



## ***The Bookseller of Kabul* (non-fiction)**

**by Asne Seierstad**

Translated from Norwegian, Virago publisher

Publication date: 2003

276 pages

### **Description (from BookBrowse.com)**

In Afghanistan, just after the fall of the Taliban, a bookseller named Sultan Khan allowed a western journalist to move into his home and experience firsthand his family's life in the newly liberated capital city of Kabul. From that act of openness emerges this remarkable book, already an international bestseller--the most intimate look yet at ordinary life for those who have weathered Afghanistan's extraordinary upheavals. One husband, two wives, five children, and many other relatives sharing four small rooms opened up their lives, unforgettably.

First is Sultan himself, a man whose love of books has exposed him to great risks over his thirty years in the trade. He has seen his volumes censored, ripped apart, even burned in the street by the Communists and the Taliban. Each time he rebuilt his business, hiding the most controversial texts, surviving prison, traveling treacherous back roads to Pakistan to order much-needed schoolbooks. He takes joy in selling books of history, science, art, religion, and poetry, and defends his business against competitors and theft with a primal ferocity. But Sultan is also a committed Muslim with strict views on filial respect and the role of women. We meet his wife, Sharifa, when she learns that Sultan is taking a new bride, as his status in the community dictates. Despite custom, it is agonizing for the mother of Sultan's children to see her place usurped. We follow their teenage son, Mansur, as he embarks on his first religious pilgrimage, which embodies all the excitement of youth's first rebellion. And we see Sultan's younger sisters, as one coquettishly prepares for her wedding while another seeks a job to escape her family's tight grip.

Stepping back from the page, award-winning journalist Åsne Seierstad allows the Khans to speak for themselves about their joys, sorrows, rivalries, loves, dreams, and temptations.

## Reviews

### From Publishers Weekly

After living for three months with the Kabul bookseller Sultan Khan in the spring of 2002, Norwegian journalist Seierstad penned this astounding portrait of a nation recovering from war, undergoing political flux and mired in misogyny and poverty. As a Westerner, she has the privilege of traveling between the worlds of men and women, and though the book is ostensibly a portrait of Khan, its real strength is the intimacy and brutal honesty with which it portrays the lives of Afghani living under fundamentalist Islam. Seierstad also expertly outlines Sultan's fight to preserve whatever he can of the literary life of the capital during its numerous decades of warfare (he stashed some 10,000 books in attics around town). Seierstad, though only 31, is a veteran war reporter and a skilled observer; as she hides behind her burqa, the men in the Sultan's family become so comfortable with her presence that she accompanies one of Sultan's sons on a religious pilgrimage and witnesses another buy sex from a beggar girl-then offer her to his brother. This is only one of many equally shocking stories Seierstad uncovers. In another, an adulteress is suffocated by her three brothers as ordered by their mother. Seierstad's visceral account is equally seductive and repulsive and resembles the work of Martha Gellhorn. An international bestseller, it will likely stand as one of the best books of reportage of Afghan life after the fall of the Taliban.

### From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—A female journalist from Norway moved in with the Khan family in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. Disguised as she was behind the bulky, shapeless burka and escorted always by a man and even in Western dress, she was somehow anonymous and accepted readily into the bookseller's large extended family. Her account is of the tragedy, contradictions, rivalries, and daily frustrations of a middle-class Afghan family. She accompanied the women as they shopped and dressed for a wedding and was privy to the negotiations for the marriage. She tells of the death by suffocation of a young woman who met her lover in secret, the bored meanderings of a 12-year-old boy forced to work 12-hour days selling candy in a hotel lobby, and of going on a religious pilgrimage with a restless, frustrated teen. All this is recounted with journalistic objectivity in spite of her close ties to the Khans. Events that the author doesn't actually witness or participate in, she recounts from conversations with members of the family, primarily Sultan Khan's sister. There is much irony here—Sultan, who has risked his life to protect and disseminate books with diverse points of view, denies his sons the right to pursue an education and subjects his female relatives to drudgery and humiliation.

