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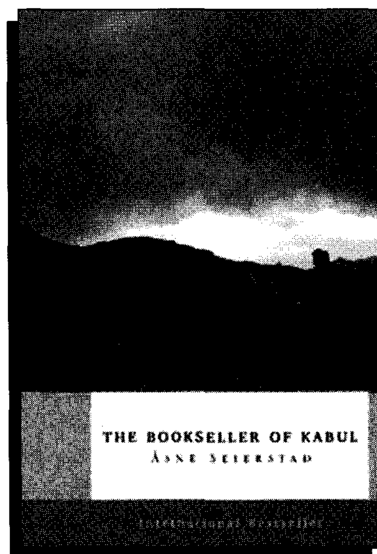
The Tenacity of Custom

The life of an Afghan family is seen through the eyes of an intrepid journalist.

LINDA SIMON

In the fall of 2001, Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad spent six grueling weeks in the Afghan desert following soldiers of the Northern Alliance—sleeping on stone floors, bumping over pitted roads in the back of trucks, tramping in the heat on foot. After the Taliban fell, she arrived with the soldiers in Kabul, where she found, to her surprise, a well-stocked bookstore managed by one Sultan Khan. He was charming and talkative, and besides coming away with stacks of books each time she visited the shop, she also came away with a trove of stories: about his struggles against censors from various regimes, including the Taliban; his love of literature and determination to save his priceless collections; and his country's cultural history. When Sultan invited Seierstad home for a meal, she heard more stories, not only from the bookseller himself but from his several sons. "This is



THE BOOKSELLER OF KABUL
Asne Seierstad; translated by Ingrid Christophersen
Boston: Little, Brown, 2003
245 pp., $19.95

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ILLUSTRATION BY EMIKO OZAKI / THE WORLD & I

Afghanistan," she thought. "How interesting it would be to write a book about this family." When she proposed the project to Sultan, he agreed readily: she would come to live with the family; she would follow him in his daily routine, along with his wives, sisters, and sons. "You are welcome," he said.

As Seierstad realized immediately, the Khan family was not typical of most of the country's population. First of all, it was headed by a literate, well-traveled patriarch, in a place where illiteracy and insularity were more usual; and the Khans, unlike many others, were not struggling to survive. They had adequate financial resources, enough food to share, and enviable comfort. Still, the result of Seierstad's four months with the Khan family (the names, she tells us, are pseudonyms) offers a rare and intimate portrait of the experiences of many men, women, and children in a country newly liberated from years of the Taliban's dictatorship.

Liberation, we come to learn, is only a relative term for the members of a middle-class family whose customs, behavior, expectations, and relationships long have been prescribed by their religious and cultural heritage. Every culture, of course, draws boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, defines for itself good and evil, sets up a hierarchy of authority, and makes clear the consequences—personal or public—for transgression. During times of political, social, or economic transition, those patterns may undergo transition, as well—but change, as Seierstad shows in this book, is often difficult and wrenching, threatening the tenets on which the stability of a community rests. For many of the people she portrays, the months after the Taliban's fall were a time of political chaos and personal frustration. Life was changing fast—too fast for some, not fast enough for others; dreams were newly possible but too often dashed.

Seierstad focuses most on the lives of women and children, two groups that she sees have been especially vulnerable both to the Taliban's fundamentalist ideas and the society's patriarchal structure. As the book opens, for example, Sultan, who is in his early fifties (even he does not know his exact birth date), has decided that his wife, Sharifa, no longer suffices for his needs. Married for more than twenty years, the father of three sons and a daughter, he now has his

eye on sixteen-year-old Sonya: she comes from a family of his own tribe (as Seierstad points out, marrying outside one's clan is considered risky), and in addition is attractive, docile, and a virgin. Negotiations with her family go well—essentially, they decide to sell their daughter to the rich businessman—and Sonya is informed that she will be Sultan's new bride. Sharifa, devastated by her husband's decision, will no longer share his bed; but she is expected to live in the household and become a kind of mentor to Sonya. Her humiliation is exacerbated when Sultan insists that Sharifa put the engagement rings on his and Sonya's fingers. Although his own sisters condemn Sultan's decision, they, too, have no choice but to support the marriage and welcome Sonya into their family.

