

# AMERICANIZED

*Rebel Without a Green Card*



SARA SAEDI  
*a memoir*



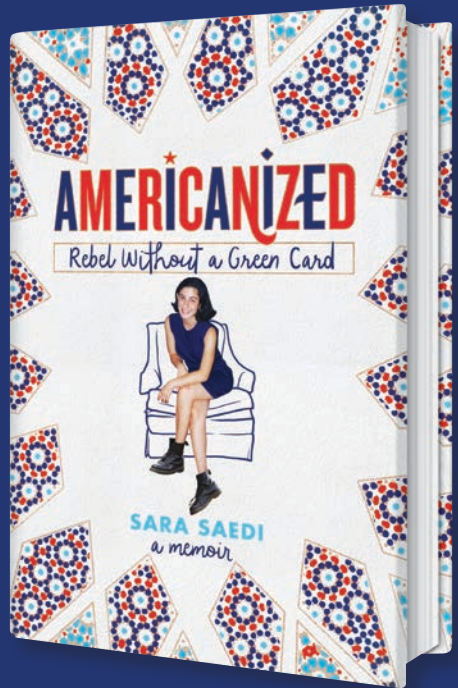
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**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

# ABOUT THE BOOK

**The hilarious, poignant, and true story of one teen's experience growing up in America as an undocumented immigrant from the Middle East.**

At thirteen, bright-eyed, straight-A student Sara Saedi uncovered a terrible family secret: she was breaking the law simply by living in the United States. Only two years old when her parents fled Iran, she didn't learn of her undocumented status until her older sister wanted to apply for an after-school job, but couldn't because she didn't have a Social Security number. *Americanized* follows Sara's progress toward getting her green card, but that's only a portion of her experiences as an Iranian-"American" teenager. From discovering that her parents secretly divorced to facilitate her mother's green card application to learning how to tame her unibrow, Sara pivots gracefully from the terrifying prospect that she might be kicked out of the country at any time to the almost-as-terrifying possibility that she might be the only one of her friends without a date to the prom.



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Denise Crew

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**SARA SAEDI** was born in Tehran, Iran, smack-dab in the middle of a war and an Islamic Revolution. She received a BA in film and mass communications from the University of California, Berkeley, and began her career as a creative executive for ABC Daytime. Since then she's penned three TV movies for ABC Family and a pilot for the Disney Channel, won a Daytime Emmy for *What If. . .*, a web series she wrote for ABC, and worked as a staff writer on the FOX sitcom *The Goodwin Games*. Her first novel for young adults, *Never Ever*, was published by Viking. She currently resides in Los Angeles with her husband, son, and pug, where she writes for the hit CW show *iZombie*. Learn more on Twitter @saaaranotsarah or at SaraSaedi.com.



## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

**ADOLESCENCE:** *Americanized* opens with an introduction by Sara, in which she talks about the difficulties of adolescence—that time in life when young people physically mature, experiencing the joys of all those awkward bodily changes. Conventional ways of thinking about puberty suggest that teens will feel alienated from their peers. Using the following questions, discuss with your students whether this experience is universal.

- If you could tell an adult in your life about your experience with puberty, what would you say to help them better understand you?
- How do you see or think about experiences of puberty being different or similar across cultures and countries?
- We are not born as teenagers (obviously). What experiences have fundamentally changed or shaped your teenage years so far?

**TRAUMA:** Teenage experiences can sometimes seem dramatic, but adults often see things from a different perspective. Consider the following questions and talk about how your students understand trauma in comparison with an adult perspective:

- Have you ever had a situation arise that you would describe as life-altering? What went through your mind at the time?
- Did you have an adult describe the situation from another perspective? If so, how did it differ from the way you saw things?
- How have time and age changed your perspectives?

**RADICALS:** *Revolutionary. Rebellious. Insubordinate.* These are all words related to *rebel*. Adults sometimes look down on teens, seeing them as rebellious and insubordinate. In this case, rebellion is seen as negative. But sometimes being a rebel can be seen as a good thing, and maybe even a way of being that can change history. Discuss with your students what it means to be a rebel.

