



Firoozeh Dumas
Bridging Cultures through Humor

An Interview by Dr. Scott LaMascus, Oklahoma Christian University, and Editor Carla Walker

The following interview is distilled from a three-hour conversation with Firoozeh Dumas when she visited Oklahoma City last July. We were dizzy from Oklahoma's hottest summer on record—it was a balmy 105 degrees, down from a record-setting 110 just two days prior. Dizzy or no, we had great fun. It's too bad the printed page isn't equipped with a laugh track (we haven't quite perfected the app for that). Firoozeh is the consummate humorist and relates her journey from Iranian immigrant to American citizen with both cheek and nostalgia. Add to the mix that she married a Frenchman and you'll understand she has plenty of experience in embracing "the other."



Carla Walker: At one of your appearances, the moderator asked what you would be if you weren't a writer and you said "a cook." You told her, "Food is a great way to learn about other people and other countries; food says so much about a culture." Tell us about the place of food and family in Iranian culture.

Firoozeh Dumas: People don't realize this, but Iran is an amazing place for fruits and vegetables, we have such a wide variety. People imagine Iran to be a desert, which is not true at all; part of it is very fertile. For hundreds of years, Persian cooks have had access to so many great ingredients. Iranian women take pride in how well they cook their rice. They take pride in cooking. I work, so it's more like *what am I thawing?*

We also eat together in Iran. You never see anybody eating alone. There is no such thing as food to go, you sit down and eat with family. It is the heart of the culture. Whenever you go into the home of an Iranian, they have to feed you. It doesn't matter what time it is, it doesn't matter who, even if you've just had a Thanksgiving meal, the attitude is: "You're in our house, let's eat." If there is ever some sort of national emergency, go to the home of an Iranian because we are well stocked.

Walker: When you gather for big family meals, all the aunts and uncles and cousins, does everyone bring food?

Dumas: We don't do potluck. It's not at all in our culture. One person has to suffer and cook for everybody. That's why in one of my articles I said, "Evolution thy name is potluck."

Firoozeh as a young girl, "too cool" in sunglasses, Abadan, Iran. As anomalies to their new American neighbors, Firoozeh's family fielded many questions about Iran: No, they didn't own a camel. Yes, they had electricity but did *not* live in a tent. The correct pronunciation of the country is "Ee-rahnn," not "I-ran."

Walker: Tell us about the conversations around those meals. In an interview you said that there is an emphasis on conversation in Iranian culture that is perhaps missing in American culture due to technology and the fast-paced lives we lead.

Dumas: When you have an hour-and-a-half meal, followed by tea, you talk. It wasn't as if there were computers and other distractions when I was growing up; getting together with family was what we did. It wasn't until I came to America that I realized that people go on vacations to places other than their relatives' homes. To me, a vacation meant you go to a relative's house and you all sleep on the floor. We are very tribal.

Walker: Are your discussions about family or about what's going on in the world?

Dumas: There is constant storytelling and rehashing of the past. One of my uncles will dominate the conversation, and then my dad will retell whatever story my uncle just told, and then my aunt will say, "No, you are both wrong," and she will retell the whole story. In my family there is so much humor. As my relatives age—my father and his siblings are all in their eighties—they will say, "Okay, the first ten minutes we're going to just talk about prostates, then we're done."

Scott LaMascus: You value education and you travel frequently to speak to high school audiences who read your books as part of their coursework. In fact, you're here in Oklahoma to speak to high school students participating in General Tommy Frank's Four Star Debate program. What is your message to students?

Dumas: I think it's really important, not just for students but for everybody, to realize that what you see on the news is the worst of every country. You need

to go beyond that to get to the human stories. I want kids to be media savvy and to realize that every news outlet has some kind of bent to it. You can't go to just one. If you like Rush Limbaugh, fine, but listen to somebody that totally disagrees with Rush Limbaugh, too, and make up your own mind.