### From Booklist

Seierstad, a Swedish journalist, entered Kabul with Northern Alliance soldiers after they ousted the Taliban. She took the rare opportunity to live with and write a book about the extended family of Sultan Khan, bookseller and entrepreneur. The result, organized around events in the lives of individual members of Khan's large clan (two wives, assorted children, mother, brothers, sisters, nephew), provides appropriate information about recent Afghani history, a glimpse from the inside at an Islamic family, and an understanding of the harshness and difficulty of the daily grind in Afghanistan--both under the Taliban and after the U.S. antiterrorist campaign. Family members come across as very real, creating understanding at the least and sympathy at best. The author's admitted reconstruction of conversations and her strong feminist beliefs raise a few questions about accuracy of recall and of the depiction of male members of the clan. However, this fascinating, thought-provoking look at Afghanistan will add depth and a different point of view to nonfiction collections.

## Biography



Asne Seierstad (born 1970) has worked as a war correspondent in Russia, China, Kosovo and Iraq. As a reporter she is particularly remembered for her work in war zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq and most recently Chechnya, as well as for her reports on the September 11 attacks in the United States of America. She has received numerous awards in Norway for her journalism.

1999: Gullruten Award for the best news coverage from Kosovo. 2001: Fritt Ord Award 2002: Årets Frilanser Award from Norwegian reporters. 2003 The Peer Gynt and Den Store Journalistprisen Award

## Bibliography

*With Their Backs to The World: Portraits of Serbia* (2000, though updated extensively in 2004)

*The Bookseller of Kabul* (2003)

*One Hundred And One Days: A Baghdad Journal* (2005)

*Angel of Grozny: Inside Chechnya* (2007)

### Interview with the Author at Biobliofemme.com

Åsne Seierstad has received numerous awards for her journalism and has reported from war-torn regions such as Chechnya, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. She published *The Bookseller of Kabul* in 2003 and although it quickly climbed to the top of the Irish bestseller charts, it wasn't until Richard and Judy picked it for their bookclub did it acquire international acclaim. Her recent book; *One Hundred and One Days* documents her experiences in Iraq during the American invasion and it is set to be another bestseller.

I'm not sure quite what I expected when I turned up at the Merrion hotel to interview Åsne Seierstad, but it definitely wasn't the glamorous, beautiful woman who was sitting on a couch in the bar. Åsne Seierstad would turn heads, so how did this beautiful if somewhat delicate creature survive one hundred and one days in Baghdad with bombs falling all around her and three months living in Afghanistan?

**Being in Kabul and living with the bookseller and his family sounded horrific how did you cope?** It was interesting of course but it was hard because life is so different there. I think as human beings we can easily adapt to new situations. The psychological part of it was more difficult due to the fact that they can't decide themselves about their lives and their future. Being a bit "trapped", I could do whatever I liked so I decided to live like them and only leave the house when they did. Obviously I got a bit frustrated about that, but I forced myself to try it.

### **So what did you think of Sultan as a person?**

When I first met him I admired him. He did so much for the culture; he fought different regimes with his books and I still admire him. He is a national hero, but he is also a typical

Afghan patriarch - no better or worse than others - so he's pretty average I think. Personally I could say that he could have been more tolerant and more flexible and listened to his family more; that I didn't like about him. He is very true to the [Afghan] traditions and if I don't agree with those traditions, that's my own fault really. He has his good and his bad sides and his good side is that he is a doer and a maker - he runs a successful bookshop - and his bad sides are he is old fashioned.

**Have you been back to Afghanistan since you wrote the book?**

No I haven't. I'm like that, I do something very intensive and I leave and I close the book. Maybe I will go back but things carry on and the war happened.

**I was scared just reading One Hundred and One Days - you must have been terrified?**

Of course yes, but when you go into war you have to make the decision to put aside your fear. Of course I was afraid but I never panicked, I carried around this ice-cold fear inside me, I was going around thinking, "I'm being bombed ok", but I was never thinking "Oh my god I'm going to die". It was only afterwards that I realised how scared I'd been.

**And how dangerous the situation was...**

I knew about the danger but I didn't let it influence me.

**You saw some horrific things in Iraq, how did you cope with that?**

You have to put aside your fear and you also have to put aside your emotions in a way. If you go there with all your emotions like an ordinary person you wouldn't cope. It is very hard.

