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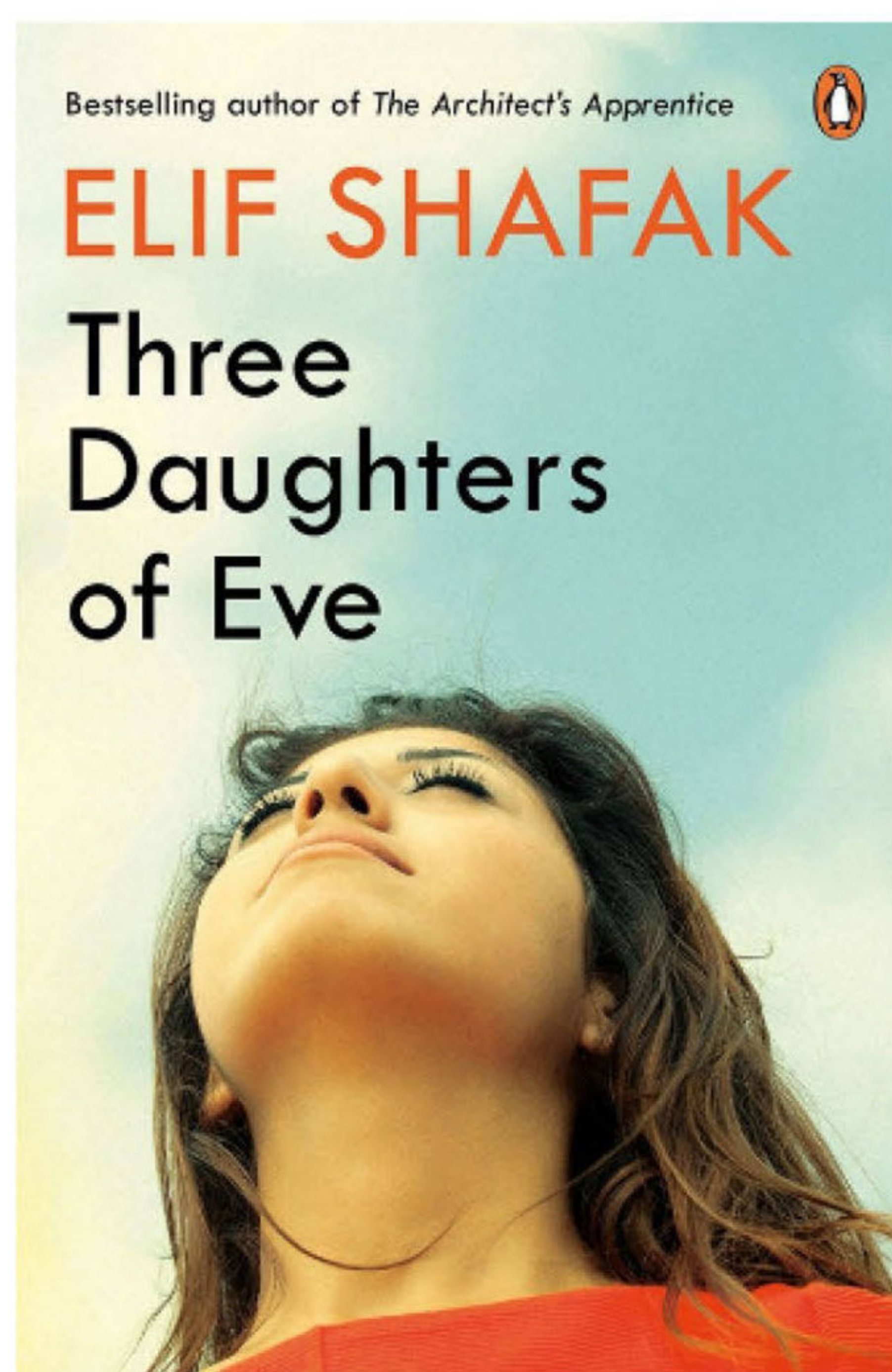


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# Ten Questions with Elif Shafak

The author of *Three Daughters of Eve* about writing between two languages, and the power of the novel to spark change.

