About the Author

Firoozeh Dumas (b. 1966) split her childhood between Iran, the country of her birth, and California. Her father loved to tell stories of his life, and she decided to tell stories, too. She originally wrote her first book, *Funny in Farsi*, for her children. It was published in 2003 and became a bestseller. Today, Dumas travels throughout the world spreading a message of humor and shared humanity.

**With a Little Help From My Friends**

**Concept Vocabulary**

As you perform your first read of “With a Little Help From My Friends,” you will encounter these words.

- **proximity**
- **correspondents**
- **interpreter**

**Base Words** If these words are unfamiliar to you, see whether they contain a base word you know. Use your knowledge of the “inside” word, along with context, to determine the meaning. Here is an example of how to apply the strategy.

**Unfamiliar Word:** translation

**Familiar “Inside” Word:** translate, with meanings including “convert words from one language to another language”

**Context:** The translation of the German author’s novel sold very well throughout the United States.

**Conclusion:** Translation is being used as a noun. It must mean “a work which has been translated, or converted from one language to another.”

Apply your knowledge of base words and other vocabulary strategies to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words you encounter during your first read.

**First Read NONFICTION**

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete a close read after your first read.

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**STANDARDS**

Reading Informational Text

By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

**Language**

Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
BACKGROUND
Once known as Persia, Iran is an oil-rich country in the Middle East. In 1953, the United States had helped to remove Iran’s government and to place a Shah, or king, in power. In 1972, when this excerpt begins, the Iranian government was still a monarchy led by the Shah. However, seven years later, during the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the country would undergo the political upheaval the author refers to in her first sentence. The Shah would be overthrown and replaced with a government that was unfriendly to the United States. Many Americans returned the hostility.

I was lucky to have come to America years before the political upheaval in Iran. The Americans we encountered were kind and curious, unafraid to ask questions and willing to listen. As soon as I spoke enough English to communicate, I found myself being interviewed nonstop by children and adults alike. My life became one long-running *Oprah* show, minus the free luxury accommodations in Chicago, and *Oprah*.

2 On the topic of Iran, American minds were tabulae rasae.¹ Judging from the questions asked, it was clear that most Americans in 1972 had never heard of Iran. We did our best to educate. “You know Asia? Well, you go south at the Soviet Union and there we are.” Or we’d try

¹ *tabulae rasae* (TAB yuh lee RAY see) *n*. blank slates, or minds free from preconceived ideas.
to be more bucolic, mentioning being south of the beautiful Caspian Sea, “where the famous caviar comes from.” Most people in Whittier did not know about the famous caviar and once we explained what it was, they’d scrunch up their faces. “Fish eggs?” they would say. “Gross.” We tried mentioning our proximity to Afghanistan or Iraq, but it was no use. Having exhausted our geographical clues, we would say, “You’ve heard of India, Japan, or China? We’re on the same continent.”

We had always known that ours is a small country and that America is very big. But even as a seven-year-old, I was surprised that so many Americans had never noticed us on the map. Perhaps it’s like driving a Yugo and realizing that the eighteen-wheeler can’t see you.

In Iran, geography is a requirement in every grade. Since the government issues textbooks, every student studies the same material in the same grade. In first-grade geography, I had to learn the shape of Iran and the location of its capital, Tehran. I had to memorize that we shared borders with Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and the USSR. I also knew that I lived on the continent of Asia.

None of the kids in Whittier, a city an hour outside of Los Angeles, ever asked me about geography. They wanted to know about more important things, such as camels. How many did we own back home? What did we feed them? Was it a bumpy ride? I always disappointed them by admitting that I had never seen a camel in my entire life. And as far as a ride goes, our Chevrolet was rather smooth. They reacted as if I had told them that there really was a person in the Mickey Mouse costume.

We were also asked about electricity, tents, and the Sahara. Once again, we disappointed, admitting that we had electricity, that we did not own a tent, and that the Sahara was on another continent. Intent to remedy the image of our homeland as backward, my father took it upon himself to enlighten Americans whenever possible. Any unsuspecting American who asked my father a question received, as a bonus, a lecture on the successful history of the petroleum industry in Iran. As my father droned on, I watched the faces of these kind Americans, who were undoubtedly making mental notes never to talk to a foreigner again.

