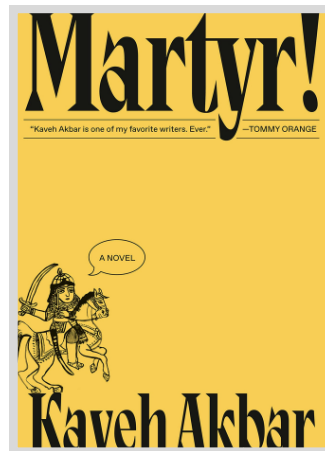


Martyr!

by Kaveh Akbar



Summary

Cyrus Shams is a young man grappling with an inheritance of violence and loss: his mother's plane was shot down over the skies of the Persian Gulf in a senseless accident; and his father's life in America was circumscribed by his work killing chickens at a factory farm in the Midwest. Cyrus is a drunk, an addict, and a poet, whose obsession with martyrs leads him to examine the mysteries of his past—toward an uncle who rode through Iranian battlefields dressed as the angel of death to inspire and comfort the dying, and toward his mother, through a painting discovered in a Brooklyn art gallery that suggests she may not have been who or what she seemed.

Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* is a paean to how we spend our lives seeking meaning—in faith, art, ourselves, others.

Provided by Publisher: Penguin Random House

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About the Author

Kaveh Akbar is the New York Times bestselling author of the novel Martyr!—a finalist for the National Book Award and one of the New York Times Ten Best Books of the Year—and two books of poetry: Pilgrim Bell and Calling a Wolf a Wolf. He is also the author of a chapbook, Portrait of the Alcoholic and editor of The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse: 110 Poets on the Divine and, with Paige Lewis, co-editor of Another Last Call: Poems on Addiction and Deliverance.

Kaveh is the recipient of fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Poetry Foundation, Civitella Ranieri, and elsewhere, and has been awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Family Foundation Award, the Brooklyn Public Library Book Prize, the Levis Reading Prize, multiple Pushcart Prizes, and named one of the TIME 100 Next.

Kaveh's writing appears in the New Yorker, the New York Times, Paris Review, New Republic, GQ, The Atlantic, Best American Poetry, Best American Sportswriting, and elsewhere. He was the founding editor of Divedapper, and since 2020, has served as poetry editor for The Nation. Born in Tehran, Iran, Kaveh is the Roy J. Carver Professor of English at the University of Iowa. His work has been translated into over thirty languages.

Provided by author's website: kavehakbar.com/about

Discussion Questions

1. In an interview with NPR, Akbar said *"art is a mechanism by which people have sought immortality for millennia."* Do you agree with his statement? How does this relate to Cyrus's journey?
2. Akbar based Roya's death during a real-life event— the destruction of Iran Air Flight 665 by the U.S.S. Vincennes in 1988. Afterwards, her widower and child immigrate to the United States, the same country that was responsible for the tragedy. How do you think this shaped the trajectory of Ali and Cyrus's lives?
3. *"It seems very American to expect grief to change something. Like a token you cash in. A formula. Grieve x amount, receive y amount of comfort. Work a day in the grief mines and get paid in tickets to the company store."* What did this book have to say about grief? How did different characters experience it? Could you relate to it?
4. How do you perceive Cyrus's imagined conversations between fictional characters? Who would you put into an imaginary conversation together and why?
5. *"We won't grow old together, Cyrus. But can't you feel this mattering? Right now?"* What did you think about the surprise revelations about Cyrus's mother?
6. *"If the mortal sin of the suicide is greed, to hoard stillness and calm for yourself while dispersing your riotous internal pain among all those who survive you, then the mortal sin of the martyr must be pride, the vanity, the hubris to believe not only that your death could mean more than your living, but that your death could mean more than death itself—which, because it is inevitable, means nothing."*
7. Why do you think Cyrus was so obsessed with the idea of martyrdom? Have you ever thought of it in this way?
8. How has survivor's guilt affected Cyrus throughout his life? Does he feel doomed or spared?
9. The ending had a different feel, what do you think was happening to Cyrus? Do you think he was changing, dying, or dreaming?
10. *"I've read your poems, Cyrus. I get that you're Persian. Born there, raised here. I know that's a part of you. But you've probably spent more time looking at your phone today, just today, than you've spent cutting open pomegranates in your entire life. Cumulatively. Right? But how many fucking pomegranates are in your poems? Versus how many iPhones? Do you see what I mean?"* How did Cyrus experience his different identities?

Questions provided by Libromanics.com and Bookclubs.com

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Professional Reviews

Booklist (12/01/2023):

Starred Review Orphaned, anxious, and outspoken Iranian American poet Cyrus Shams is in AA and barely scraping by. Not quite 30, he's trying to write a book about martyrs, his obsession with "meaningful" deaths stemming from his mother's perishing on the Iranian passenger airliner shot down by the U.S. navy in 1988. His bereft father left Tehran with his infant son to work at an industrial chicken farm in Indiana. The only remaining connection to Iran is Cyrus' uncle, who suffers from PTSD after his surreal service in the Iran-Iraq War as a battlefield angel. Living with Zee in an ambiguous friends/lovers relationship, Cyrus is tipping toward suicidal. When they learn about a martyr-in-the-making, the terminally ill Iranian American artist Orkideh and her end-of-life performance piece à la Marina Abramovic at the Brooklyn Museum, the two men go to New York, leading to a staggering revelation. Poet Akbar (Pilgrim Bell, 2021) is an almost deliriously adept first-time novelist, writing from different points of view and darting back and forth in time and into Cyrus' satirical dreams and the lives of Iranian poets from Rumi to Farrokhzad. Akbar creates scenes of psychedelic opulence and mystery, emotional precision, edgy hilarity, and heart-ringing poignancy as his characters endure war, grief, addiction, and sacrifice, and find refuge in art and love. Bedazzling and profound. COPYRIGHT(2023) Booklist, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Publishers Weekly (10/16/2023):

Poet Akbar (Calling a Wolf a Wolf) explores the allure of martyrdom in this electrifying story of a Midwestern poet struggling with addiction and grief. Cyrus Shams, an orphaned son of Iranian immigrants, is fixated on finding meaning in the deaths of his parents—his mother in a plane that was accidentally shot down by the U.S. Navy over the Persian Gulf, his father from a stroke. His obsession strains his relationships, particularly with his closest friend and roommate Zee Novak, as does his heavy drinking and drug use. Immersed in the study of martyrs throughout history, Cyrus finds focus for his project when he meets Orkideh, an older painter foregoing treatment for her terminal breast cancer, and he realizes he has an opportunity to interview a living martyr. More details would spoil the plot, which thickens when connections are revealed between Cyrus and Orkideh as well as secrets about Cyrus's family history that inform his conflicted feelings about pursuing a queer romance with Zee. Akbar deploys a range of styles with equal flair, from funny wordplay ("Maybe it was that Cyrus had done the right drugs in the wrong order, or the wrong drugs in the right order") to incisive lyricism ("An alphabet, like a life, is a finite set of shapes"). This wondrous novel will linger in readers' minds long after the final page. Agent: Jacqueline Ko, Wylie Agency. (Jan.) *Correction: An earlier version of this review misidentified where the main character is from.*