**Did the images stay with you?**

Yes of course but they don't haunt me. In the moment I reacted, I cried. The images did stay with me but they don't give me nightmares. They give certain seriousness to life, all those children who will never grow up.

**You met some very brave ordinary people, but when the Americans invaded the Iraqis didn't exactly welcome them did they?**

The American's liberated them but then they stayed. Why should the Iraqis accept that? Some people were against the invasion, others said it was great to get rid of Saddam Hussein and they thought the Americans would install some security - but they didn't and now it's just a mess and the American's can't leave. It's a very complex situation but I don't think people in the West understand what it feels like to be bombed and invaded. They feel occupied by people with different backgrounds and different religions. How would we feel if people were coming to kill our president, take over our resources and kill our children? That's what the Iraqis feel is happening, it feels like an occupation.

**To write this book you had to try to not be too political but there are some innuendoes?**

I always do that even with my articles. I'm trying to be a journalist and report what I see and what I hear but of course sometimes my feelings come through. In The Bookseller of Kabul it might come through that I don't think Sultan is particularly fair, but it's not supposed to. Sometimes it's not possible though to stop your feelings seeping in to what you write.

**What has happened to Aliya your translator?**

She wants Saddam back. She was happy with her life and she didn't know any other way and her family had a great life. None of her family was affected by Saddam, you find many Iraqis have family members tortured and killed and some just disappeared. They had a very strong hatred for Saddam, but she didn't. I'm still in touch with her but I don't

confront her. But now she sees a town that is bombed out, looted. You can't travel anywhere, mothers don't send their children go to school because it's too dangerous so she wants the old way back.

**When you were in Iraq your family and your editor were trying to get you to leave, how did you feel when you got home?**

I've been so busy since I came back I haven't had time to suffer at all, but I am aware that whatever you do in life affects you. Doing nothing affects you too, but doing a lot affects you. Maybe one day I will just fall down and sleep for a couple of years. That would be quite boring but at some point it will probably happen. I'm very tired at the moment and I'm taking a year off. I'm tired of working and producing. I really want to read. When you write you get information but you're just giving it out all the time. I really just want to sit and read and take it all in. I'm reading the classics at the moment, nice sentences. I'm going to go skiing and eat nice food.

**So what's next for you?**

I don't know, I will see what happens in the world. I wouldn't go back to Iraq, not now, it's too dangerous. You can't go anywhere - you would just be trapped in Baghdad and it's too dangerous. This year I covered the recent election in the United States, not the campaign though. Every weekend I was doing a piece for my newspaper. One week I covered religion and stayed in a Baptist church. I covered education and stayed in a school one week and then spent a week in a juvenile prison in California. So I didn't cover the campaign, as that didn't interest me because elections are quite boring! I wanted to focus on things that people are interested in, like what does it mean to be a Republican. So maybe my next book will be about the United States.

For those of you who like me are dying of curiosity, the Italian Lorenzo in *One Hundred and One Days*, did make it to Mount Everest! Those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about - go out and buy the book, it's well worth it.

**Shah Muhammad Rais, owner of the bookshop at the Intercontinental Hotel and another near the Mustafa Hotel, is taking legal action against Norwegian journalist and author Asne Seierstad for her best selling book "The Bookseller of Kabul."**

During a trip to Scandinavia in November 2005, Rais declared he was seeking asylum in either Norway or Sweden, as a political refugee. He felt things revealed about him in Seierstad's book had made life for him and his family unsafe in Afghanistan, where bootleg versions of the book had been published in Persian.

Rais has published his own version of the story, *There once was a bookseller in Kabul*. It was translated to both Norwegian and Brazilian Portuguese

**In his own words**

**September 2 2003 A MATTER OF HONOR AND TRUTH      By Shah Muhammad Rais**

The legal actions that I have undertaken and will undertake in Norway as well as in other countries and international forums against Asne Seierstad for the defamations of myself, my family and my country contained in her book "The Bookseller of Kabul" involve questions of honour and truth that extend far beyond the lies and distortions committed in this particular case. What is at stake are basic issues of decency and trust on a world scale at a time when mankind is engaged in a great struggle against extremism, and the debt that must be paid to those who bear the brunt of this struggle.

