: Research materials, paper, pencils

Directions:

1. Read from the top of page 108 to “‘Iran could be a world leader in housing design,’ he said.”

2. Tell students that today Tehran is one of the world’s most polluted cities. Some architects suggest that a sustainable future for Tehran could involve a return to underground architecture. In fact, around the world people are turning to ancient building practices to find energy-efficient solutions for building in various climates.

3. Ask volunteers to name traditional building techniques they are familiar with. Once they have exhausted their knowledge you can round out the list with the following: Adobe, Cob, Compressed Earth Blocks, Cordwood, Dry Stone, Earthen Floors, Leichtlehm, Log, Natural Plasters (lime, caliche, etc.), Rammed Earth, Sod, Wattle and Daub.

4. Have students choose one technique from the list to research. They will write a persuasive essay arguing either that their chosen technique is a valuable technology that should be used in modern architecture, or that it is an inefficient technology that is inferior to modern building practices.

5. The essay can include a brief description of the building technique, its early history, its climate-specific adaptations, examples of its current use in modern architecture, and examples of how architects predict it will or should be used in the future.

Elements of a News Article

Headline

Something short, catchy, and informative. Headlines often employ wordplay to get the reader’s attention.

Subheading

A very brief summary that builds on the headline and gives further information.

Byline

The name of the person who wrote the article. Bylines may also appear at the bottom of an article, and may give a brief piece of information about the writer; for example, “Maryam Tehrani is the author of the bestselling novel *Revolution*.”

Lead paragraph

The first paragraph of your story, which should summarize all the important information of who, what, when, where, and—if possible—how and why.

Body paragraphs

Any further paragraphs that give extra information and quotes from witnesses

EXAMPLE

The diagram shows a news article layout with labels on the left pointing to specific parts. The article text is enclosed in a box. The labels and their corresponding parts are: **Headline** points to the main title; **Subheading** points to the summary below the title; **Byline** points to the author's name; **Lead Paragraph** points to the first paragraph; and **Body Paragraphs** points to the remaining paragraphs. The article text includes a quote from a homeowner and a paragraph from a neighbor.

Headline — **Antirevolutionary Faction Discovered**

Subheading — **Revolutionary Guard seizes illegal goods, arrests wealthy pro-Shah Supporters**

Byline — **By Maryam Tehrani**

Lead Paragraph — Early Monday morning, residents of Tehran witnessed the arrest of a wealthy north-end developer and his wife, along with a number of houseguests. The suspects were apparently celebrating the birthday of Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran’s deposed Shah.

Body Paragraphs — “We haven’t done anything illegal,” one of the homeowners stated. “Why is a photograph illegal?”

The homeowners, along with their guests, were escorted to Evin Prison before further interviews could be conducted. The Revolutionary Guard removed a photograph of the exiled prince and several bottles of alcohol from the home.

A neighbor, who wished to remain anonymous, told reporters that large parties were a regular occurrence at the residence in question.

PRIMARY, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY SOURCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

Original materials from the time period or event being researched. Examples include:

Artifacts (clothing, household materials, etc.); letters; journals; interviews with eyewitnesses; audio or film recordings of the event; speeches; photographs; official documents (marriage licenses, immigration documents, etc.), newspaper articles from the time period; web sites that record or contribute to the event as it develops.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Materials created after the fact with the benefit of hindsight and the use of primary sources. Secondary sources often analyze and comment on an event rather than simply recording what happened. Examples include:

Biographies; history textbooks; articles, web sites, and audio or visual recordings that give information about an event that has already happened.

TERTIARY SOURCES

Material that distils information from primary and secondary sources. Tertiary sources give researchers a concise overview of the data available. Examples include:

Dictionaries; encyclopedias; bibliographies; guide books; and manuals.