In choosing to begin her portrait with this event, Seierstad sets forth her themes: gender roles, sexual mores, the basis of power, and the intersection of tribal customs with contemporary Western ideas. Yet though the book focuses more on women than on men, it could not be titled anything other than *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Sultan, after all, is the driving force in the lives of the members of his family. All of them, even if they dare to protest, eventually bend to his will.

Inside the burka

Although as a Western woman, Seierstad could move freely among men and women, she chose to wear a burka when she navigated Kabul's streets. It was easier, she said, not to attract attention. "Beneath the burka," she explains, "I could gaze around to my heart's content without being stared at in return. I could observe the other family members when we were out, without everyone's attention being directed at me. Anonymity became a release, the only place to which I could turn; in Kabul quiet places were in short supply." Like other such shrouded women, however, Seierstad realized that the burka was designed so that her gaze itself could be monitored by others: "Burka-women," she tells us, "are like horses with blinkers, they can only look in one direction. Where the eye narrows the grille stops and thick material takes its place; impossible to glance sideways."

To look at something, the woman must turn her whole head: "another trick by the burka-inventor," she adds, "a man must know what his wife is looking at." And the burka has other restrictions: it is hot, it never is washed, it retains the smells of its owners, and, because in the Khan household burkas hang near the kitchen, it is pervaded by years of cooking odors. Yet even after the Taliban fell, some women felt reluctant to give up the burka that no longer was required. Sonya, for one, refused to emerge in Western clothing until Sultan demanded that she do so. "I don't want a prehistoric wife," he told her. "You are the wife of a liberal man, not a fundamentalist."

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Sonya's hesitation, though, was echoed in other women's behavior, as well, not only about wearing the burka but also about claiming independence. Seierstad's most compelling tale concerns Leila, Sultan's youngest sibling, the char and drudge for the entire family. Unmarried at nineteen, Leila rises earlier than anyone else to light the stove and begin cooking; she boils the family's water for washing up and makes

■ Asne Seierstad

breakfasts to the men's exacting specifications. She sweeps the rooms many times a day—there is unending dust in Kabul—washes the family's laundry, and cooks all their meals, staying up into the night to prepare for the next day's needs. All the while, Leila dreams of another life. Since she knows English from pre-Taliban schooling, she hopes that she can become a teacher. Or perhaps she will marry and move in with her husband's family, smaller, she hopes than her own. Or perhaps she can continue her education.

All of Leila's hopes, however, are frustrated: sometimes by the convolutions of Afghan bureaucracy, sometimes by her own failure of will and determination, and, finally, by the malicious gossip that frequently influences others' decisions and actions. When she applies for a teaching certificate, she is continually rebuffed; though repeated efforts bring her close enough to achieving her goal that she needs only one more elusive signature on yet another form, this final step seems insurmountable. "She has reached the deadlock in a system which is rooted in centuries-old traditions and which paralyses half the population," Seierstad writes. "The Ministry of Education is a half-hour bus ride away; an impossible half-hour. Leila is not used to fighting for something—on the contrary, she is used to giving up."

When she enrolls in an English class, she goes to the first session, where she discovers that the class is coeducational. She is so fearful of that situation, so timid among boys, that she feels she cannot speak at all, much less speak English; she resolves—a decision upheld by the other women in her family—never to go again. When finally she attracts an admirer, an ambitious young man who supports her desire to work or return to school, that potential union is undermined by Leila's brother Mansur, who acts on the family's desire to marry Leila to an ignorant, loutish cousin. Spreading rumors about Leila to her admirer, Mansur generates doubt in the young man himself; when Leila's mother presents the alternative to Leila, the young woman knows that her fate is sealed. "With him her life will be exactly as it is now," she thinks despondently, "only with more work and for more people." She will never escape the endless sweeping of dust.