Far from providing any profound insight into Afghan society, the tragedy of Afghanistan's modern history and its crucial role in world affairs, this is a low and salacious book, one that focuses almost exclusively on dirty aspects of life to the neglect of the challenges at hand. It is not the product of any deep study, experience or thought about the country. The author has taken advantage of a crisis in world history to pander to sensationalism, depicting things in as negative a light as possible in order to sell books and abusing the goodwill of the Scandinavian people in the process.

It is not the first time that Ms Asne Seierstad has taken advantage of the generosity of others. When she first came to Kabul in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks and the fall of the Taliban she was wholly ignorant of Afghanistan and its particular traditions and historical experience, and entirely without contacts or guides. I extended to her the hospitality of my home, the benefits of my lifetime's worth of knowledge about my country, and my precious time at a moment when all responsible individuals were preoccupied by the great drama unfolding around us.

She has repaid this kindness by concocting a worthless collection of invented incidents, twisted truths and personal details which were told to her in confidence, whose decimation in many countries will harm many innocent people.

Among the most egregious of these are:

----- Depicting me as a fundamentalist, when I have been against fundamentalism all of my life and have suffered personally from it.

----- Attributing perverse sexual practices to members of my family and friends which are completely untrue, up to and including the invention of incidents.

----- Claiming that I denied educational opportunities to my children, male and female, when the truth is that their formal education was disrupted by war and oppression. In fact their knowledge, particularly of languages, is considerable, and I have always been a champion of women's rights, starting with that to an education.

----- Mischaracterizing the traditional Afghan practices of arranging marriage expenses, including provisions for the wedding feast and setting up the new household, as the buying and selling of human beings.

----- Mischaracterizing the role of people in general, depicting such things as household chores undertaken by relatives who have been given shelter because of the disruptions of war as servitude.

----- Broadcasting nonessential personal details such as where I keep my cash, a vital secret for all Afghans in a land devoid of either a banking system or personal security.

----- Not hiding the identities of people in the book, all of which are easily recognizable in terms of personal attributes, locations, etc., which she had promised to do.

All of these personal attacks are secondary to the crime she has committed against the culture and people of Afghanistan. She has depicted as ingrained national traits incidences of violence and extremism, which are the by-product of prolonged and devastating war, and by no means represent the majority of Afghans or their essential spirit. There can be no greater disservice to a nation, which has contributed so much to and sacrificed so much in the world's common struggle against communism and terrorism.

The degree to which her book represents the aberration of a disreputable person can be seen in its contrast to the great classics on

Afghanistan and its Central Asian region written by truly talented and virtuous foreigners. Works such as Peter Hopkirk's "The Great Game", Jason Eliot's "An Unexpected Light" Christina Lamb's "The Sewing Circles of Herat" and Ahmed Rashid's "Taliban" are the product of years or even decades of profound experience of and reflection on the subject, and depict a different land than the one that Ms. Seierstad does not even know. Ahmed Rashid's noble commitment of a large portion of the proceeds from his best-selling book to supporting the growth of a free press in Afghanistan also stands in stark contrast to her opportunistic greed.

Many journalists have asked me since the enormity of the slanders and defamations committed in her book became apparent whether I regretted inviting her into my home. I always answer "No", for my actions were in keeping with deep Afghan spiritual traditions of hospitality, which are summed up by the proverb, " If your enemy comes to your house, do your best to protect them and give them hospitality -- Especially if the guest is a woman ".

My life has been full of countless positive and meaningful encounters with journalists, scholars and other foreigners, and I will continue to extend the hospitality of my home and share my knowledge of Afghanistan with them, because I passionately believe in the honour of the intentions of most of them, and their commitment to the truth.

And that is also why for their sake, who write well without being paid much, for the sake of my family, which has been terribly injured, and for the sake of Afghanistan, which has been defamed, I must pursue legal actions on all fronts against Ms. Asne Seierstad. That the many people of all lands whom she has needlessly hurt will not suffer more than is necessary in this time of general sacrifice for a better world.

