

# **The Bookseller of Kabul**

## **by Asne Seierstad**

### About the Book

This mesmerizing portrait of a proud man who, through three decades and successive repressive regimes, heroically braved persecution to bring books to the people of Kabul has elicited extraordinary praise throughout the world and become a phenomenal international bestseller. The Bookseller of Kabul is startling in its intimacy and its details - a revelation of the plight of Afghan women and a window into the surprising realities of daily life in today's Afghanistan.

### Praise for the Book

"[A]n astounding portrait....Seierstad's visceral account is equally seductive and repulsive...An international bestseller, it will likely stand as one of the best books of reportage of Afghan life after the fall of the Taliban."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"One of the few pictures we have of everyday life in Afghanistan... Bridging the gender gap as no Afghan could, Seierstad accompanies Sultan on business trips, visits the wild tribal areas where Osama bin Laden may be hiding—and, most memorably, dons a burka, the garment prescribed by Islamic fundamentalists, and describes what it's like to go about fluttering, billowing, half-suffocated, and half-blind. This is a story of individuals struggling for happiness in a country turned by twenty years of war."

—*Michael Harris, Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"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."

—*Scott W. Helman, Boston Globe*

"Seierstad is after truths more personal, textured, even mundane—a view of Afghanistan not from the top down but from the inside out—and for the most part she finds them.... A closely observed, affecting account of the family's daily life... Seierstad writes of individuals, but her message is larger."

—*Mark Hertsgaard, Washington Post Book World*

*Courtesy of Hachette Book Group*

## About the Author

Title: Asne Seierstad

Norwegian Writer ( 1970 - )

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## Personal Information

Born February 10, 1970, in Lillehammer, Norway; daughter of Dag Seierstad (a political scientist) and Froydis Guldahl (a writer). Education: Attended Oslo University and Moscow University.

## Career

Writer, television war correspondent, translator, and journalist.

## Works

### Writings

- *With Their Backs to the World: Portraits of Serbia*, Virago (London, England), 2000, Basic Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Bokhandleren i Kabul: et familiedrama*, Cappelen (Oslo, Norway), 2002, translation by Ingrid Christopherson published as *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 2003.
- *Hundre og én dag: en reportasjereise*, Cappelen (Oslo, Norway), 2003, translation by Ingrid Christopherson published as *A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal*, Virago (London, England), 2004.
- *De krenkede: historier fra Tsjetsjenia*, Cappelen (Oslo, Norway), 2007.
- *The Angel of Grozny: Orphans of a Forgotten War*, translated from the Norwegian by Nadia Christenesen, Basic Books (New York, NY), 2008.

Translator of works.

## “Sidelights”

Norwegian author Asne Seierstad is a print and television journalist who is well known throughout her native Norway and the Scandinavian countries. Adept at several languages, including Chinese, Russian, and Spanish, she has been a translator and foreign-language reporter for a variety of Scandinavian newspapers. Seierstad has covered the Chechen war, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the fall of Baghdad, and other conflicts in Serbia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

*With Their Backs to the World: Portraits of Serbia*, first published in England, was reprinted in the United States six years later by Basic Books. Reviewers who commented on the American edition included several who had read her later works. *Library Journal* contributor Zachary T. Irwin commented that readers of those books "will discover the same sensitivity and intelligence in her portraits of Serbs that marked her treatment of Afghans and Iraqis."

This volume is the result of Seierstad's interviews of thirteen people and one family prior to and following the arrest of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic. Throughout the dialogues, animosity toward the United States and Muslims is evident, as is the belief that the Serbs committed no war crimes or "ethnic cleaning." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor noted: "To Seierstad's credit, she does not accept these assertions silently; rather, she prompts her sources to elaborate and to justify." As the reviewer noted, the responses usually consisted of opinions based on news seen on government-run television. Many of the people were Milosevic supporters who would have welcomed another dictatorship.

