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ONLY THIS BEAUTIFUL MOMENT

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Teachers' Notes

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Synopsis

Only This Beautiful Moment is the story of the Jafarzadeh family. Their tightly guarded history gently unfolds as three generations – son, father, and grandfather - share their stories.

When seventeen-year-old Moud receives news that his grandfather is dying, he and his father Saeed make the journey to Iran, a homeland Moud has never known. Before leaving, he completely erases his digital footprint, afraid that if Iranian authorities learn he is gay, he may be imprisoned – or worse.

Saeed hasn't been to Iran in more than forty years. After protesting in anti-government rallies in the late 1970s, he flees to America and the care of an abrasive grandmother he never knew existed. Once there, he struggles to navigate life in a country he despises, so far from all he knows and loves.

And then there's Bobby, a talented musician who finds living in 1930s Hollywood a game of smoke and mirrors. Now, at the end of his life, it's time to share his story in the hope of healing a family that is fractured and hurting. Only then can all three truly understand, love and accept themselves and one another.

Themes

- Love; Family; Relationships
- Acceptance; Forgiveness
- Identity; Belonging
- Equality; fairness
- Iran; Iran-America relations
- Hope
- Courage; Fairness; Resilience

Writing Style

Only This Beautiful Moment is told from the first-person perspectives of Moud (2019), his father Saeed (1978) and his grandfather Bobby (1939). Powerful vignettes of each man's fragile sense of identity, belonging and acceptance are woven together to create a story that is anchored in the social attitudes of various eras and contexts. The voice of each narrator is clear, relatable, and engaging. Likewise, the use of figurative and emotive language evokes in readers a sense of empathy and compassion for these three men. Iranian poetry is interspersed throughout the text, beautifully framing a culture that is richly artistic and far-removed from westernised depictions; yet it gives an

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honest portrayal of prejudiced, bigoted, and brutal regimes. *Only This Beautiful Moment* approaches same-sex love in a sensitive manner, however due to its occasional explicit nature, it is suited to older readers aged fifteen and older.

Study Notes

- The opening paragraph of *Only This Beautiful Moment* immediately positions readers in Moud's headspace. How has the author achieved this? What questions or issues are raised in the first few paragraphs? Why does 'de-gaying' his social media leave him feeling he has 'no past. Just possibility' (p. 1)? (*Revisit this question once completing the novel.)
- What were your first impressions of Moud's dad? Why do you think Moud feels so disconnected from him? How does their relationship develop as the novel progresses?
- In what ways does Moud find Saeed 'deeply Iranian' (p. 2)? What is meant by this term?
- Why does Moud say having an Iranian passport 'stops me cold, like a piece of paper has already changed me' (p. 2)?
- Why, after deleting his social media history, does Moud somehow feel 'more free' (p. 3)? In what ways might you feel freer by having less of a digital identity?
- Explain the struggle that Moud has with the two sides of himself that are in conflict with one another (pp. 6–7).
- Why does Moud think that Shane and his dad 'aren't so different' (p. 7)? How do you think Shane would react to this sentiment?
- Do you agree with Shane's theory that 'in every successful relationship, there needs to be a listener and a talker' (p. 7)? Why? Discuss with a friend.
- Discuss Shane's viewpoint that 'When you say it's a cultural thing, you totally shut down my point of view.' (p. 9)
- What does Shane mean when he says 'take care of your emotional immune system' (p. 18)? What would one need to do to achieve this?
- Use examples from the text to describe Tehran. How, by the end of the novel, does Moud feel towards this place?
- Why does Moud get frustrated with his father's reply when asked how it feels to be back in Tehran (p. 19)?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language in *Only This Beautiful Moment*. Examples include:
 - 'The air in the room is thick when it's just the two of us' (p. 8)
 - 'The cold metallic sound of fear' (p. 31)
 - 'She has become the revolution of my life' (p. 31)

