



News Release

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Marjane Satrapi Tells Century College Audience: Beware of Fanatics

Marjane Satrapi had a clear message for the 700 people who braved a sloppy April storm and attended her presentation at Century College this week: beware of fanatics and fanaticism.

“There is a division in the world,” Satrapi, author of the illustrated memoir *Persepolis*, told audience members. “It is between stupid, fanatical people and the rest of the world.”

Satrapi, who grew up during the Iranian revolution, said fanatics who try to impose their brand of religion or politics on the rest of us use emotion, loud voices and power to get their way. Intelligent people who think for themselves should not allow the world’s bullies to stifle independent thought, she said. She added that it is scary when leaders of secular democracies use the same rhetoric (i.e. “Axis of Evil,” “The Great Satan”) as leaders of dictatorships.

“There is still something I believe in,” she said. “Education and culture. They do not solve the problem, but they give us a possibility to be less stupid. It is always better to be less stupid than to be more stupid.”

Satrapı, who has been touring the country and addressing huge crowds since the movie version of *Persepolis* was nominated for an Academy Award, endeared herself to the audience with her casual manner and down-to-earth message. She is most concerned that people gain one insight from reading her book: people around the world share a common humanity.

“We live in a world where we dehumanize the other one,” she said. “That kind of condescension is very dangerous. We say they are terrorists, let’s kill them. They are not human beings with dreams and brothers and sisters... We reduce people to an abstract concept. With my work, I am saying, ‘Look at me. They are just like me.’”

Satrapı said she doesn’t believe in the concept of “culture clash.” She thinks that each culture is a ring in the same chain, with African art influencing Picasso, and Persian poetry influencing the great French poets. “Culture belongs to everybody,” she said. “It is international.”

Persepolis, Century’s Common Book for the 2007-2008 academic year, was read by students, faculty and staff members across the campus. Satrapı told audience members that she prefers to call her book a comic rather than a graphic novel. “I am a cartoonist,” she said. “Graphic novel sounds like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* – so bourgeoisie.”

Satrapı said as a child, the first American comic she ever read was a Dracula comic that she bought in a toy shop in Iran in 1977. She didn’t read another comic until, at age 24, she read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, a comic about the Holocaust. “Reading this book was like a big shock, a big revelation,” she said. She eventually decided to draw and write her own comic about her own life using humor without cynicism. The book, started in 1999 and published in 2003, attracted the attention of a Hollywood filmmaker who wanted to make it into a movie.

“I told them it had to be animation, hand drawn, black and white, in the center of Paris with Catherine Deneuve,” said Satrapı. She was shocked when they agreed.

Making the movie, which required 12 hand-drawn images per second, was “hell,” she said. A solitary person by nature, she had to work with over 100 people. “After six months, I wanted all of them to die,” she said. Eventually, she came to love and respect her co-workers.

Though drawing is “The first language of human beings,” she said most people associate drawing with childhood and stop drawing by the age of 10. “In our educational system, we learn quickly how to talk about text,” she said. “We are not taught how to talk about drawing.”

Satrapi said her drawings make her story more accessible to people and break down the perceived differences between people in the Middle East and people in the West. “I had to make it a personal book,” she said. “I am not a politician and I am not a sociologist. By coincidence, I was born in a certain time and a certain place. The book is my own subjective point of view. It is the story of one person.”

Satrapi, who now lives in France, reminded people that it is a luxury to live in a civilized society with enough food and housing, without the fear of being harassed or violated.

In response to an audience member’s question, Satrapi said she called her book *Persepolis*, the name of an ancient Persian city, to remind people that the characters in the book are people with 4,000 years of history behind them. “There is a need for more books like mine,” she said.

Satrapi’s appearance was part of Century’s ongoing Speaker Series, which has brought to campus such major speakers as Steven Pinker, Andrew Revkin, Sarah Vowell, Anne Fadiman and Stephanie Coontz.



Photo: Marjane Satrapi and Prof. Cullen Bailey Burns, coordinator of Century’s Common Book project.