Check for updates

earlier history of American evangelical activism and a simple newsletter—stood “on the front lines of an encounter between people of different faiths and nationalities” (228). Shannon’s fine book testifies to the influence and appeal of American soft power, as well as to the intimate but vexed relationship that has prevailed between Iran and the United States.

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.44

Familial Undercurrents: Untold Stories of Love and Marriage in Modern Iran. Afsaneh Najmbadi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). pp. 162. $25.95

Reviewed by Susanna Ferguson, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA
(sferguson06@smith.edu)

(Received 21 May 2024; accepted 21 May 2024)

A few short months after her father’s death, Afsaneh Najmabadi received a surprising phone call from Tehran. Across a bad connection, she learned of a sister she had never met; through that sister, of another family and another life that her father had kept secret from her until his death. Who was this sister, this second family? How would this encounter change her memories of childhood, her relationship to kin and kinship, and her sense of what was owed to the present and the past? More broadly, what light could this startling discovery shed on the modern history of family, love, and marriage in Iran? From these deeply personal beginnings, *Familial Undercurrents* weaves a history of intimate life in modern Iran with Najmabadi’s own reflections on the historian’s craft: the ethics of interpretation, the politics of archives and reading practices, and the difficulties of navigating what is due to the living, and the dead.

The book joins a growing literature on family history in the modern Middle East. Works such as Beshara Doumani’s *Family History in the Middle East* (2003) and *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean* (2017) have argued that the family is not simply an object of history, but a “strategic site of analysis” which invites “the building of conceptual bridges between materialist and discursive frameworks.”[1] Najmabadi shows that focusing on the family indeed helps to unify those frameworks, bringing together questions of text and context, materiality and memory, practice and idea. She joins historians like Sherene Seikaly in putting her own family history at the center.[2] This reflexive framework highlights the sensibilities, encounters, and affective experiences that structure both archival and narrative work.[3] *Familial Undercurrents* is perhaps the field’s most sustained engagement to date with these questions. Najmabadi’s book also joins a substantial body of scholarship on the history of love, sex, and marriage in the modern Middle East. While others have documented the shift from extended-kin households to nuclear families and companionate marriages, Najmabadi’s unique methodological approach allows readers to see this shift through the

[1] Beshara Doumani, *Family History in the Middle East: Household, Property, and Gender* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1; Beshara Doumani, *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean: A Social History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[2] Sherene Seikaly, “How I Met My Great-Grandfather: Archives and the Writing of History,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 1 (2018): 6–20.

[3] Seikaly, “How I Met My Great Grandfather”; see also Maya Mikdashi, *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), especially ch. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

eyes of some of those who lived it.[4] Her close reading of texts, objects, photographs, and urban forms shows how changes that may now seem coherent and unidirectional were often not experienced that way.

Familial Undercurrents also raises broader methodological questions: about the positionality and responsibility of the historian, the work of constructing an archive, and the benefits of "reading across" multiple kinds of sources (p. 11). As she confronts her own family's past, Najmabadi wonders if what historians owe to the dead might extend *beyond* the work of recuperating stories and elevating marginalized voices that has often animated subaltern histories. Instead, she asks: "What of the desire of the dead to remain silent? What of the lives made possible by keeping silent?" (p. 2). She decides, with some discomfort, to both acknowledge and subordinate such desires, in the hopes that the stories she reveals might "reduce injury and disrespect, embarrassment and shame" (p. 2, 6).

Najmabadi grapples with what it means to tell a story in which she is at once a historian and a character (p. 7). Her answer constitutes the book's central methodological claim: that the job of the historian is to "explain people's past experiences to today's readers, rather than presume we can understand people in the past, and their choices and practices, better than they did" (p. 18). To tell the history of love and marriage in modern Iran along these lines, *Familial Undercurrents* constructs a multi-source archive made up of novels; works of satire; private letters; diaries; oral histories and gossip; public writing; photographs; objects; and memories of urban space. Many sources are drawn from the digital Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran archive, which Najmabadi edits, alongside Najmabadi's own family papers. Chapters are organized both by theme ("1. Marrying for Love," "3. Meanings of Marriage") and by source type ("2. Objects," 4. "Urban Transformations"). To address this complex archive, Najmabadi turns to a method she calls "reading across many surfaces at once" (p. 11). It is what she does with this method that constitutes the book's novelty and main contribution to the field.