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TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS BEHIND WRITING *THREE DAUGHTERS OF EVE*. WHERE DID THE IDEA COME FROM, AND HOW MUCH DID IT CHANGE AS YOU WROTE?

**A**t the heart of this story there are three young women. They call themselves, The Sinner, The Believer and The Confused. And they clash. And they quarrel—a lot. My novel focuses primarily on the story of The Confused and the confusions of our times—about faith, identity, sexuality, the state of the world, the role of the individual. These are issues that I also care about, and think about, and perhaps, in many ways, I am also “confused”, which I believe is not necessarily a bad thing. I like to doubt. I like to question my own truths constantly. If we could only celebrate

confusion and complexity, things would have been very different. In fact, it is people who are “absolutely certain of their truths” and have a “simple” answer that have caused this world lots of harm, in my opinion. So, in a way, this is a novel of ideas that questions certainties and opens up unexpected dialogues by putting young women—both believers and non-believers—at the centre.

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**FROM PERI'S EARLY ATTACK IN THE NOVEL, THROUGH DINNER WITH THE WEALTHY BUSINESSMAN, THE PATRIARCHY LOOMS LARGE. WHAT ROLE DO YOU FEEL THE NOVEL CAN PLAY IN CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO?**

I know what it feels like to live in a deeply patriarchal, sexist and homophobic society. And I had to learn this quite early on in life because I was raised by a single, working mother, a young divorcee. Until I was 10 years old, my grandmother looked after me while my mother went back to college and then she went into the workforce. This was very unusual at the time. We were “strange” in the eyes of the neighbours. I have to add, perhaps, that I was born in France and then my mother brought me to Ankara, Turkey, to my grandmother’s neighbourhood, which was very conservative. I always felt like an “outsider-insider”. Enough of an insider to understand the culture and the people, but enough of an outsider to observe things from a cognitive distance. In my university years, I completed my Masters in Gender and Women’s Studies and I taught for several years in this area. To me, it is very important, both the theory and practise of feminism.

**WRITING IN ENGLISH AND TURKISH, YOU'RE OFTEN VIEWED AS A WRITER WHO STRADDLES WEST AND EAST. HOW MUCH DOES THAT INFORM YOUR WRITING?**

I have always thought I have multiple belongings. I believe we all do, in truth, deep within, and in different ways or for various reasons. But either the society or the politics of the times tend to impose on us a monolithic notion of “identity”. I oppose that imposition. Instead of a single identity, I prefer multiple belongings. I am an Istanbulite, and I will carry Istanbul with me wherever I go; I am also very attached to the Balkans, especially Thessaloniki, where my great-grandmother came from. Likewise I am attached to the Aegean and the Mediterranean. There are elements in my soul from the Middle East and I am a European, by birth, by choice, by the values that I share and uphold. I am a Londoner and a British citizen. And despite what our politicians keep telling us these days, I’d like to think of myself as a world citizen and a global soul. Why can’t we have multiple belongings, plural attachments?

**OF PROTAGONIST PERI, YOU SAY: "WHILE SOME PEOPLE WERE PASSIONATE BELIEVERS AND OTHERS PASSIONATE NON-BELIEVERS, SHE WOULD ALWAYS REMAIN STUCK IN BETWEEN." WHY DID YOU FEEL IT IMPORTANT TO EXPLORE THE GREY AREA OF FAITH SO DEEPLY?**

It is the grey area that excites me because that’s the right place for “the perplexed”. The problem with those who are unequivocally religious is that they often want to get rid of “doubt”. And the problem with those who are unequivocally atheists is that they want to get rid of “faith”. What excites me, however, is neither that nor this. I am interested in the dance, in the waltz, of faith and doubt. Can they talk to each other? Can they challenge each other? That’s much more interesting. So I am closer to agnostics and to heterodox mystics who were always questioning things, and who saw life as an ongoing journey where you keep learning every day.

