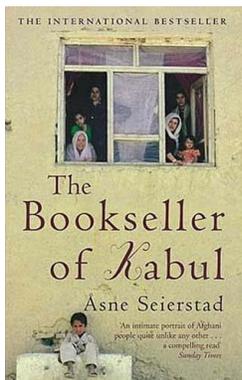


The Bookseller of Kabul

by Asne Seierstad



Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Back Bay Books; Reprint edition (October 26, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0316159417

ISBN-13: 978-0316159418

ABOUT THIS BOOK

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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

taken from 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 made it had September 11 not happened and the world started to care about Afghanistan" (p. 138). Discuss the implications of this statement.

INTERVIEW: Asne Seierstad

Bookseller of Kabul author Åsne Seierstad: 'It's not possible to write a neutral story'

The Bookseller of Kabul propelled Åsne Seierstad to global literary renown – and then to court. Did she exploit her subjects' privacy and trust in her portrayal of Afghan family life? And what does the case mean for journalism?

The Guardian | Friday July 30, 2010



A story reported on the outcome of a lawsuit lodged in Oslo against Åsne Seierstad, author of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, by a member of the Afghan family portrayed in the book. The story said Seierstad was found guilty of defamation, but that was not so: the finding was invasion of privacy. The piece also said she was found guilty of "negligent journalistic practices". To clarify: the judge did cite negligence, but there was no guilty finding on a charge of

negligence, as our phrasing might have implied. Contrary to the piece, legal fees were not awarded against Åsne Seierstad and her publisher Cappelen Damm; the judge is to rule on fees later. The article also said the book's revelations of personal details caused several members of the Afghan family to move to Pakistan and Canada. We should have made clear this was an allegation made by the plaintiff's side in a case document. Equally, the heading – Brought to book: Kabul author guilty of 'betraying' a nation – referred to an accusation by a family member, not a comment by the court (28 July, page 11).

In three weeks, Åsne Seierstad will give birth to her second child. Substantial rebuilding work is being done to her house in Oslo and her young son is driving her neighbours to despair every

morning with his new drum kit. But all of this is nothing to the storm [Norway's](#) most successful author has gone through in the past few days.

Last week, Seierstad learned that she had lost the first legal stage of a literary tussle over her representation of the real-life subject of her bestseller *The Bookseller of Kabul*, which has fascinated her readers around the world for almost a decade. "Even though I'm in the middle of this and it's boiling right now, I can see that it's a fascinating situation and an important debate about who can and should, write what – and in what way," she says

Seierstad was a war correspondent before she exchanged the front lines to write the book that made her name, and which could now ruin it.

Provoking controversy almost from publication, *The Bookseller of Kabul* is a compelling portrait of an Afghan bookseller, a local hero who risked his life to save the literary heritage of his country and publicly argued for women's rights and liberal ideals. But, in the course of the book, the eponymous hero is revealed by Seierstad to be a tyrant who mercilessly oppressed his own family, enslaving his wives and refusing education to his sons.

It quickly became the bestselling nonfiction book in Norwegian history, and went on to be translated into 41 languages and top the international bestseller charts. Tim Judah, reviewing it in the *Observer*, called it "compulsive, repulsive and frightening". "If this is what life is like in the family of Afghanistan's answer to Tim Waterstone, there is clearly no hope for Afghanistan," he added. Another reviewer said it was "an emotive indictment of a horrible society".

But then, the central character stepped out from its pages and repudiated the book. Instead of staying quietly put where she left him, in Kabul, Shah Muhammad Rais bought a business-class flight from the Afghan capital to Norway, hired a lawyer and launched a counter-publicity trail through the Norwegian media, appearing on television and the front pages of newspapers, accusing Seierstad of treachery.

He claimed that her depiction of his family was inaccurate and invasive; that she had humiliated and destroyed them, forcing his first wife to move to Canada to live with her brother. The book had also, he said, dishonoured Afghanistan. The man who had risked his life to prevent his library being burned by the communists, the mujahideen and the Taliban insisted that Seierstad's account of him and his family was so slanderous that every copy should be destroyed.

For almost eight years, the row has played itself out in public and last month, Seierstad found herself in the witness box for three days, defending her book and her journalistic integrity.

She was confident she would win. "It is hard as a journalist to be judged like this," she says. "I can insist to everyone that it is just three small, concrete points that the judge has found against me, but it will always be written about me now that I have been judged for breaking privacy and had my accuracy questioned, and that's not a good thing as a journalist." (Those points were that Rais's wife hadn't wanted to marry him; that she hadn't been terrified of wanting a girl; and that Seierstad didn't do enough to make sure the wife's thoughts were correctly presented.)

She and her publisher Cappelen Damm must now pay 250,000 Norwegian kroner (£26,000) to the second wife for invasion of privacy and for failing to ensure her quotes were accurate. He is

claiming that seven other members of his family are poised to make similar claims against the author.

