

Iranian novelist makes it to Oysterville

By AMY NILE
EO Media Group



Natalie St. John/EO Media Group

Aida Moradi Ahani, an Iranian writer working on her second novel, rested in Oysterville, Wash., last week after taking a chance that she could make it to America.

OYSTERVILLE, Wash. — An Iranian writer made a beeline for Oysterville, hoping a federal court would block President Donald Trump's ban on travel into the U.S. from her country along with six other Muslim-majority nations.

Aida Moradi Ahani, 34, left her home not knowing how much time she might have, if any, to get to here for her monthlong artist residency in March.

The author and novelist's original plans were foiled by Trump's January order stopping visitors from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Libya from coming into the U.S. and the resettlement refugees.

She kept checking for CNN and BBC news updates on her smartphone, but it wasn't clear if the courts could override the president's ban. So she took her chances and started her trip, boarding an Etihad Airways flight from Tehran to Abu Dhabi.

Ahani was waiting to catch her next flight to New York when she heard the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld an order in February by a federal judge in Seattle halting the president's ban.

Safe in O'ville

She arrived in Oysterville on Feb. 12, two weeks ahead of the five other artists who have now joined her at Willapa Bay AiR.

"Aida is lovely," Jeff McMahon, the nonprofit's manager, said. "The artists are excited about the opportunity to do their work."

Meanwhile, the White House is devising another travel and refugee order to try to avoid future legal snares.

History of resistance

Ahani remains determined to defy despotic power with her writing after growing up under the confines of the Iranian regime.

She was born in Tehran during the country's eight-year war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The bloody battle that lasted longer than either world war came after the Shah monarchy was overthrown in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

"I remember the sound of the alarms when it was time to go to the shelter," Ahani said. "Yes, it was sad. It was horrible sometimes. But it helped me to understand we can get through dark days."

Ahani dares to publish descriptions of life in the Islamic Republic, despite a government notorious for censorship and punishing dissent.

Although men control the

country and dominate most families, she said, her parents gave her freedom. They encouraged her to tell the truth as she sees it when she started writing while studying at Tehran's Azad University. She earned her degree in electrical engineering, her father's profession, but found writing better suited her.

Second novel

Now, Ahani hopes to finish her third book and second novel during her stay at Willapa Bay AiR. The nonprofit gives artists, writers and musicians from around the world a chance to work uninterrupted at its secluded, 16-acre spot in the woods near Oysterville.

The residency accepts about one in 10 who apply for coveted spots offered at no cost to six artists each month from March to September, McMahon said. Every effort is made to avoid disturbing the residents while they work, including having their lunches delivered.

Ahani is using the time to work on the final draft of her novel about an Iranian woman and an American man. They fall in love but run into political pitfalls and cultural divides.

Ahani said she writes about romance but she's more interested in her work than her own love life.

Like many Persians, she

hasn't published much of her writing in English. She hopes working with American artists during her residency will help her change that.

The Brooklyn-based Akashic Books in 2014 published her debut in English after her first book and her novel came out. "Tehran Noir," a collection of short stories by Iranian writers, featured Ahani's "Lariyan's Day in the Sun."

She said she was surprised the Iranian government allowed the uncensored publication of her book in 2011 and her novel, "Golfing on the Gunpowder," in 2013. But she couldn't let the fear of her voice being silenced stop her from telling the story of a girl who was abused after she was forced to make secret deals for the regime.

"I don't think about that," Ahani said. "I think about writing the truth."

She got the title for her book, a collection of short stories called "The Pin on Cat's Tail," from a game Iranian children play in schools. They learn where the country is on the map by tacking a pin into it on the map.

The characters in the nine stories struggle with past experiences after the Iranian Revolution. Ahani said they have different troubles that stem from the same problem, their father's control of their family.

"It's about the role of power in our society," she said. "Why should we accept everything from one power? I've always challenged that."

After reading her words, a professor at Stanford University invited her to the prestigious California campus to speak about her generation of Iranian writers.

Sharing together

Ahani said she hopes Americans and Iranians can share their cultures through literature and art, despite political problems. She blames the media for making the people of the two countries seem like enemies.

"I know it's a big lie and I wish Americans knew the same," she said. "People are different from their government. They're just people. They don't have any main role in the decisions of their government."

After finishing her residency, Ahani is scheduled to speak at the University of California, Irvine. She also plans to visit Ohio.

She's determined to break into American literature so she can share Iranian culture and the challenges her people face with the world.

"There's a way for everything," she said. "Always, I think about hope."

Empty bowls readied for annual anti-hunger event

Students craft soup bowls for local fundraiser

By DAMIAN MULINIX
For EO Media Group

ILWACO, Wash. — As Hilltop Middle School students rolled out two types of clay for a third time — this time together — some seemed to wonder why. But once they started cutting the logs of clay into little rounds and then smashing them together into a paper bowl they used as a

mold, it all started to become clear.

The marbled effect is attractive, something you might want to purchase. Soon enough, potential buyers will have their chance.

Now in its ninth year on the peninsula, the annual Empty Bowls event returns to the Peninsula Church Center on March 18. The event, which raises money to fight global hunger, sells soup from various local restaurants served in bowls made by local school kids.

According to the Ocean Beach Presbyterian Women's

Association, which sponsors and hosts Empty Bowls, the local event has raised more than \$45,000.

Once again heading up the project is Long Beach clay artist Karen Brownlee, who estimated that they will have made more than 600 bowls this year. Brownlee made different styles of bowls with the different age groups — kindergarten through sixth grade. For Hilltop school, she chose an agate-style design.

"You use two different kinds of clay and kind of swirl them together," she explained. "This class did porcelain and

stoneware. Each class will do a different combination."

Once formed, the bowls are fired in a kiln for nearly a day before being returned to the schools for glazing. They go back in the kiln a final time.

Empty Bowls is an international hunger-awareness campaign, with local events taking place around the world. The peninsula version was originally started as a project of the Highly Capable program at Long Beach School, with Brownlee helping.

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