**AT ONE POINT DINNER-PARTY CONVERSATION TURNS TO THE "LUXURY" OF DEMOCRACY, A PASSAGE THAT FEELS MORE PRESCIENT EVERY DAY. ARE WE NEARING ITS END?**

The dinner-party conversations throughout the novel are the most “realistic” parts of the book. And that’s because they were directly shaped by the conversations I have



witnessed in Istanbul, conversations that broke my heart. People, even educated and privileged people, talking about the ‘luxury’ of democracy, of how democracy is a western invention anyhow. This loss of faith in democracy is a massive problem and it is not only Turkey’s problem. In a recent survey in the US only a third of millennials said it was essential for them to live in a democracy. Among people over the age of 60, this percentage went up to 70. That means, people who remember or who had an experience of what it felt like living in times of war, conflict, jingoism and militarism, have a better appreciation of democracy. Whereas many today just take it for granted.

### **YOU'RE ONE OF TURKEY'S MOST WIDELY READ WRITERS. WHY DO YOU THINK YOUR WORK HAS HAD SUCH AN IMPACT LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY?**

I feel incredibly humbled when I look at the people who continue to read novels, people who know the power of stories and the power of words—even in countries where there is no freedom of speech and where economically it is not always easy to purchase books. Most fiction readers are women. And the amazing thing about them is that when they read a novel, they don’t necessarily see it as a "personal item". They share it with their friends, their relatives, people around them, their boyfriends... It is thanks to this sharing by word-of-mouth that books survive even in countries where democracy is in danger. To me, this is very precious.

### **FOR READERS WHO LOVED *THREE DAUGHTERS OF EVE*, WHAT OTHER BOOKS WOULD YOU RECOMMEND?**

It sounds simple but I think I can only recommend, and I cannot recommend enough, the importance of reading across genres and cultures. Sometimes people say to me, “I don’t read novels, I only read history and politics.” These people miss out the fact that the intellect is nourished not only with data and facts and logic, but also with emotions, empathy, intuition and stories. I find it very important to read both fiction and non-fiction, both from the East and the West and everywhere.

### **WHAT WAS THE FIRST BOOK YOU LOVED?**

I was a lonely child, an only child. I thought life was very boring. Books really became my good friends at an early age. In my grandma’s house there weren’t too many books, and I would read all of them again and again. There was a big tome of *The Islamic Encyclopaedia of Interpretation of Dreams*, and I was fascinated by that. How do you interpret an image, an idea, a word? How can the same thing be seen differently by different people? At school we had a very modest “library” and that’s how I discovered **Charles Dickens**, *A Tale of Two Cities*, that to me was a revelation. I never forget my excitement when I read Dickens for the first time. He might be writing about England in the 19th century but to me he was writing about a lonely Turkish girl in her grandma’s house of evil eye beads and magic charms—I felt that connected with Dickens.

### **WHAT WAS THE LAST BOOK YOU READ?**

I am chairing the Wellcome Book Prize and, alongside my fellow esteemed judges, I have been reading a big pile of fiction and non-fiction titles, all of which are



exploring, in very different and fascinating ways, science, medicine, health, human body and mind... It has been an amazing journey.

### WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I am working on my new novel, which focuses on the life and death of a prostitute in Istanbul. Her name is Tequila Leila. Killed brutally, left in a garbage can, she waits to be found as the sun rises. Her mind is still working though and will continue to function for the next ten minutes and 38 seconds, during which time she will tell us her remarkable story.

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\*Three Daughters of Eve is Hay Festival Book of the Month for February, available [online now](#) or from all good bookshops and libraries.

**Elif Shafak** is an award-winning novelist and the most widely read female writer in Turkey. She writes in both Turkish and English, and has published 16 books, 10 of which are novels. Her books have been published in 48 languages. Shafak is a member of Weforum Global Agenda Council on Creative Economy in Davos and a founding member of ECFR (European Council on Foreign Relations). She was awarded the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 2010 by the French government.\*

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