### **Discussion Questions** Source: Madison Public Library

1. This narrative, which begins with a proposal of marriage, describes many different unions. Discuss the ways in which marriages are agreed upon and carried out in the Afghan society. What are the roles of husband and wife as depicted in *The Bookseller of Kabul*?
2. The Taliban instituted many restrictions on books and printed materials. How did these policies affect Sultan Khan? What impact did they have on education in Afghanistan? How were things changing during the time the author spent with the bookseller's family?
3. How do female roles in Afghanistan differ? Discuss how a woman's stage in life (girlhood, adulthood, old age) or her position in the family (daughter, sister, mother) helps determine her role. Which women have the most influence in the family and in society?
4. Clothing is particularly significant in Seierstad's account. What are some instances in which clothing is a key detail? How does fashion reflect the social changes in Afghanistan?

5. As the bookseller's first son, Mansur has a special position within the family hierarchy. How does his interaction with various family members reflect this? The author also focuses on Sultan Kahn's youngest sister, Leila. How does Leila's position compare to her nephew's?
6. The reader travels through Afghanistan with Mansur as he makes his pilgrimage. In what ways does the landscape reflect the social and political circumstances in the country? The author says of the Taliban that "they might have mad it had September 11 not happened and the world started to care about Afghanistan" (p. 138). Discuss the implications of this statement.
7. Mansur, who is extremely enthusiastic about the opportunity to make his pilgrimage, almost misses the chance to go. What does his experience tell us about the social and emotional outlets currently available to young men in Afghanistan?
8. Sultan Khan has been on both sides of the judicial system – as a prisoner and as an accuser. How, in each case, was truth pursued and justice handled? What can the reader learn from the bookseller's experience about crime and punishment in Afghan society?
9. What kind of man is Sultan Khan? The author contrasts the bookseller's behavior at home with his behavior at work. How do his private and professional identities differ?
10. How do Sultan Khan and his acquaintances view the changes in government in their country? Does Sultan's perspective evolve in the course of the book?
11. Seierstad explains that she had a rare opportunity to observe Afghan family life. How did the fact that she is a woman affect her access to Sultan Khan's relatives? How might her background as a European woman have affected her interpretation of the people and events she observed?
12. Seierstad describes how women's access to education, work outside the home, and social freedom changed in Afghanistan immediately after the fall of the Taliban. How have the years of Taliban rule affected women in Afghanistan today? What do you believe are the prospects for the future?

### **More Discussion Questions**

How do you explain the relationship between Sonya and Sharifa? In many cases the older wives are mean to the younger wives and treat them badly, is it worth it for Sharifa to treat Sonya this way or are they better off being friends?

Explain the reason why Leila has never been alone before. What conclusions can you make between the Afghani culture and independence?

Why does everyone treat Leila like a maid even if she is one of the family members? Does she have to live like a maid in Sultan's house?

How is Bibi Gul's behavior similar and/or different than that of American/Western mothers who "lose" their daughter/son to marriage?

Has Asne Seirstad given you two different impressions of Mansur? Although he was the main character in the previous chapter and a background character in this chapter, he seemed to have two different personalities. Why do you think the author shows two different sides of his personality just as she previously did with his father, Sultan?

What examples from the chapter, *An Attempt*, demonstrate the statement that "...the Taliban may have disappeared, but they are still present in Leila's head, and in Bibi Gul's and Sharifa's and in Sonya's"?

Mansur is quoted "When a man has everything, and does not know what more to do, he tried to teach his donkey to talk" what do you believe this to mean? Do you think there is some other meaning implied in this quote or can it be interpreted in some other way?

Why do you think Mariam spoils her oldest son, Fazil and why did it upset her so much when Sultan no longer needed Fazil's help in his shop?

## **For Further Reading**

Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil by Deborah Rodriguez

The Swallows of Kabul by Yasmina Khadra

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Brick Lane by Monica Ali

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books by Azar Nafisi

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian by Marina Lewycka

My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story by Latifa

The Map of Love: A Novel by Ahdaf Soueif

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie

Small Island by Andrea Levy

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Places In Between by Rory Stewart

The Piano Tuner: A Novel by Daniel Mason

Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid

The Mulberry Empire: Or the Two Virtuous Journeys of the  
Amir Dost Mohammed Khan