



## Sepideh Discussion Guide

Director: Berit Madsen

Year: 2013

Time: 90 min

### You might know this director from:

SEPIDEH is Berit Madsen's first feature-length documentary film.

## FILM SUMMARY

SEPIDEH is the story of a teenage Iranian girl named Sepideh whose gaze is fixed toward the stars. At night, while everyone in her rural village is sleeping, Sepideh goes outside under the night sky with fellow Astronomy Club members, who are mostly boys, to look at the the moon and the stars, an illuminated cosmos that captured Sepideh's heart since she was young.

Sepideh dreams of becoming an astronaut and astronomer, someday traveling to outer space like her hero Anousheh Ansari, but everyone in the village shakes their head. They think her goal is unrealizable and useless. Sepideh's mother and uncle fear that she, in chasing her dream, will waste her chance at university. Sepideh is not deterred, however. Since her father's death when she was twelve, Sepideh has vowed to honor her father by becoming an astronaut. Passionate and committed, she pursues her goal with the mentorship of physics teacher, Mr. Kabiri, who started the Astronomy Club and has his own dreams to build a hilltop observatory.

To keep her spirits up, Sepideh pours her heart out in letters to Albert Einstein. Her endearing words and the daily drama of her life are interwoven in this film with shots of constellations and starry hosts. By the film's end, Sepideh makes a decision that will set her life on a new course. Heartwarming and inspirational, SEPIDEH is a universal story of determination and hope, as well as an important film about the young people of Iran, many of whom are envisioning new lives for themselves, going against tradition and societal expectations.

## FILM THEMES

When Sepideh's uncle rebukes her for going out stargazing with the boys, Sepideh says, "After me there will be ten more doing what I have done. I'm not alone." This brave statement encapsulates the importance of this film, how resolute dreamers and pioneers risk so much to pursue their dreams so that others may follow.

### PURSUIT OF A PASSION

Sepideh's focus is unrelenting; her passion is near obsessive. After her father's death, astronomy is the only thing that gives her life purpose. When her mother says the family cannot afford to send her to university, Sepideh embarks on an ambitious project to win a scholarship. She is not selected, but she perseveres. There is a cost to her monomania, however. Sepideh is willing to risk possible censure from her uncles and her community, and at times she may seem selfish, especially when her mother is concerned about the family's survival and future.

### REDEFINING GENDER ROLES

Sepideh is not rejecting the gender role she was born into; she is redefining it. Her passion for astronomy doesn't mean a denial of her identity as an Iranian woman. In fact, her idol is a fellow Iranian woman, who proved that Sepideh's dream is possible. But Sepideh must defy expectations placed on her. Her bravery and determination isn't just for herself though. She knows that others will follow. Her physics teacher also wants Sepideh to be a role model who inspires other girls. In an interview, the filmmaker reveals that even Sepideh's mother, inspired by her daughter, became interested in attending university.

### MENTORSHIP AND INSPIRATION

Though Sepideh's mother and uncles discourage her pursuits, she's inspired by mentors, both living and dead. She learns how Albert Einstein believed in his own abilities despite having failed math as a young student. She writes to him, expressing her hopes and dreams. Anousheh Ansari, the first Iranian in space and the first female space tourist, is another source of inspiration. Sepideh's letter to her brings them together, and we learn at the film's end that Ansari pledges to support Sepideh's education. Most importantly may be Mr. Kabiri, the physics teacher in Sepideh's hometown who recruited female students into the Astronomy Club and encouraged Sepideh to follow her dreams.

### CHOOSING ONE'S OWN PATH

Mr. Kabiri disapproves of Sepideh's engagement and views her leaving the Astronomy Club as selfish. He hoped that she would stay and help him fulfill his vision for the observatory and the Astronomy Club. Sepideh, however, decides that the club cannot give her anything more. She must move on and continue chasing her dream. Though she has much to thank Mr. Kabiri for, she must choose her own path, not the one he, or anyone else, chooses for her.

**“Great Spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”**

Albert Einstein

**“I knew that I had to pursue this story of Sepideh that was taking me into another side of Iran – the story that isn't about the oppression of women and victimisation, but about change coming to Iran.”**

Director Berit Madsen



## FILM FACTS:

- SEPIDEH was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize in the category of World Cinema–Documentary, at the Sundance Film Festival in 2014.
- The film also exists in a 52-minute version. For Sundance, the film was titled Sepideh: Reaching for the Stars. The official title is simply SEPIDEH.
- Berit Madsen, the filmmaker, was in Iran with her daughter and Iranian husband when she chanced upon the story of an astronomy festival, started by a physics teacher who was trying to raise funds to build an observatory. Madsen wanted to visit Saadat Shahr, 400 miles south of Tehran, to learn more about the town’s relationship to astronomy.
- Madsen was instantly enchanted by Sepideh when they first met. Sepideh came to Mr. Kabiri’s house in the middle of the night, lugging a telescope as large as herself. Madsen was struck that “she had come alone in these late hours to meet a group of boys, with no adult.”
- Madsen learned that in Iran, the mother must give permission for her daughter to be filmed. Sepideh’s mother was reluctant at first, but Madsen was able to earn her trust.
- The film’s gorgeous shots of the nighttime sky was captured by Babak Tefreshi’s nighttime and time-lapse photography.
- The filming of SEPIDEH took more than five years and has led Madsen to filming new projects about the Middle East.
- According to an interview with Madsen, Sepideh is now studying physics at a small university.
- In 2010, 64% of Iran’s population was under age 30. In 2012, more than 60% of all university students in Iran were women.
- On her official website, Anousheh Ansari describes herself as “First Female Private Space Explorer and First Space Ambassador.”
- In May 1996, the X Prize Foundation created the X Prize, which was renamed the “Ansari X Prize” in 2004 in honor of the multi-million dollar contribution given by Anousheh Ansari and her brother-in-law, Amir Ansari.
- For the Ansari X Prize, the Foundation offered \$10 million USD to the first non-government organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft into space twice in two weeks. The prize was won on October 4, 2004, which is the 47th anniversary of the Sputnik 1 launch. The winner was the Tier One project, the experimental space plane, SpaceShipOne, designed by Burt Rutan and financed by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. In developing new technologies for the project, more than \$100 million USD was invested.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film so that others can also be inspired by the courage, determination, and resilience of Sepideh.
2. Visit Anousheh Ansari’s [official website](#) to learn more about her involvements with space travel and science education.
3. Support your local observatory or science and space museum. Invite children you know to join you in learning more about the stars, and more importantly, encourage them to find their own dreams.
4. Participate in an Astronomy Club, or if there isn’t one in your community, start one of your own and invite students to join you.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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