The second wave of litigation, however, will have to wait. Seierstad is appealing against the judgment. She plans to take it to Norway's supreme court and all the way to the European court of human rights if necessary.

"If I lose, then I have to accept that my way of writing books is not the way society says it's OK to write," she says. "I will get a loan and pay the money the court asks for. But I will not lay down my writing and I still say this was an important book to write. The family is the single most important institution in Afghan culture. It is described in the country's constitution as the 'fundamental pillar of society'. Family law – decided by the men in the household – is more important than government legislation: [President Hamid] Karzai might insist that women can work but that doesn't mean anything if a father forbids his daughter from going to school. If we can't understand the Afghan family, we can't understand Afghanistan."

Born in Norway in 1970, Seierstad studied Russian, Spanish and the history of philosophy at Oslo University. After graduating, she spent a year in Russia, where her father was working as a political scientist. In 1993, she moved to Moscow full-time to study politics. Keen to gain access and speak to Russian government officials, she posed as a journalist and her career took off.

Seierstad asked Rais, whom she met during her time in Afghanistan, if she could come and live with his family and write an intimate portrait of their lives. For five months, she probed, delved and peeled back the secrets of the family. There was nothing she didn't ask and nowhere she didn't go: into the men's world of commerce and conversation; into the women's world of the hammam, where burqas and inhibitions are shed.

It is a fascinating portrait: a family's dirty linen hung out for public gaze. Seierstad absented herself from its pages: in the book, the omnipotent storyteller is never present. Having lived with the family for so long and questioned them so closely, she says she felt justified writing from inside the head of each character, attributing thoughts and feelings to them without the filter of her own voice – as if she were writing a novel. In previous interviews, Seierstad has made much of the fact that the most important lesson that her parents taught her was to care for others less fortunate than herself, and has cited the writer and traveller Ryszard Kapuscinski as a hero owing to the respect he always showed his subjects.

I ask whether it was kind of her to draw out these women's most intimate sexual secrets and private emotions, and reveal them to the world. "What's unkind in it?" Seierstad says, surprised. "My project, my only goal, was to understand what was going on inside one of these families. I was there as a journalist, invited into their home to find out about Afghanistan. Should I, when I know something is not right, like the way the bookseller treated his wives, say it's not important? Yes, it is important and I have to find out."

But was it right to accept Rais's hospitality for almost half a year and then tear him apart in public? She may have been invited into the family home by Rais, but did the women in the house – one of whom was 16 and had barely left the backyard of her father's home before

marrying the aging Rais – truly understand what would happen to their secrets after they were scribbled down in a writer's notepad?

"They say now that they didn't say certain things or that they are humiliated by having them written about, but who is really saying that?" Seierstad says. "It is Rais who is leading this campaign against me for reasons of money or of honour, I have no idea, but because these women are dependent on him, they have no choice but to say what he says. It's important for us to know Afghanistan. It is a country where we waged a war and to understand people you have to dig deeper and there's nothing unkind in that."

Yet Seierstad admits that, at times, she did go too far. In the first edition of the book, published in a limited run in the UK and now out of print, there is an astonishingly intimate description of one of the women in the household at the hammam. In two passages, Seierstad writes about the breasts, belly and genitals of this woman – a woman who since reaching adulthood has never left her house without wearing a burqa.

"I removed that section because Rais asked me to," says Seierstad. "But this book went through several editors and we all overlooked that problematic word, genitals. We realised it was a mistake only after Rais focussed on it, and I apologised to him and to his mother for it."

That she put it in at all, is perhaps evidence of a lack of sympathy for her subjects' privacy. In the past, Seierstad has claimed that the book is not a criticism of the Islamic way of life – but that it "just reveals a lot about it". This, I suggest, is disingenuous – and dangerous. Her outrage at the way women are treated in the book crackles on every page, but because she has written herself out of the narrative, her highly subjective account could be accused as masquerading as an objective report.

There is a long pause. "I agree now that it is not possible to write a neutral story," she says. "I don't criticise the society with my words in the book but I agree, it's there in the text anyway. It's not an open critique but it is a critique."

Despite standing her ground, Seierstad says that she needs to be more rigorous: "If I write a book in future, I may decide to take the precaution of going back to every person I interview, reading their quotes back to them and asking them to sign a letter, saying it is accurate," she says. "Journalism is moving into a different world where we are held to almost impossible standards. In everything I write, ever again, I need to make sure I am 100% accurate. A journalist can get away with this sort of controversy once, but I can't survive it again."

• This article was amended on 31 July and 7 August 2010. The original said that Åsne Seierstad had been asked to make a payment to the bookseller's first wife. It also said that The Bookseller of Kabul had been translated into 29 languages. This has been corrected.