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- 'The scents of perfume, cologne, cigarettes, and sweat hit me hard' (p. 36)
 - 'I can't find her in the sea of feathered hair and polyester and flashing lights' (p. 37)
 - 'They leer at me with violence in their eyes' (p. 49)
 - 'It's like he can see inside me with X-ray vision' (p. 49)
 - 'The longing inside me feels like a physical object. It gnaws at me. I wave to him wistfully.' (pp. 54–55)
 - 'I squeeze myself into a ball, my body shaking in terror' (p. 134)
 - 'His blood pours over me. It has a scent to it, like rust' (p. 135)
 - 'My heart feels like a raisin, shriveled and dry' (p. 169)
 - 'Thoughts are buzzing inside me, like they have a heartbeat of their own' (p. 236)
- How is Saeed from 1978 different from Saeed in 2019? What has prompted these changes?
 - Why is a character such as Peyman needed in this story? Discuss his idea that 'all children must become the opposite of their parents in at least one important way' (p. 21).
 - Why does Saeed 'feel alive in a way I rarely do' when attending protests (p. 24)?
 - What is it about Saeed that appeals to Shirin? Why does she find him different from other Iranian men?
 - Why are Baba and Maman so against Saeed attending protests?
 - Why does Bobby find it 'hard to breathe' when he's with his mother (p. 51)? Why does he 'want to hide' (p. 53)? Discuss their relationship, and how this shapes Bobby later in life.
 - How does not knowing who his father is affect Bobby? How does his life change once meeting him?
 - What role does Zip Lamb play in Bobby's life? Why does he call him when arrested?
 - Why is going to the movies with Margaret the only time Bobby feels connected to his mother?
 - In the role of Bobby, write a journal about your mother pretending Frisco is dead. What does this reveal about the nature of your relationship?
 - Why does Bobby want a family like Vicente's? How successful has he been in creating such a family in Iran?
 - Why does Moud feel confused about America being his homeland when it's his birthplace and the only country he knows?
 - Baba says that 'poetry is in our bones' (p. 69). What is the role of Iranian poetry throughout the text? What does it symbolise? Take note of the verses shared

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and discuss the messages shared in each. Consider reading more poetry by poets such as Saadi, Shahriar, Hafez and Rumi.

- Why is Moud so desperate to know what his dad is thinking when they first arrive at Baba's home?
- Discuss the language features used in describing Baba's home (see pp. 70–71).
- How does Ava help Moud to feel a true sense of belonging and acceptance, even though he finds her arrogant and presumptuous at first?
- Why does Ava say, 'I think Americans are so bored that they talk about things that don't really matter' (p. 78)? What sorts of things might she be referring to?
- What is meant by the term 'cultural appropriation' (p. 78)? How is this concept threaded throughout *Only This Beautiful Moment*?
- How does the author successfully share an Iran that is 'different from the nuclear power plants and prisons like the Western media wants you to believe' (p. 85)?
- Why does Moud find the gay community in Iran so much more authentic than that in America? Why does Shane get angry when he says this?
- In the role of Moud, write a journal entry about your 'stoic Iranian father' and the love that you've 'craved from him and never gotten' (p. 89).
- With reference to his conversation with Siamak on p. 93, what sits uncomfortably with Moud about the idea of '*wiping [his] history*'? Why does the word *shame* keep 'swirling around [his] brain'?
- How are the words of Forough Farrokhzad found under the painting a metaphor for the themes of *Only This Beautiful Moment*? (See pp. 105–106.)
- What do Iran and America have in common? How and why are these similarities shared in the text?
- Moud describes the gay community at the party as being 'real' (p. 121), noting that 'they were barely ever on their phones. Like people were actually focused on each other, not on performing their lives' (p. 122). Meanwhile, Moud reflects on often feeling like he's 'performing for people ... writing the caption for a moment before I've even lived the moment' (p. 122). Have you ever felt like Moud? Share with a friend.
- Discuss Moud's comment to Shane: 'Who are you to say who I am? Why do Americans get to treat me and my people like one of them when it's convenient for them, and like a foreigner when they feel like it?' (p. 125). Why does he go on to say he feels invisible in his own culture?
- Why is Shane so insistent that Moud 'cut [his] dad off' (p. 126)? What does Moud begin to feel about Shane's opinions on the matter?
- What makes Moud realise 'I can't let my own silence be the death of my relationship with my dad' (p. 127)? In what ways is this a turning point for Moud?

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- How does Moud finally make a small connection with his dad? Why does he see this as 'success' (p. 129)?
- Explain what Shirin means when she says, 'Men in this country think that stoicism is bravery. But it's not. Honesty is bravery' (p. 141).
- Shirin tells Saeed that her mother was the 'fairest girl in her village', which her parents saw as an advantage. How, ultimately, did 'something as superficial as the color of [her] skin' (p. 142) impact her life?
- How is Bahar different from Shirin? Why is the love between her and Saeed different from his love for Shirin? How does Bahar help Saeed to find himself?
- Why does Saeed say, 'it's impossible to build a future when you don't know the truth of your past' (p. 176)? Do you agree with him? Why?
- When Saeed discovers the truth about his parents in 1978, he describes it as follows: 'The ground under us shifts, the earth reorients itself. A new past emerges. A strange and frightening history. This isn't a conversation. It's a seismic event. My life will never be the same' (p. 181). In the role of Saeed, write a present-day reflection about these thoughts you had as a younger man, now that you have the benefit of hindsight.
- Why does Bahar believe that 'only deeply unhappy people' want to rule the world (p. 188)?
- Why did his night in the gay American piano bar make Saeed feel like he was 'right back home' (p. 199)?
- 'Baba always said that when the world didn't make sense, the answers could be found in poetry' (p. 202). Find a poem that makes sense to you, explaining how it helps you to make sense of yourself and your world.
- What does Bobby really mean when he says, 'I dream of a day when my mother's spit won't be in my hair' (p. 211)?
- Debate whether Margaret thinks 'her son is priceless' (p. 214).
- What effect does going to Joan Crawford's party have on Bobby and his future happiness? Why can't he wait to share this revelation with Vicente?
- In what ways is Zip Lamb a father figure to Bobby?
- What is really preventing Vicente from being with Bobby?
- Discuss Zip Lamb's comment that: 'Shame is humanity's enemy. It's the root of hatred and division' (pp. 266–267).
- What are Zip's rules of love? (See p. 268.) Do you agree with his rules? Why does Zip say 'nothing destroys love like resentment'?
- Why, when Vicente leaves, does Bobby wish he was the one leaving (see p. 281)?
- How does visiting Peyman help Moud to see his father in a different light? What does he mean by his 'fun-house mirror' analogy (see p. 283)? How is this visit a