Critical thinking is important and I think this generation, ironically, even though there's so much information available to them, they don't necessarily seek it. I say, next time there is a major world event, go on BBC.com. Read their version. Go on CNN.com. Read their version. Go on FOXNews.com. Read their version. And understand that every bit of information you get is coming through some sort of bias filter. No news organization is completely neutral because these are humans reporting.

LaMascus: Your books offer a perspective on the socio-political views of Iranian Americans before and after the revolution. How have things changed since that period during the Carter administration?

Dumas: When President Carter let the Shah come to the U.S. for treatment of his cancer, Iranians were very angry. They wanted the Shah returned to Iran to stand trial for crimes. A small group of militants invaded the embassy in protest and took American diplomats as hostages. That was the first time that most Americans even thought, "Where is Iran?" Unfortunately it was the worst introduction possible. I remember my father, along with every other Iranian, said, "Oh, this is a ploy, they'll be out tomorrow. Iranians, we're not hostage takers." No Iranian ever thought it was going to take 444 days to get the hostages released. And unfortunately, what happened during those 444 days was that the image of Iran as an anti-American nation was carved into the psyche of Americans, and I think that's still there. Even though Iran was not involved at all on 9/11, so many people associate Iran with that tragedy. One thing I try to do with my lectures, traveling throughout the United States, is to present a voice and story that Americans haven't heard.

Walker: Immigration is a subject of contentious debate in America right now. Tell us about your family's experience of coming to this country and the level of acceptance or non-acceptance that you experienced thirty years ago versus what immigrants experience now.

Dumas: Our experience was so positive and it really shaped us. I love America. Had I come into a hostile country, obviously I would have had a very different impression of what Americans are like. Iranian immigrants

who came after the revolution really did experience a different America than my family did. When we came here in 1972, we lived in Whittier, California, where ninety-nine percent of the people had never heard of Iran. People were making us cookies and treated us with such kindness and hospitality. We experienced what I refer to as the real America. For Iranians that came after the revolution and after the hostage taking, it was, "Oh, you're from that country we all hate." When I lecture, I remind Americans what they were like before 9/11, because we don't benefit as a country by deciding, "Let's all hate the same people." There is no gain in this mutual hatred. It's like air pollution: we all suffer and our children suffer.

In the debate in America about immigration, what I don't often see is a distinction between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants. When my father decided he wanted his children to be educated here, he came ready to work hard and to give to this country in exchange for the opportunities that his children would be given.

In California we have many illegal immigrants from Mexico who play a huge role in the state economy. There's an issue with illegal immigration, but that doesn't mean that we get to treat inhumanly those who are here contributing to the economy. In this country, all kinds of businesses rely on the labor of illegal immigrants. You wouldn't have a restaurant business without illegal immigrants. Half the nannies in California are illegal immigrants. Half the people cleaning those houses are illegal immigrants. You can't complain about illegal immigrants and at the same time benefit from their being here.

I personally am against illegal immigration, let me make that clear; however, once we figure out how to stop illegal immigration, what do we do with those who are already here? People say we shouldn't educate their children. Really? You want all these children not to be educated for our benefit? We talk about denying them healthcare. Do you really want people with hacking coughs to be working in restaurant kitchens or serving you food? It's a very complicated issue. It's a gray area and the more people try and make it black and white, the further we get away from the solution.

Walker: Part of the problem in our ongoing debate about immigration is that we don't know how to talk to each other. Your essay "A Politically Correct Christmas" (NPR, 2010) suggests that our efforts to be politically correct actually inhibit civil discussion.

Dumas: All political correctness has done is to scare people away from asking questions that need to be asked. There is no such thing as a bad question if it's coming from a place of honesty. I think that political correctness has not made people more culturally sensitive, it has just stopped conversations. I would rather people ask me something about my culture than reach their own conclusions because they are too afraid to ask. Usually the answer is much simpler than they realize.