Detention

If children are the hope of any nation's future, Seierstad presents a dismaying prospect. Eleven-year-old Fazil is given detention daily for not knowing his homework, which consists of memorizing the tenets of Islam. Although he is fortunate enough to attend a good school, fortunate enough even to be going to school at all, he finds the lessons stultifying and the teacher cruel. Besides the moral teachings that dominate the curriculum, what Fazil learns most are fear and hopelessness.

His situation is far better, though, than that of Aimal, Sultan's youngest son, who, at the age of twelve, spends every day, seven days a week, working long hours selling chocolate in a booth at one of Kabul's hotels. He begins so early and ends so late that he never sees daylight. Pale and withdrawn, he is known by hotel visitors as "the sad boy." Bored by the relentless monotony of his life, Aimal envies Fazil and begs his father to send him to school. But Sultan refuses: "Later," he says; "now we must pull together. This is when we lay the foundations for our

emporium." Sultan's dreams of expanding his business, of extending the bookstore into a publishing enterprise, take precedence over his children's future. Children's dreams, like women's, do not count.

Yet within the context of Afghan society, Sultan is a liberal. He is, after all, forward-looking in his political beliefs, including the conviction that Afghanistan must move technologically and materially into the twenty-first century. One day, when visiting journalists set up their satellite telephones, a group of heavily armed soldiers looks on incredulously. "Do you know what is our problem?" one of them says. "We know everything about weapons, but we know nothing about how to use a telephone." Sultan, whose experiences have put him in contact with such marvels, pushes toward a nation where telephones—and the openness and communication they bring—will be commonplace.

Yet Afghanistan, as we see it through Seierstad's eyes, seems mired in its past. Kabul, after all, is a place where women sit in the back of the bus, separated from men by a curtain. They bathe in a communal bath, using shampoo that has illustrations of women's heads scratched or blacked out. They bathe their children with soap on which babies' faces have been similarly expunged. "Living creatures must not be portrayed," the Taliban had proclaimed, and its influence, like the shampoo and soap left over from its rule, has not abated. Under the Taliban, cassette recordings of music were impounded; kite flying was forbidden, resulting, it was believed, in "wicked consequences, such as gambling, death amongst children and truancy." The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Extermination of Sin was vigilant. Even after the Taliban, the prohibitions seem embedded in the culture: a family's vigilance often replaces the now-defunct Ministry of Virtue.

Seierstad saw the burka as a place of privacy and autonomy in a culture in which neither state was possible. Women were never alone: they ate, slept, and bathed together. Even if they wanted to go shopping or, as in Leila's case, to enroll in a class or seek a teaching certificate, they would find a neighborhood boy to accompany them on the streets. Although they confided their private thoughts to Seierstad, those thoughts occurred while they were in the company of others, not in reflective solitude. "Alone is an unknown idea," writes Seierstad, so alien that it seems inconceivable and, therefore is not missed. Perhaps, as she implies, the luxury of solitude is more essential than the telephone.

The Bookseller of Kabul allows us a glimpse of Afghan life that transcends the daily news. Although Seierstad admits that

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she did not know Dari, the dialect spoken by the Khan family, she was able to converse with many family members in English, and she apparently won their confidence. She, in turn, was open with them. "I have rarely been as angry as I was with the Khan family, and I have rarely quarreled so much as I did there. Nor have I had the urge to hit anyone as much as I did there. The same thing was continually provoking me: the manner in which men treated women. The belief in man's superiority was so ingrained that it was seldom questioned." Yet rather than write an angry feminist critique, Seierstad offers a portrait sensitive to and respectful of the culture's integrity. She illuminates the customs and beliefs that make Afghanistan what it is and portend what it may become.■