



Staff Work

---

1-31-2023

## Eating the Tornado: A Review of Everything Sad is Untrue

Sarah Moss

---

## Eating the Tornado: A Review of Everything Sad is Untrue

### Abstract

"The book contains so much sadness, but there is also plenty of joy and laughter to be had."

Posting about the book *Everything Sad is Untrue* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/eating-the-tornado-a-review-of-everything-sad-is-untrue/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Everything Sad is Untrue, Daniel Nayeri

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

# Eating the Tornado: A Review of *Everything Sad is Untrue*

Sarah Moss

January 31, 2023

**Title:** *Everything Sad is Untrue: (a true story)*

**Author:** Daniel Nayeri

**Publisher:** Levine Querido

**Publishing Date:** August 25, 2020

**Pages:** 368 (Hardcover)

**ISBN:** 978-1646140008

Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue (A True Story)* is a beautiful, epic memoir told from the perspective of his 12-year-old self—an Iranian who just moved from a refugee camp to a small town in Oklahoma where he is bullied and “othered” by his classmates. His mother, a wealthy doctor back in Iran, must now work menial jobs to make ends meet. His sister, who also escaped from Iran, treats Daniel with a mix of cruelty and indifference, and his stepfather, Ray, is unpredictably violent toward Daniel's mother. Daniel's few memories of Iran are fading, even as through the book he weaves together a Persian tale that spans generations of Daniel's family lore and some mythology. Daniel likens himself to Scheherazade, the protagonist of *One Thousand Nights* who seeks to enchant her new husband with stories so that he will not chop her head off in the morning. In this case, Daniel is enchanting his classmates—“like Scheherazade in a hostile classroom,” as the book summary states.

The book is written as if Daniel is responding to a series of writing prompts from his teacher Mrs. Miller over the course of the year, starting with “What are some of the first memories you have of your grandfather?”

Daniel's first memory of his grandfather, Baba Haji, is jarring: he recalls how Baba Haji slaughtered a panicked bull right in front of him at four years old. His second memory of Baba Haji is a sad one: “On the phone once, with my dad—I was in Oklahoma, he was in Iran where he stayed—he said, ‘Your Baba Haji has a picture of you on his mantel. Every day, he weeps and kisses it.’”

Daniel dreams of life back in Iran, where his grandmother weaves beautiful Persian rugs, where his hometown of Isfahan smells like jasmine, where the Orich bars are *much* more delicious than Mounds bars. But, as the reader finds out, he can't return to his home country. He must stay in Oklahoma because of a decision his mother—who, in Daniel's words, is the unstoppable hero of the story—made that would have otherwise cost her and her children their lives.

Again, life in Oklahoma is far from easy for Daniel. He's ridiculed by kids at school and at church; he often goes without lunch. He gets into situations that jeopardize his safety.

In one scene, Daniel and his stepfather, Ray, don trash bags (too poor for raincoats) and climb out onto the roof of their home. It is 2 a.m., and a tornado rages around them. Ray hands Daniel a box of three-inch nails to hammer into the shingles, so that the rain doesn't flood the house.

"Stepping outside during a tornado, or even a storm on the outskirts of a tornado, is a pig idiot thing to do that no real Oklahoman would do," writes Daniel.

Still, Daniel does as his stepfather says. After dropping the box of nails into a bush, he climbs down the metal ladder, grabs as many nails as he can, and pulls himself back onto the roof in the middle of a tornado.

"I thought, My grandfather's house is six hundred years old and made of stone," he writes.

And he cried.

"You might feel what I felt on the roof that night. I was ashamed of being so weak, angry at Ray for everything he'd done, tired of being poor, and afraid of the thunder and lightning crashing all around me. I thought of my Baba Haji as I braced against the roof of the house."

There, on the roof, Daniel prayed to God that, even though he may not see Baba Haji again in this lifetime, he might see his grandfather again in the next.

"Reader," says Daniel, "I think He heard me":

- I think He's a God who listens as if we are his most important children, and I think He speaks to tell us so.
- I looked up.
- The hair felt like nails.
- It didn't matter.
- I opened my mouth
- Ray said something I don't know what.
- I was busy eating the tornado.

The book contains so much sadness, but there is also plenty of joy and laughter to be had. And there's quite a bit of bathroom humor, which should not come as a surprise since this book is written from a 12-year-old perspective and is considered youth literature.

*Everything Sad is Untrue (A True Story)* might make Christians pause and ponder, "Would I be willing to give up everything—my wealth, my comfort, my grandfather—for my faith, in the

same way that Daniel and his family had to?" It's the sort of question that readers might ponder for days after finishing the book, recalling the harrowing tales that Daniel shares. We can only decide for ourselves what our answers might be, but in Daniel's case, it seems that his answer would still be "yes."