

## Nadine Takvorian, Warrior for Truth

Interview with L. Michelle Quraishi,  
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*I'm a warrior for doing this, I'm bringing to the surface what has been hidden for so long.*  
—Nadine Takvorian

Nadine Takvorian, author and illustrator of the upcoming graphic novel *Armaveni*, held the dream of this book safe for more than a quarter of a century, ever since she graduated from college and declared that she would write a graphic novel someday. Releasing in Fall of 2025 from Levine Querido Books, this semi-autobiographical graphic novel tells the story of the author's great-grandmother, survivor of the Armenian genocide. We hold our own hearts and throats in our hands as we speak via Zoom, our hands returning to those two places over and over as we share our experiences of wrestling pain onto the page.

Regarding the genesis of *Armaveni*, she refers to the inspiring work of Armenian artists Nonny Hogrogrian, two-time Caldecott winner (*One Fine Day*, 1971; *Always Room for One More*, 1965), and her husband David Kherdian, Newbery Honor winner (*The Road From Home: A Story of Courage, Survival and Hope*, 1979). “I wanted to write about the genocide....When my daughter was born, [I gave her the] middle name...Armaveni, and I wanted her to understand why.” A lot of people question why we still talk about the genocide, she explains: “All the stories have been set in the past, but [they] never bridge to now. [The genocide is] happening to me. It's still happening. I don't know if I'll have a country left at the end of my lifetime.” We share heartbreak over the current war in Gaza and Lebanon, how Armenian culture and Armenia itself face the threat of erasure even today—in politics, world finance and social media—and

how genocide is still happening in other places with other people as well. Genocide is NOT gone. And although some people who read *Armaveni* may not want to face that truth, others will answer its call to action and start thinking in ways they haven't before.

In *Armaveni*, Takvorian demonstrates how our ancestors are not merely a source of trauma, but also of strength, joy and connection, as editor Nick Thomas reminded her while she developed storylines including the “rich and full lives” of her main character’s family and friends: a spunky, resilient little brother, supportive and protective parents, best friends and allies, extended family, church leaders, music, dance and Armenian folklore. Even as she directly confronts terrible scenes from her family’s past, Takvorian frames that history from the safety of a loving family successfully immigrated to a safer place, giving her main character the curiosity and determination to face violence and bigotry past and present.

One aspect of her experience that Takvorian is especially keen to share is how communities metabolizing trauma can splinter along internal lines. She describes the way Armenians who identify as LGBTQIA+, as well as those who do not speak, read or write the language or who marry outside of the culture can be subject to extreme judgmentalism and ostracism. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2009 TED Talk warns of the danger of a single story: “show a people as one thing, and only as one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (Adichie 9:19). The many characters in *Armaveni* have different filters around their own cultural identity and experience, and this offers a variety of perspectives to the reader on Armenian culture and concerns. As an Ottoman Armenian with historical roots in Istanbul, Takvorian worries about the way her culture gets erased or judged even by other Armenians. “I can’t represent anything but my own experience,” she says, and hopes the publication of *Armaveni* will encourage other Armenian artists to tell their stories.

When I ask Takvorian what strengths and solace she drew upon when representing some of the most cruel and terrifying scenes from her family's past, her shoulders lift and her eyes snap with energy. She shares an artistic experience that surprised her regarding one scene in particular:

I had already written the scene and was dreading, dreading, dreading having to go in and draw it. What I found as I worked through that scene...I actually felt a power coming out of it. I started feeling more powerful...taking ownership of it and not feeling victimized by it. [I realized that] I'm a warrior for doing this, I'm bringing to the surface what has been hidden for so long—this is what happened...Here is this horrific thing that my family wanted to hide, that the Turkish government doesn't want you to know about, they'll tell you it never happened, and here's what happened, I'm gonna show it to you.

She mentions the courage of Gisele Pelicot, the French woman battling to overturn rape culture in her country by allowing videos of crimes against her to be shown in open court. When I ask the author what power she thought her ancestors drew upon to survive, she says “you have to hide everything, your identity, everything, assimilating, laying low, and then eventually getting out.” This reminds me of how Deborah Miranda (Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation) writes in *Bad Indians*, “When a lie saves your life, / that's truth; when a lie saves the lives / of your children, grandchildren / and five generations forward, / that's truth in a form so pure / it can't be anything / but a story” (38). Takvorian hasn't heard of Miranda's work, but shares the story of a grandmother who, when forced to become Muslim, would secretly make the sign of the cross as she bowed down to pray in the mosque. After generations of hiding and surviving, Takvorian has stepped forward as family historian and storyteller to tell the truths her family kept hidden and safe, truths that survived every attempt to wipe them out.

Takvorian also reveals some of the practical things she did to bring herself to the page when she knew that page would be full of atrocities: “going for a run, taking a shower in the evening...rinsing away everything you did during the day....getting enough sleep, eating well, taking care of yourself.” As a lifelong musician, she found music especially helpful, following her instinct to make choices about the background soundtrack for her art, recognizing that sometimes a piece of music might amplify the emotion of the scene in a good way, and sometimes it might exceed its boundaries. So she would use heavy metal or taiko drumming as “a really powerful way to get me riled up,” to awaken her warrior energy, then “would shift...to something else, like classical music” or an innocuous kid lit podcast about school visits.

Ultimately, when considering the challenges of writing a difficult story, Takvorian says:

It’s like a book. You can’t have that beautiful thing at the end unless you’ve gone through the journey of all those horrible, challenging things and then you get to the end—here, this! It’s all for this! ...And so [as artists], we are all going through our own trials to reach that nugget at the end....It’s what we have to do. It’s part of being alive.

And warrior that she is, Nadine Takvorian will fight for the truth on the page, for “not just one story,” but all of them.

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