LaMascus: Your books reveal some very painful episodes: an ugly mob scene with your family when you were invited to the White

Firoozeh (she's the one with pigtails, second row from the bottom) and classmates with her first (and favorite) teacher in America, Mrs. Sandberg. Upon meeting her new teacher, Firoozeh proudly recited the full extent of her knowledge of the English language: "White, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green."



House; the prejudice and ignorance about Iran among ordinary Americans; even rejection by some family members. But your writing makes us laugh about those experiences. What is the relationship for you between humor and suffering, laughter and tears?

Dumas: If someone is hurt, it's never funny. But in a lot of instances, if you give them a few years, you'll look back and think *that is kind of funny*. Part of the reason why the negative has not left a lasting impression on me is that if you have just an ounce more joy in life than pain, this is what you remember. I have been the recipient of so much kindness that I've been able to forgive people that are narrow-minded. You have no idea how much better life is if you have an open heart. I've had great conversations with complete strangers in the airport. It didn't matter that that person was from another country, or what religion they were, or what we disagreed on. For that moment, we got together and had a lovely conversation. I think I am very lucky to go through life not being afraid of people who are different than I am.

LaMascus: Let's talk about humor in a slightly different way. In your writing, humor is often generated by disjuncture or a slippage in language. You're hilarious, for example, when you write about "dog foods" like hush puppies and hot dogs, and how those things confused your family when you were first introduced to them. Why does language appeal to you as a source of humor?

Dumas: I think I've always been fascinated by words, because words change over time. When you are learning another language, that's when it strikes you how different things are. For instance, my family always asks me questions about English. I am their "expert" on the language. About a year ago, my father calls me and says, "What's the difference between 'knocked down' and 'knocked up'?" I said, "Dad, I've experienced both and they're very different." You would think that small variation wouldn't matter. One word: "down" or "up." How can you not love language?

Walker: Considering your love for language and writing, I wonder how the ability to express yourself would have evolved had you stayed in Iran. Would you talk a little bit about the importance of free speech?

Dumas: I don't think I can talk a *little bit* about free speech. Free speech is like oxygen to me. You cannot appreciate free speech if you have lived your whole life in America, because you cannot envision not having it. It's like gravity. Nobody says *thank God for gravity*, because we have always had it. When you live in a country like Iran where you don't have freedom of speech, what you learn to do is self censor. You even censor your thoughts. It changes who you are, it limits your world, because you know that there are certain thoughts that you're not supposed to have.

The hard part about having free speech is that we have to listen to a lot of idiots! I would still take that over not being able to speak freely and hear everyone's opinions. Free speech comes with responsibility. Free speech does not mean that you are allowed to have hateful speech. Part of what goes with free speech is respect. Sometimes we need to just agree to disagree.

Walker: I want to ask you about the rich experience that you have with two cultures, Iranian and American. What are the assets of each of those cultures?

Dumas: Starting with the Persian culture, I think the closeness of family. We take care of our own. I'm from pre-revolution Iran, so things are probably



Firoozeh (center) with older brothers Farid (left) and Farshid in Abadan, Iran. When the family came to the U.S., they learned about American culture by watching television. Firoozeh says, "My brothers used to call me *T.V. Guide* because I knew every show on every channel. They would say, 'Channel four, three o'clock,' and I'd say, 'Brady Bunch.'"



What experience could be more "American" than a visit to Disneyland? Firoozeh's father believed Walt Disney was a genius and took the family to the attraction many times after they moved to Southern California. Here, Firoozeh (left) and her friend, Heather, pose with Mickey Mouse.



A typical Sunday lunch at Aunt Fatimeh's home. Around the table is (clockwise from top): Firoozeh (seated); Dr. Kani, a cousin's husband; and Firoozeh's father, Kazem. Favorite family foods pictured here include: beef and chicken kebob (saffron is the secret to the golden hue on the chicken); lentil rice with dates, raisins, and caramelized onions; and white rice with saffron.

different now, but we never had nursing homes. Everybody has an old person living with them, some aunt who never married. My dad used to say, “In America everyone has a dog and in Iran everyone has an old person.” Partially, too, Iran is a much smaller country, about the size of Texas, so it is easier geographically to stay close with your extended family.

