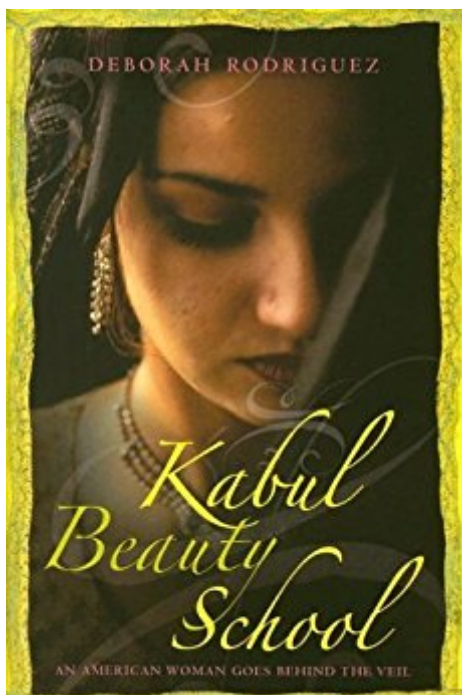


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Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind The Veil



Synopsis

Soon after the fall of the Taliban, in 2001, Deborah Rodriguez went to Afghanistan as part of a group offering humanitarian aid to this war-torn nation. Surrounded by men and women whose skills “as doctors, nurses, and therapists” seemed eminently more practical than her own, Rodriguez, a hairdresser and mother of two from Michigan, despaired of being of any real use. Yet she soon found she had a gift for befriending Afghans, and once her profession became known she was eagerly sought out by Westerners desperate for a good haircut and by Afghan women, who have a long and proud tradition of running their own beauty salons. Thus an idea was born. With the help of corporate and international sponsors, the Kabul Beauty School welcomed its first class in 2003. Well meaning but sometimes brazen, Rodriguez stumbled through language barriers, overstepped cultural customs, and constantly juggled the challenges of a postwar nation even as she learned how to empower her students to become their families’ breadwinners by learning the fundamentals of coloring techniques, haircutting, and makeup. Yet within the small haven of the beauty school, the line between teacher and student quickly blurred as these vibrant women shared with Rodriguez their stories and their hearts: the newlywed who faked her virginity on her wedding night, the twelve-year-old bride sold into marriage to pay her family’s debts, the Taliban member’s wife who pursued her training despite her husband’s constant beatings. Through these and other stories, Rodriguez found the strength to leave her own unhealthy marriage and allow herself to love again, Afghan style. With warmth and humor, Rodriguez details the lushness of a seemingly desolate region and reveals the magnificence behind the burqa. Kabul Beauty School is a remarkable tale of an extraordinary community of women who come together and learn the arts of perms, friendship, and freedom. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

A work of non-fiction Deborah Rodriguez's book could almost be fictional. Only that it isn't. It's a story about determination, challenge, love and heartache. It is the story of an American woman who catapulted herself from Holland, Michigan to Kabul, Afghanistan. A maverick by nature, Rodriguez came to Afghanistan in 2002, with an American non-governmental organization (NGO) trained in emergencies. Also gregarious by nature, Rodriguez very early on turned her attention to befriending Afghans who spoke some English. Her checkered background in multitasking and a rich personal life helped her in being sought after what was badly needed in Kabul - hairdressing. With this, she developed a deep bond with Afghan women, who were just coming out of the tyranny of living under the Taliban. Their heart-rending stories are told poignantly by Rodriguez, throughout the book. I lived in Kabul for a month in 2004 and for four months in 2006. I also went to Rodriguez's beauty parlour, Oasis, in April 2006, with a friend. It took us forever to find it, as houses have no names or numbers in Kabul (security reasons). I called her four times on her cell phone to get to the right place. I waited while my friend got a haircut, was served tea, and got a chance to observe my surroundings. She had a presence and charisma that was hard to miss. Her energy was infectious. When Rodriguez took a cigarette break, she told us parts of her story, all in the book. I first read about The Kabul Beauty School in an opinion piece posted in the Kabul Guide e-list I subscribe to, a few months ago. It talked about how some people that worked with Rodriguez in starting the Beauty School felt they did not get the credit they deserved in the book.

My mother eagerly sent this book to me (yes here in Afghanistan) because she knows how much my heart bleeds for people (read: women) who do not relish in the wonderful things we westerners take for granted. At times, I applauded Debbie for taking a stand, and never in a million years would I criticize her for leaving, because the folks who are the heaviest critics have NO concept of bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, and the like. It is truly one of the most horrifying things I have dealt with. Now...Kabul...I am going to attempt to describe this large city in layman's terms so the

average person can understand where I am coming from. I apologize for any hurt feelings or protests, but unless you can meet me downtown Kabul tonight for tea, please take this for what it is: a description of someone who is there. Yes, some women still wear Burqas (chadris), but while I detest the things more than I can describe, many women still wear them to protect themselves from stares, fondling, cat calls, etc. This is not to say no woman is exempt from these things, but many prefer to wear it, much to their chagrin, because women by themselves are truthfully considered "whores" by many and thus "deserving" of being fondled and hollered at. One of the things I had to get used to as a western woman (obviously, I am rich and a prostitute because I'm not married..."obviously") is the CONSTANT gaping by young men. Truckloads of young men will physically hang out their entire bodies to gawk at a western woman. Shuras won't look at me, though (usually). I have gotten my hand shaken, however, which was considered a huge step up by many in my circle.

I have mixed feelings about this book. It's easy to read and certainly provides an interesting and informative portrayal of what life is like for the women of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, for me it dragged on in the end, and I started counting pages wondering when it would be over. There is one heartbreaking and shocking story after the next, and too many "characters" to wrap one's mind around. This mélange of stories primarily boils down to this: Terrorizing Men and Terrorized Women. I don't believe life for Afghani women has improved because of the Kabul Beauty School, and from what I understand, because of their portrayal in this book, some of the women are in more danger now that the book is out and Rodriguez has fled. In the end, reading Kabul Beauty School did not elicit the feelings I thought it might, which was to have met an extraordinary, selfless woman who achieved a major accomplishment. Throughout the reading, I didn't understand or appreciate the author's motivation and, as a result, found it difficult to champion her cause. It's excellent memoir or journal material, but that's where the excellence ends. Does it entertain a broad audience? Absolutely not. In addition, there's a certain lack of credibility from the merely average writing skills of the author. In the retelling of this tale, Deborah Rodriguez often comes across as victim of circumstance. She makes a series of foolish choices particularly when it comes to marriage, acts rashly, and often irreverently, probably drinks too much and smokes. (This may be harsh, but these traits, to me, have nothing to do with "beauty.") For example, it doesn't make her the least bit likeable when we learn she verbally assaults a man at an outdoor market when he follows her around and grabs her backside.

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