By "reading across many surfaces at once," Najmabadi highlights the ambivalence and multiplicity of everyday life to reveal that apparently straightforward historical transformations were messy, contingent, and uneven. For example, she shows how love letters from her father, Abbas, to her mother, Fari, "cultivated conjugal affection," the bedrock for a companionate marriage (p. 46). At first glance, these letters are yet more evidence of one of the early twentieth century's great transformations: the gradual replacement of extended-kin households by companionate marriages and nuclear families among urban middle classes. But Najmabadi reveals that these letters also did other work. They placed the lovers in a rich tapestry of daily life, re-embedding companionate marriage in experiences of class, urban change, expertise, and state power as well as of going to the bath, reading books, and talking with friends. Most significantly, even as the letters "cultivated conjugal affection," they also located the couple within networks of family, household, and extended kin (p. 49–50). Viewed from this intimate perspective, the move from extended household to companionate marriage was not clear-cut: extended kin and family politics were deeply embedded in modern conjugal relationships. Najmabadi deepens this argument with her analysis of family photographs. While wedding photographs began to figure the conjugal couple alone, family albums and collections continued to situate those couples in larger kinship networks.

Using her broad archive and the method of "reading across," Najmabadi complicates many established narratives about how sex and love changed in the modern Middle East. Chapter One unpacks the idea of "love marriage," showing how this neat concept actually

[4] See, *inter alia*, Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis That Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Kenneth M. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015); Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

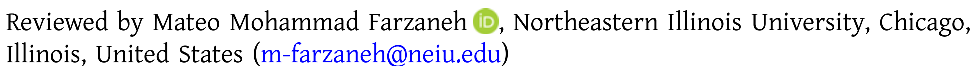
https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sheltered a host of debates about affection, passion, friendship, and desire; work and education; choice and opinion; and polygamy and monogamy. People experienced these debates differently across categories of social difference, especially gender. Chapter Two shows that conjugality was not simply an idea or discourse: it was sustained by practices such as letter-writing, photography, and dress. Highlighting these practices reveals how conjugality was *experienced* in concert (and sometimes in tension) with family, wealth, property, education, literacy, and work. Chapter Three traces how men's practices of multiple marriage became seen as shameful and backward over the course of the twentieth century, a foil for the newly-idealized love marriage discussed in Chapter One. But people navigated this shift in different ways. While some men, like Najmabadi's father, hid their multiple families from one another (a practice made possible by the increasing anonymity of urban life), some women lived alongside second wives, using different strategies to make claims on power and respect within this increasingly non-normative family form. Together, these stories pose an important question: who gets to say what the family is? Chapter Four shows how "the changing habits of urban life provided the possibility of having two families in the same city, while keeping one unknown to the other," embedding this possibility in new educational practices, social encounters, and gender relations in urban space (p. 111). Alongside these new practices, however, the memories of Najmabadi's parents' generation preserve the intimacies and joys, as well as difficulties, of joint households.

Najmabadi's study is a superb example of how close attention to individual stories and experiences, reconstructed through a wide array of sources, can challenge the neatness often attributed to historical change in hindsight. "Reading across many surfaces at once" reframes well-established narratives about sex, gender, and marriage in the modern Middle East, showing how changes and concepts were experienced in different, multidirectional, and sometimes contradictory ways. At times, the close attention to so many stories and sources comes at the expense of intimacy with their authors and creators. It would also be fascinating to see Najmabadi comment more directly and systematically on the questions of inheritance, property, wealth, and political economy that surely shaped family form and marital norms in twentieth-century Iran as elsewhere. Nevertheless, the work will be of interest to scholars of marriage, sex, and family in the modern Middle East and beyond. Its accessible style and vivid archival material, the deft work of a mature scholar, will also make *Familial Undercurrents* useful in the undergraduate and graduate classroom.

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.18

Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic. Rose Wellman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 262. $34.95. ISBN 9780520376878



Reviewed by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois, United States (m-farzaneh@neiu.edu)

(Received 15 February 2024; accepted 21 February 2024)

In this book, Rose Wellman aims to describe how everyday life and religiosity are directly connected with the Islamic Republic, concluding that the state and lives of its supporters are intertwined through food, among other things. The scarcity of academic work about food in Iran, and the potentially delicate nature of ethnographic research far from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press