My family and I wondered why Americans had such a mistaken image of Iran. We were offered a clue one day by a neighbor, who told us that he knew about Iran because he had seen Lawrence of Arabia. Whoever Lawrence was, we had never heard of him, we said. My father then explained that Iranians are an Indo-European people; we are not Arabs. We do, however, have two things in common with Saudi Arabia, he continued: “Islam and petroleum.” “Now, I

2. Yugo (YOO goh) small car manufactured in Yugoslavia.
3. USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, name for a former country composed of 15 states, including Russia, that disbanded in 1991.
4. Lawrence of Arabia movie made in 1962 about a military officer in the Arabian Peninsula during World War I.
Another neighbor, a kindly old lady who taught me how to take care of indoor plants, asked whether we had many cats back home. My father, with his uncanny ability to forge friendships, said, “We don’t keep pets in our homes. They are dirty.” “But your cats are so beautiful!” our neighbor said. We had no idea what she was talking about. Seeing our puzzled expressions, she showed us a picture of a beautiful, longhaired cat. “It’s a Persian cat,” she said. That was news to us; the only cats we had ever seen back home were the mangy strays that ate scraps behind people’s houses. From that day, when I told people I was from Iran, I added “where Persian cats come from.” That impressed them.

I tried my best to be a worthy representative of my homeland, but, like a Hollywood celebrity relentlessly pursued by paparazzi, I sometimes got tired of the questions. I, however, never punched anybody with my fists; I used words. One boy at school had a habit of asking me particularly stupid questions. One day he inquired about camels, again. This time, perhaps foreshadowing a vocation in storytelling, I told him that, yes, we had camels, a one-hump and a two-hump. The one-hump belonged to my parents and the two-hump was our family station wagon. His eyes widened.

“Where do you keep them?” he asked.

“In the garage, of course,” I told him.

Having heard what he wanted to hear, he ran off to share his knowledge with the rest of the kids on the playground. He was very angry once he realized that I had fooled him, but at least he never asked me another question.

Often kids tried to be funny by chanting, “I ran to I-ran, I ran to I-ran.” The correct pronunciation, I always informed them, is “Ee-rah-n.” “I ran” is a sentence, I told them, as in “I ran away from my geography lesson.”

Older boys often asked me to teach them “some bad words in your language.” At first, I politely refused. My refusal merely increased their determination, so I solved the problem by teaching them phrases like man kharam, which means “I’m an idiot.” I told them that what I was teaching them was so nasty that they would have to promise never to repeat it to anyone. They would then spend all of recess running around yelling, “I’m an idiot! I’m an idiot!” I never told them the truth. I figured that someday, somebody would.

But almost every person who asked us a question asked with kindness. Questions were often followed by suggestions of places to visit in California. At school, the same children who inquired about camels also shared their food with me. “I bet you’ve never tried an Oreo! Have one,” or “My mom just baked these peanut butter cookies and she sent you one.” Kids invited me to their houses to show me what their rooms looked like. On Halloween, one family brought over a costume, knowing that I would surely be the only
kid in the Halloween parade without one. If someone had been able to encapsulate the kindness of these second-graders in pill form, the pills would undoubtedly put many war **correspondents** out of business.

After almost two years in Whittier, my father’s assignment was completed and we had to return home. The last month of our stay, I attended one slumber party after another, all thrown in my honor. This avalanche of kindness did not make our impending departure any easier. Everyone wanted to know when we would come back to America. We had no answer, but we invited them all to visit us in Iran. I knew no one would ever take us up on our offer, because Iran was off the radar screen for most people. My friends considered visiting their grandmothers in Oregon to be a long trip, so visiting me in Iran was like taking a left turn at the next moon. It wasn’t going to happen. I didn’t know then that I would indeed be returning to America about two years later.

Between frenzied shopping trips to Sears to buy presents for our relatives back home, my mother spent her last few weeks giving gifts to our American friends. I had wondered why my mother had brought so many Persian handicrafts with her; now I knew. Everyone, from my teachers to the crossing guard to the Brownie leader to the neighbors, received something. “Dees eez from my county-ree. Es-pay-shay-lee for you,” she would explain. These handicrafts, which probably turned up in garage sales the following year, were received with tears and promises to write.

My mother was particularly sad to return to Iran. I had always assumed that she would be relieved to return to her family and to a land where she spoke the language and didn’t need me to act as her **interpreter**. But I realized later that even though my mother could not understand anything the crossing guard, Mrs. Popkin, said, she understood that this woman looked out for me. And she understood her smiles. Even though my mother never attended a Brownie meeting, she knew that the leader, Carrie’s mom, opened up her home to us every week and led us through all kinds of projects. No one paid her for this. And my mother knew that when it had been my turn to bring snacks for the class, one of the moms had stepped in and baked cupcakes. My best friend Connie’s older sister, Michele, had tried to teach me to ride a bike, and Heather’s mom, although single with two daughters, had hosted me overnight more times than I can remember. Even though I had been the beneficiary of all the attention, my mother, watching silently from a distance, had also felt the warmth of generosity and kindness. It was hard to leave.

