

The Bookseller of Kabul

by Asne Seierstad

Shortly after September 11, 2001, Swedish journalist, Asne Seierstad traveled to Afghanistan, where she stayed with the family of Sultan Khan (a pseudonym) for three months. Khan is an educated, literary man, who sold books and was arrested and abused by the Taliban for his selling of titles they had banned. Because she is a western journalist, Seierstad is able to interact with both men and women in Afghanistan; she spends time at Khan's and with other members of his family.

The book, though non-fiction, reads much like a novel, developing characters and weaving the story together so the reader feels compelled to follow along to find out what happens to people like Leila, Sultan's daughter, who is bright but limited by her gender, and Mansur, Sultan's son, who is driven to make a dangerous journey on a religious pilgrimage. Seierstad travels across the border of Pakistan and back, a trip many Afghans make for business and family reasons, learning much about life, culture and politics in the region.

Seierstad reveals many of the details of life in an Afghan family, and some of those details are disturbing. For example, Sultan takes a much younger wife, and his first wife lives essentially as an outcast. His daughters, like other women in Afghanistan, are unable to pursue the educations and professions they might have access to in other countries. Children are beaten and forced to work in ways that would not be acceptable in our country. Mansur is aware of a rape that he did nothing to try to stop. Sultan is a paradox because he is at once a champion of freedom for making sure banned books are available, but is also a self-centered harsh man, telling bawdy stories and treating some of his children more like servants.

However, the parts of the story that can be disturbing provide students with the chance to discuss why Seierstad would have included such details. For example, Sultan tells a bawdy story by the Sufi poet Rumi, thinking it makes him look good, an entertaining and funny man, but students, along with other readers of the book, see that story as evidence that Sultan can be crude and offensive, and his treatment of the women in his life is put in a clearer light. When he finds the story funny and appropriate to tell to Seierstad, we are then unsurprised by his dismissal of his wife and can form a view of him that is not likely to be in line with his own high opinion of himself. When Mansur is near-witness to a rape, he is so consumed with guilt that he risks his life in a pilgrimage, trying to assuage his guilt. After reading about the rape episode and the journey Mansur undertakes, students can discuss the issue of choices, guilt, and living according to one's values. The journey itself, is written as a very suspenseful episode in the book, and provides not just thematic discussion, but also provides a good example of how to build suspense when writing. Students also read of a woman who orders her sons to kill her daughter who committed adultery, arguably the most disturbing event in the story for most readers; however, through this story, students learn the reality of life for many women in some parts of the world.

There are other literary qualities the book provides for discussion in the classroom. Many popular non-fiction writers today gain their high-volume readership by writing non-fiction with elements often ascribed to fiction, and Seierstad's book is an example of this. The

characters are fully developed; the book moves along several storylines driven by different characters all tying back to the central figure of Sultan; the writing includes strong description, dialogue, setting of scenes, and building of suspense. Sophomore and Senior years are the two years that Wyoming High School English students are asked to produce major written products based on research. Those are the two years we ask all students to read non-fiction during the summer, providing the students with an example of non-fiction that is not simply dry and factual, but that uses research and observation along with the elements of engaging writing.

The Bookseller of Kabul is also aligned with the World Literature focus of the English 10 and 10 Honors curriculum of Sophomore English. It is set in a country that has been in the news in recent years, and will certainly continue to be for the next several years. The book provides a look into real lives of people living there, giving them something beyond the brief stories and pictures they see in the news. Students learn that Afghanistan is a developing democracy where women's contributions are often dismissed and where children dream of access to free education. Students learn, through Seierstad's straightforward reportage, about the endurance of Afghan people through three different wars, including our own campaign in that country. Throughout their sophomore year, students will be reading literature from a wide variety of countries and cultures; reading and discussing a country they have heard about often but may know little about, will prepare them for the variety of voices they will read during the rest of the year.

The sophomore Social Studies curriculum in World Studies II, also addresses the part of the world and the culture portrayed in Seierstad's book. Sultan Khan, though less admirable in his family life, is admirably dedicated to preserving the literary culture and history of Afghanistan. Students learn that the Dark Ages in Europe were times of flourishing culture elsewhere – for example, the works of Rumi known as the *Masnavi*. Khan is shown scheming to protect these works from the vicious intolerance of the Taliban. The book provides a strong backdrop and context for Social Studies teachers to draw on as they teach about Afghanistan and Islam.

Class discussion often centers on Seierstad's portrait of this family and whether or not she abused the hospitality of the man she describes so unflatteringly. The contradictions in Sultan's personality are also a good source of discussion. Teachers provide opportunities to discuss incidents in the book that are troubling, characters that are ambiguous, and events that can be frustrating, upsetting, and sometimes exciting. After the publication of Seierstad's book, the man she calls Sultan Khan, sued her, believing she had misrepresented him. In fact, he has written his own book. The books give teachers to opportunity to ask students to do some of their own searching—to find articles that reveal Sultan's views of Seierstad's portrayal of him; to learn about the border crossing region between Afghanistan and Pakistan' to look at how women's rights in Afghanistan have expanded, or contracted, since the time of the book; to learn about some of the books and writers Sultan fought to save, etc.

The parts of the book that are troubling—the rape, Sultan's bawdy storytelling, the treatment of women—are addressed in class discussion, along with other topics, so students have the opportunity to have teachers guide them as they reach conclusions about the people in the story and their own views and judgments of those people's actions and treatment of others.

For students who may seek an alternative:

The Forever War, by Dexter Filkins. A war correspondent's account of the people he met and the experiences he had covering Afghanistan and Iraq before and during the wars there.

A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal, by Asne Seierstad. The journal of the reporter who went to Baghdad shortly before the war began in 2003.

My Life Behind the Burqa, by Batya Swift Yasquri. A memoir of two sisters who fled Afghanistan twenty years apart, during the Mujahadin and Taliban reigns.

Reviews presented on Amazon.com:

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.—*Jackie Gropman, Chantilly Regional Library, VA*

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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 offers 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. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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. *Ellen Loughran*

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"A compelling book. . . . Seierstad infiltrated a world most readers will never see." (**Denver Post Steve Weinberg**)

"An unusually intimate glimpse of a traditional Afghan family. . . . Seierstad imbues a grim story with language of desolate beauty." (**Entertainment Weekly S. L. Allen**)

"A compelling portrait of a country at a crossroads - desperate for tranquility, factionalized beyond imagination, struggling both to uphold tradition and to modernize, hoping to prove to itself and the rest of the world that it knows peace and stability." (**Boston Globe Scott W. Helman**)

"An admirable, revealing portrait of daily life in a country that Washington claims to have liberated but does not begin to understand. Seierstad writes of individuals, but her message is larger." (**Washington Post Book World Mark Hertsgaard**)

"The most intimate description of an Afghan household ever produced by a Western journalist. . . . Seierstad is a sharp and often lyrical observer." (**New York Times Book Review Richard McGill Murphy**)