What have I gotten from America? That’s a long list. I just love that in America you can become the best version of yourself. There is no other country in the whole world where you can do that.

Walker: My impression after reading *Funny in Farsi* is that your family was so open and curious when you arrived in America, that you approached this new experience with open arms. I didn’t get the sense that you were afraid. I think I would be at least hesitant, setting off to live in a country where I knew little about the language and culture.

Dumas: When we first came, we were here for only two years and the idea was, *We are going to eat everything in America and see as much as we can*—which we did. We were at the garlic festival. We were at the bake festival. We were eating fried foods on a stick.

I remember my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Sandberg, invited us to her house for dinner and her husband was a hunter. They had animal heads mounted all over every room. They served us venison. Of course we had no clue what venison was, so my mother says in Persian to my father, “What is this?” and my dad says in Persian, “Eat it.” We were eating this meat and looking at all the animal heads, thinking, *Which one of you is this?*

Walker: Gauging from your essays, it seems that television was a big part of assimilation for your family. Yet, you don’t have a television in your own home now with your children. For a new immigrant coming to this country, would you say that watching television is a good or bad tool when trying to understand our culture?

Dumas: If you want to understand American culture, go to a garage sale. Go to a baseball game. Go to some kind of festival. I think television is the worst of the worst. MTV is all over the world, so people in the Middle East think that American teenagers are promiscuous and have no morals. That’s not the image you want. A lot of Iranians came to America after the revolution, and the first question they’d ask was, “What has your daughter experienced here? What’s it like?” and my mother would say, “Oh, the nicest people, such nice families.” They were really surprised because that is not the image they had of Americans, of families being close-knit.

There is so much fear of “the other” nowadays. I wish that there were a channel that focused on good news and positive stories. I would call it the Good Karma Channel. For example, after hurricane Katrina I got emails from many Iranian groups that were having fundraisers for hurricane victims and I thought, *I wish Americans knew this. I wish Americans knew that all these Iranians are having fundraisers for people they will never meet.* That would never make network news—ever.

Walker: I was moved by what your father taught you about religion, which you describe so well in your essay “The Ham Amendment.” Would you tell us some of his philosophy?

Dumas: Basically my dad said it’s not the rules of religion, like what you eat or don’t eat, it is how you treat your fellow man; that’s the only detail God cares about. He also said—in Christianity, in Judaism, in Islam—there are good people and bad people. Just because someone belongs to a certain religion doesn’t mean anything, you don’t know what kind of person they are. You have to judge every person individually. I hear the phrase “Christian values” and we Iranians have those same values—we just call them “values.” There is so much that is universal among all of us.

LaMascus: In addition to visiting with students, you addressed the Iranian American community while you were here in Oklahoma City. What did you want to communicate to them?

Dumas: Part of the reason I was interested in speaking at Oklahoma Christian University is because I have lots of Iranian fans and Middle Easterners who read my website. I want them to see that bridge going both ways. There are misconceptions on both sides. I spend a lot of time in rural America, and when I go home I always debrief my family. “How was it?” they’ll ask me and I say, “They were so kind to me.” People I meet across the country take me to local places, to do this and that. I feel like every time I’m talking to my family, every time I’m relating that to a group of Iranians, I’m also telling them, “Look, you don’t need to be afraid.” That’s my message to Americans, but I’m telling the same thing to Iranians, too. It goes both ways.

LaMascus: You are the bridge.

Dumas: The irony is, it’s easy to bomb a bridge, but it is so hard to build one. ☺

Firoozeh Dumas is the author of *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing Without an Accent*. She is currently working on a tween novel (which contains no vampires) for Random House. Firoozeh also lectures throughout the United States, using humor to remind us that our commonalities far outweigh our differences. Interview transcribed by Stanton Yeakley, Oklahoma Christian University, English/Pre-Law major.

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