



Transcript



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Arts, Literature and Music

A Good Read - 05

Sarah Knight, Salisbury Library Service

Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman goes behind the Veil by Deborah Rodriguez

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Deborah Rodriguez is an American woman who decided to join the post Taliban peace effort in Afghanistan. She writes with an easy, almost conversational style. The book is filled with vignettes highlighting her experiences, the highs and the lows of living and working in Afghanistan. She writes of how she needed to learn new cultural information to help her to be an effective person offering humanitarian aid to the people of that country.

The story begins in post Taliban Afghanistan in 2001 and spans a period of approximately 6 years. It is a work of nonfiction but, of course, some of the names of people, places and organisations have been altered. In addition some of the chronological events have also been adjusted.

The story opens in Afghanistan detailing the wedding ceremony and after party of one of the author's dear friends. There are great descriptions of the personal preparations of the bride and those in the wedding party and of the unique approach to celebrations after the ceremony itself. In this recall of events, as in the many vignettes throughout the book, we are shown what it is to be a woman living in Afghanistan in these times. Deborah clearly and sensitively shares her experiences. She shares how the cultural expectations of women living here determine their ability to take advantage of life opportunities. For many women, opportunities are limited or determined by the male person who makes decisions for them.

From here the story backtracks to the significant moments in Deborah's life that led to her making the decision to join a volunteer service being deployed to Afghanistan around 2001. Deborah's marriage had broken down and she was looking for a way to make a significant contribution to the lives of those in need. After joining a humanitarian volunteer organization and leaving Michigan U.S.A. bound for Afghanistan she was soon immersed in a completely different culture.

At that time she wasn't sure where this decision would take her but the next phase of her life would shortly be revealed to her. She noticed that the other volunteers on her team were from career backgrounds that seemed to be more purpose filled than her own. They were teachers, doctors,

scientists and so on. She was simply a hairdresser from Michigan. Little did she realise then that her purpose for being there would soon unfold to her.

One of the first things she began to notice was that there was a huge need for someone with her skills in Afghanistan, starting with the Westerners who lived there. Finding a decent hairdresser in Afghanistan was almost impossible. In addition, finding a hairdresser skilled in Western styles and tastes was even more difficult. Within weeks of her arrival Deborah was inundated with requests by other Westerners to have their hair cut or coloured or whatever else she could offer them. This led Deborah to think about this situation. What about the women who already lived there? There were still celebrations such as weddings to be prepared for. By this time Deborah realised what was involved in terms of beauty preparations for Afghani brides and their bridal parties. The preparation could go for days. What about the women whose families had suffered at the hands of the Taliban? And here a seed of an idea grew.

What about the women who were hairdressers or beauticians before the Taliban were in power? Or those who had a desire to learn how to become a hairdresser or beautician? What if this were a legitimate way for Afghani women to be business women in their own rights and for them to assist the rebuilding of the families and communities by becoming employable in a high demand profession?

In the early part of the book Deborah describes how her idea grew. In between visits to Afghanistan she returned to her home town in the US. Whilst she worked there for brief periods she also approached companies including Clairol and Vogue magazine for funding and supplies. The money and supplies were vital to assisting Deborah with her mission. She worked to establish Afghanistan's first modern beauty school. With the support of humanitarian aid organizations Deborah established a school to assist Afghani women to polish their skills as hairdressers. For this she asked for women who were already hairdressers. From her first intake of students she established a bank of teachers. Who better to teach Afghani women than other Afghani women with the skills already needed?

Deborah Rodriguez writes in a very easy style. It is as though she is sitting with you telling the story to you as you read. She has a very pictorial style of narrative so it is very easy to see the world through her eyes. The Kabul Beauty School not only changed the life of the women of Post-Taliban Afghanistan but also the life of Deborah Rodriguez herself. She now lives there with her Afghan husband.

I would like to close this review quoting Deborah's words from her acknowledgements at the conclusion of her book. She writes:

"One of the wonderful things about Afghan women is that they never let someone cry alone. Without your honesty, friendship, love and willingness to share your stories, there would have been no book. Thank you for letting me into your lives and allowing me the chance to share them with the rest of the world so the real stories of Afghan women can be heard. Always know that I count you among my family, and that I will never be the same because of you."

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