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turning point for Moud? What has allowed you to view your parent/s or caregiver/s differently?

- What do Moud and his father have in common? What makes Moud start to realise this?
- What role does grief for Bahar play in the breakdown of Moud and Saeed's relationship? How can this now be rebuilt?
- What does Baba mean when he says, 'History is a quilt. You pull one thread and everything changes' (p. 295)?
- Why does Moud say, 'It's like my life has always been an untouched coloring book, and finally, someone is coloring it all in for me' (p. 295)?
- Discuss the notion that 'regret is no feeling for a happy man' (p. 297). What regrets do Bobby, Saeed and Moud have?
- Discuss the following passage: 'I picture my mother, telling my dad that love easily given can be easily taken away. I can feel her presence. I may not have a memory of her, but she's with me. And I cry. I'm weeping because she left me too soon. She would have loved me. Accepted me. Fought for me' (p. 300). How does including his mother in his history help Moud to move forwards?
- Explain why Shane is called a 'Peak White Gay' (p. 303). How does this affect him? Why has this been included in the text?
- What makes Moud say, 'I've never felt so close to my family. It's like we opened some kind of Pandora's box of memories, and now they come flooding out.' (p. 307). In the role of Moud, explain why you feel this way.
- What is the symbolism of Moud's tri-colour ski suit (see p. 307)?
- Discuss Baba's sentiments on p. 310 that 'power corrupts'. Discuss examples from throughout history that verify this statement.
- Why doesn't Moud want Shane to come to Iran? What causes Moud to be 'so filled with doubt about who I am that I'm not sure I can even be in a relationship anymore' (p. 311)?
- How does 'time [have] a way of helping us adjust to new ideas' (p. 314)? When has this been true in your life?
- In your own words, explain what Zip means when he likens the gay community to fruits and flowers (see p. 340).
- Why, when he wears Zip's clothes, does Bobby like the feel of his 'new skin' (p. 344)?
- What ideals and advice does Zip instil in Bobby? What does he implore Bobby to do when he becomes a man? What evidence is there that Baba followed this advice? Who, in your life, is a mentor?
- Why does Moud want to '[give] my dad a second chance at life, at love' (p. 357)? Why didn't he feel like this earlier?
- What does Baba mean when he says, 'Change is the only constant in this life' (pp. 369–370)?

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- Discuss the significance of Baba's father taking him to a hammam (see p. 373). Why, for Baba, does it feel good to be this new person, 'in a new skin' (p. 373)?
- Reread p. 374 on which Saeed shares a line from his favourite poem with Moud. What is the significance of this to the story?
- On pp. 378–379, Ava and Moud take photos of every room in the house while Ava shares her memories. Take a photo of a room that has helped shape your life, sharing your memories in a reflection.
- Moud realises that this trip has been filled with heartbreak, sadness and regret, but also love, connection and purpose (p. 379). Why does he say this makes him 'lucky'?
- Why does Moud insist on going to the protest with his dad? (See p. 381)?
- Moud is unsure of the difference between 'withholding a secret and honoring a private moment' (p. 382). What advice would you give him about this?
- Why does Baba say, 'The things you regret are the things you don't do, not the things you do' (p. 384). How has this been true in your own life?
- Discuss the importance of the ending paragraph of the novel (see p. 387).
- Family loyalty and forgiveness are important messages that come through in *Only This Beautiful Moment*. Write or record a piece reflecting on these values.
- What role do Sonia's and Shane's podcasts play in the text? How and why do these podcasts implode on Shane?
- How and why do Moud's feelings towards Shane change over time? What triggers these changing feelings?
- Why has a character like Siamak been included in the novel? How would the story be different without him?
- How could Saeed's life have been different had he shared his history with Moud?
- What comments does *Only This Beautiful Moment* make about social media?
- Throughout the text, attention is drawn to American–Iranian relations, and the paradoxes that lie within this fractured relationship. Use examples from the text to explore this theme.
- How would this story be different had Moud's mother not died?
- In terms of your relationships with friends and family, what are your biggest take aways from *Only This Beautiful Moment*? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss the significance of the title, *Only This Beautiful Moment*. When do Moud, Saeed and Bobby each experience their beautiful moments? When have you had your beautiful moments? Share in a reflection.
- What do you believe to be the main message in *Only This Beautiful Moment*?
- In what ways is *Only This Beautiful Moment* a coming-of-age story?
- How is resilience an important theme of *Only This Beautiful Moment*?