- What do you think of when you hear the word *rebel*? Does it have positive or negative connotations?
- Take a few moments and think about whether you consider yourself or anyone in your family to be a rebel. What does that mean?
- Think about the media you consume (books, TV, movies, music) and consider the purpose of rebellion as it's portrayed. Is rebellion necessary sometimes? In what situations?

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

**HISTORY:** “Iran has dealt with its fair share of strife and political unrest. And while I’m not one to point fingers or lay blame . . . the United States and Britain were totally at fault.” (p. 9)

- Does this statement make you upset? Do you have an automatic desire to protect your country’s reputation? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do you know any of this history from school? If not, why do you think it may not have been taught to you?
- What do you think of the way that Sara discusses Iranian history in the first chapter? Does the humor make the history more accessible?
- What new information did you learn from this section? Does it change how you understand the history of America?



**WORK:** In the introduction, Sara talks about how her sister can't get work because she doesn't have a Social Security number. Sara, not quite understanding, thinks to herself, "Who cared if we didn't have Social Security numbers? We had a phone number and an address. What else did a person need to apply for a job?" (p. 3)

- Have you ever worried about the possibility of being unable to work?
- Have you ever considered what it means to try to set up a life somewhere you are not supposed to be according to lawmakers and politicians?
- What do you think it would be like to suddenly realize you may not be able to find a way to truly make a life for yourself in the place you consider home?
- Have you thought about what it might be like for someone your age to be denied something you take for granted simply because they were born somewhere else?
- Have you ever considered the connection between a Social Security number and your citizenship status in terms of what rights you're granted by having that number?

**WOMANHOOD:** "[My mom] was afraid what our relatives would think if word got out that Shohreh let her daughter pluck her brows before she'd turned fifteen. Would the older generation of great-aunts and great-uncles think she was a bad mom? Would they infer that her kids were sluts and harlots?" (p. 49)

- "I hated swimming during PE and considered it a basic human right to use my menstrual cycle as an excuse to stay out of the water. My PE teacher was a dude and missed the memo that tampons had been invented and that periods didn't last for three consecutive months." (p. 21) Do you think the PE teacher was truly ignorant in this way? What does the way society at large reacts to discussions of menstruation mean for women? What does it mean for men? Have you had a similar experience? What do you think this says about how girls and women are misunderstood in our society? Do you see these misunderstandings play out in your own life?
- "I'd been cursed with a unibrow. . . . I never thought it was that noticeable. My whole life, my mom and aunts had praised me for how American I looked." (p. 43) How much is our understanding of what is beautiful dictated by culture and society? Can you think of more things that are understood differently in other countries and cultures?
- What roles do you have within your family? Do you think your gender influences the roles you play? Does your family's treatment of gender reflect society's? How?

**STEREOTYPES:** "When people inquire about my ethnicity, I prefer to say that I'm Iranian. It always feels like Persian is the more pretentious response, and a term to use when you don't want people to associate you with a country that's been referred to as part of the axis of evil. But to anyone who still refers to Iran in those terms, I respectfully say: stop being a horrible xenophobe." (p. 37)

"One might assume Strict, conservative, diabolical monsters with foreign accents raised me. Only the foreign-accent part of that statement is true. My mom and dad defied (most of) the stereotypes regularly associated with Persian parents." (p. 55)

- Consider the quotes above: Does Sara's story help you to deconstruct preconceived notions about Iran and the Middle East? What about stereotypes around conservative parents from outside North America?
- Does reading about Sara's parents change your views of your own parents? Think about statements such as this: "For most of my childhood, I thought all dads worked six days a week, but I began to notice that most of my friends' fathers took Saturdays and Sundays off." (p. 60)
- What other kinds of stereotypes does Sara's story help reveal and break down?



## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION CONTINUED

**MYTHS:** In America today there are many myths that overshadow discussions about immigration. There are myths about laziness, people stealing jobs, or parents driving their children near insanity by pushing them into careers they may not want. But these myths are often just that. Sara writes, “One of the many downsides of emigration from one country to another is that you’re not always left with the option to follow your dreams.” (p. 56) But her parents didn’t allow this to stop Sara. In fact, she notes, “my parents were like ‘Cool, we’ll pay for [acting lessons] even though we totally can’t afford it. Follow your pipe dream, honey! Yay, America!’” (p. 60) In this situation at least, it appears that the American dream is still something Sara’s parents believe in. Consider this as you think about the following questions:

- How does Sara’s narrative challenge myths that you might hear about immigrant families? How does her experience differ from the narratives that anti-immigrant groups spin in the media?
- Think of some specific examples of how Sara and her family defy these myths. Discuss them as a group.