When my parents and I get together today, we often talk about our first year in America. Even though thirty years have passed, our memories have not faded. We remember the kindness more than ever, knowing that our relatives who immigrated to this country after the Iranian Revolution did not encounter the same America. They saw
Americans who had bumper stickers on their cars that read “Iranians: Go Home” or “We Play Cowboys and Iranians.” The Americans they met rarely invited them to their houses. These Americans felt that they knew all about Iran and its people, and they had no questions, just opinions. My relatives did not think Americans were very kind.

Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read. Review and clarify details with your group.

1. How did most Americans treat Dumas and her family during their first year in the United States?

2. What surprised the young Dumas about Americans’ knowledge of geography?

3. What joke did Dumas play on boys who pestered her to teach them bad words in her native language?

4. According to Dumas, how did things change for Iranian immigrants to the United States after the Iranian Revolution?

5. Notebook Write a summary of the selection.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the memoir?

Research to Explore Choose something from the text that interested you, and formulate a research question.
Close Read the Text

With your group, revisit sections of the text you marked during your first read. **Annotate** details that you notice. What **questions** do you have? What can you **conclude**?

Analyze the Text

1. **Review and Clarify** With your group, reread paragraphs 18–19 of “With a Little Help From My Friends.” What change in the attitude of Americans toward Iran did Dumas see in a few short years? How did Dumas feel about the change, and were her feelings justified?

2. **Present and Discuss** Now, work with your group to share the passages from the text that you found especially important. Take turns presenting your passages. Discuss what you notice in the text, the questions you asked, and the conclusions you reached.

3. **Essential Question:** What does it mean to be “American”? What has this selection taught you about American identity? Discuss with your group.

Concept Vocabulary

**proximity**

**correspondents**

**interpreter**

Why These Words? The three concept vocabulary words are related. With your group, determine what the words have in common. Write your ideas, and add another word that fits the category.

Practice

**Notebook** Use a print or online dictionary to confirm the definitions of the three concept vocabulary words. Write a sentence using each of the words. How did they make your sentences more vivid? Discuss.

Word Study

**Latin Prefix: inter-** The Latin prefix *inter-*, which begins the word *interpreter*, means “between” or “among.” For instance, an *international* agreement is an agreement between or among different nations.

Reread paragraph 1 of “With a Little Help From My Friends.” Mark the word that begins with the prefix *inter-*. Write the word here, and explain how the prefix *inter-* contributes to its meaning.
Analyze Craft and Structure

**Literary Nonfiction**  Autobiographical writing is any type of nonfiction in which an author tells his or her own story. A full autobiography usually covers the author’s entire life or a large span of time. A memoir, by contrast, is a limited kind of autobiographical writing that focuses on one period or aspect of the writer’s life. Memoirs share these elements:

- written in first person, using the pronouns I, me, we, and us
- written in story form; may read like a work of fiction
- expresses the writer’s attitude and insights

Memoirs often show how the writer’s personal life intersects the **social and historical context**, or the circumstances of the time and place in which the story occurs. Aspects of the context include politics, language, values, beliefs, foods, customs, and traditions. In this memoir, Dumas expresses insights about the social and historical context of her childhood.

### Practice

Work independently. Use the chart to identify details from the memoir that show each aspect of the social and historical context. Add a fifth category of your own. Then, discuss with your group how Dumas uses each detail to support an insight.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT OF THE CONTEXT</th>
<th>TEXTUAL DETAIL(S)</th>
<th>DUMAS’S INSIGHT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
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<td>Traditions</td>
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<td>Values or Beliefs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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Author’s Style

Humor Language that is used imaginatively rather than literally is called figurative language. Writers often use figurative language to make their ideas more vivid and rich. As figurative language involves surprising contrasts, writers also use it to make their writing funny. In this memoir, Dumas uses three types of figurative language—metaphor, simile, and hyperbole—to add zest and humor to her story.

A metaphor compares by describing one thing as if it were another.
Example: My chores were a mountain waiting to be climbed.

A simile uses the word like or as to compare two unlike items.
Example: Gerald is like a pesky housefly that keeps coming around again and again.

Hyperbole is a deliberate, extreme exaggeration.
Example: The cake was ten stories tall.

Read It
On your own, identify each type of figurative language from “With a Little Help From My Friends.” Then, share your work with your group.

Write It
Notebook Write a paragraph describing daily events in your school. Use at least one metaphor, simile, and hyperbole.