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Author Motivation

Abdi Nazemian's author note: My kids once asked me, 'What's your favorite day ever?' Perhaps they were expecting me to say it was the day they were born. Or the day I was married. But after giving it some thought, I told them my favorite day was today, because it holds every preceding day within it. This book, in some ways, was born from that conversation, from wanting to understand the way my present, and our collective present, holds the past within it.

I've always been obsessed with the past, nostalgic for a time I never lived through. I think that's because, when I was young, so much of my history was hidden from me. My parents, and many of their generation, didn't speak about Iran, perhaps to shield the next generation from the pain of their memories. Similarly, when I started to realize I was gay, I knew nothing of queer history. It certainly wasn't taught in schools when I was young. As a kid, I was too scared to dig into my Iranian and my queer history. And so, my obsession with the past took other forms. I was consumed by Old Hollywood. I lost myself in the fantasy world of Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow, Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, and so many others. The first version of this novel wasn't about Moud, Saeed, and Bobby. It was about a young girl making her way in Old Hollywood. That story guided me to a different story, to a much more personal tale. In some ways, the process of writing this book mirrors the process of my life. What began as an escape through fantasy ended with me having to face the reality of my history and identity. Creating art has been one of the true gifts of my life. It's given me a tool to piece together the histories that were hidden from me, and in doing so, to become more whole.

This book is, among other things, about the resilience of the human spirit. In particular, the spirit of Iranian people and queer Iranians. Iran's former president, during a visit to the United States, famously said, 'In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran we don't have this phenomenon.' Those comments still enrage me. Through family and friends who live in Iran, I know of many queer Iranians living in Iran, though they must hide their queerness from the government. Perhaps that's what makes me the saddest about those comments. They remind me of how often I felt invisible in my home and my community growing up. And they remind me of how many people, especially queer people with intersectional identities, feel *too* visible in some spaces, and invisible in others. And yet, somehow, community still forms.

This book is also an ode to the bonds of family, and to the power of forgiving those we love, and forgiving ourselves. If there's one thing I love about Persian culture, it's the way it values family. When I struggled with my family's and my culture's difficulties in

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accepting my sexuality, many Americans I knew turned my family and the Iranian community into the bad guys. They spoke the language of American self-empowerment, which tells us that if someone doesn't accept us as we are, we should shut them out completely. I spoke the language of immigrant families, which taught me that family loyalty comes before everything else. My family and my culture may have struggled with me, and I may have struggled with them, but we never turned our backs on each other. And I'm so grateful for that, because now I have a family who accepts me, and a vibrant, ever-changing community that welcomes my voice. We've never been perfect, but we've always been there for each other, and we've always forgiven each other.

This isn't meant to imply that we should keep our families close if they threaten our safety. Nor is it meant to imply that we all have the option of healing the wounds of our families. Many family bonds are broken by emotional and physical abuse. Many members of our queer community can't come out for fear of their own safety. No one should come out if they don't feel safe.

I hope that those who are moved by this book are inspired to dig into their own past, and their own invisible histories. Perhaps, by shining a light on all the histories that were once invisible, we can honor those who paved our path for us by making the world a place of greater empathy, forgiveness, and understanding, a place where every today holds the spirit of every yesterday within it. Because all we will ever have is this moment, and we owe it to those who fought for us to make it as beautiful as possible.

About the Author

Abdi Nazemian is the author of *Like a Love Story*, a Stonewall Honor Book, *The Chandler Legacies*, and *The Authentics*. His novel *The Walk-In Closet* won the Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Debut Fiction. His screenwriting credits include the films *The Artist's Wife*, *The Quiet*, and *Menendez: Blood Brothers* and the television series *The Village* and *Almost Family*. He has been an executive producer and associate producer on numerous films, including *Call Me by Your Name*, *Little Woods*, and *The House of Tomorrow*. He lives in Los Angeles with his husband, their two children, and their dog, Disco. Find him online at www.abdinazemian.com.