**CELEBRITY:** We are often shaped by popular culture and the cult of celebrity, particularly when it comes to how we dress and what we consider worth paying attention to. “I don’t know if I was as fascinated with acting as much as I was with the cult of celebrity. More specifically, the world of Winona Ryder.” (p. 59)

- How does popular culture and celebrity affect Sara’s way of understanding the America she grew up in?
- How does popular culture (films, books, television) portray immigrants and the experience of immigration in America?
- Do you see the same experiences reflected in Sara’s book? What’s different?

**FAMILY:** “One of my parents’ biggest fears after we immigrated to America was that we would abandon the most significant qualities of Iranian culture: our morals, our loyalty to and love for our family, our hospitality, and the lifelong desire to be kind and polite to others.” (p. 72)

- What does family mean to you?
- Look at how Sara talks about her family and what they mean to her. How does her family experience differ from yours?
- Does this thinking about respect, morals, and manners differ from yours? What about other families in your community?
- What other key traits (showing appreciation, positive communication, etc.) are a part of the way your family functions? How do you all go about trying to maintain these traits?

“I grew up among nineteen first cousins, and they each played a pivotal role in my childhood and teen years. Most of them had several years on me, and I could never shake the feeling that they were privy to family secrets and scandals that I was too young and innocent to know about.” (p. 151)

- Think about your family. Is it big? Small? Do you spend much time with your extended family?
- What level of communication do you believe it takes to be successful as a family? Keep in mind what you’ve read about Sara and how she interacts with her parents and siblings.



**DRUGS AND POPULARITY:** In Chapter Five, Sara talks about how she yearns for popularity. In her mind, there is an association between popularity and drugs: “As the school year came to a close, I remained hopelessly drug-free. . . . If our application for a green card got denied, I wanted to relish in the perks of being an American teenager before the INS killed my vibe” (p. 83). Consider some of the following questions as you think about the relationship between recreational drug use and Sara’s status as an undocumented citizen:

- What are your initial reactions to Sara’s statement: “It never crossed my mind that smoking pot was a privilege afforded to American teenagers and not us undocumented kids.” (p. 91) Are consequences for drug use by a documented vs. undocumented individual something you’ve ever considered?
- How do you think the consequences would differ if Sara was caught, compared to other students in her school?
- Do you notice the connections that mainstream media often attempts to make between undocumented immigrants and drug use? Do you think this affects how undocumented immigrants are seen and understood in America?

**XENOPHOBIA:** “‘Go back to your country’ is one of my least favorite phrases in the English language. It’s vile and racist and only uttered by xenophobes and bigots” (p. 97). *Xenophobia* is a word that describes an intense dislike or fear of anything from outside one’s own country or culture. It’s often irrational, and usually manifests in ways that are damaging to the lives of non-white populations. In Sara’s experience, xenophobia even led her to be ashamed of her own family for a while, because they spoke a different language and adhered to different customs. Think about what it would be like to be seen in a negative light simply because you’re not from the same part of the world as others in your community, then consider these questions:

- Have you experienced or witnessed instances of xenophobia in your community?
- What is your first instinct when you see someone being targeted by bigotry and xenophobia?
- How do you see xenophobia being reinforced in media and/or in your community?
- In what ways do you and your friends respond to those who are different when you come across them in your own lives? Do you think about the consequences of these actions?

## Praise for **AMERICANIZED** by Sara Saedi

★ “Invaluable, honest, and **HEARTFELT.**” —*Booklist*, Starred Review

★ “Handled with delicacy, Saedi asserts  
**A FEARLESS VOICE FOR GEN XERS AND MILLENNIALS.**” —*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

★ “This is an encounter with a family that many readers will understand  
**AND OTHERS WILL LONG TO BE A PART OF.**” —*The Bulletin*, Starred Review

★ “**A MUST-PURCHASE** for memoir collections.” —*School Library Journal*, Starred Review



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