These interviewees represent all levels of education, income, politics, and sophistication. They include novelist Ana Rodic and rock star Antonio Pusic, who performs as Rambo Amadeus, as well as a farmer, a cleric, and a black marketeer. Profiles are included, including of Zoran Zivkovic, who briefly served as prime minister after the assassination of Zoran Djindjic. *Booklist* reviewer Ian Chipman wrote that this book "is fascinating reading for anyone wishing to uncover the stark humanity hiding beneath one of the world's most troubled and confused regions."

*Bokhandleren i Kabul: et familiedrama*, published in English translation as *The Bookseller of Kabul*, is Seierstad's acclaimed story of the life and household of patriarchal Afghani bookseller Sultan Khan. Seierstad first encountered Khan and his bookshop while she was covering Northern Alliance soldiers during the war in Afghanistan. She was intrigued by the presence of a bookseller in a fundamentalist Taliban country. After she and Khan became friends, he agreed to let her spend some time in his home to report on the status of life in Afghanistan during and after the Taliban regime. With Khan's youngest daughter as an interpreter, Seierstad spent four months living and observing Khan and his family.

In Seierstad's telling, Khan is a complex, often maddeningly contradictory man. Literate, well-traveled, and stoic in the face of adversity and opposition, Khan resolved to continue to sell books that preserve Afghan culture and ideas, even after several instances in which communists or the fundamentalist Muslim Taliban raided his shop and burned books they deemed to be offensive or immoral. To preserve his stock, he carefully stashed hundreds of books in dozens of

locations throughout Kabul. Yet, while waging a personal war against censorship, Khan upheld the harsh traditions of his homeland in his family life. Seierstad presents tellingly vivid accounts of his tyrannical hold over his household; how he took a sixteen-year-old second wife after his first wife, Sharifa, turned fifty; how Sharifa was expected to teach the new wife how to care for the master of the house; how youngest sister Leila was expected to give up her independence to serve as the household's unpaid perpetual servant; and how even Khan's sons had to bend to Khan's iron will, foregoing education and helping him run his bookselling business. Instead of a story about an enlightened man who championed the continued freedom of thought in a country that tried so hard to repress it, Seierstad found "a world of repression, dirt and crushed hopes, which in her view is symptomatic of the nation as a whole," commented Sheena Gurbakhash for the *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*. Even after the ouster of the repressive fundamentalist Taliban, in Afghanistan women in particular still suffered in the stranglehold of tradition.

"Seierstad presents a vivid, intimate, yet frustrating picture of family life after the Taliban," commented *Library Journal* contributor Lucille M. Boone. The book "allows us a glimpse of Afghan life that transcends the daily news," commented Linda Simon in *World and I*. *Booklist* reviewer Ellen Loughran called *The Bookseller of Kabul* a "fascinating, thought-provoking look at Afghanistan," while a *Publishers Weekly* critic found it an "astounding portrait of a nation recovering from war, undergoing political flux and mired in misogyny and poverty." Carol Bere, writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, concluded that, "whether fiction, nonfiction, or so-called immersion journalism, provocative works like *The Bookseller of Kabul* add to the growing body of literature that explores the situation of Afghan women from historical, social, and cultural perspectives."

*Hundre og én dag: en reportasjereise*, published in English translation as *A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal*, covers the U.S. invasion of Iraq during the second Gulf War. "Her book focuses far less on the big, dramatic events than on the war's impact on ordinary Iraqis," noted Julie Wheelwright in the London *Independent*, adding that it portrays "the gut-wrenching tragedy of thousands who were--quite literally--caught in the crossfire." Seierstad talks to a grieving grandfather whose grandson was killed in a civilian massacre at the el Nasser market. A visit to a morgue results in photographs too graphic and too gruesome to be published. She tells about her translator, Aliya, who longs for Saddam Hussein's return and who fell into a sort of unresponsive state of numbness after the dictator was deposed. While dodging the sanitized view of the country provided by her official handlers, she manages to travel with a child psychologist to look at the war's effect on children. "While more ambitious narratives may provide more context," a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted, "this is a valuable impressionistic portrait." *Booklist* reviewer Kristine Huntley called the book "required reading for anyone who truly wants to delve into the complexities of life in Iraq under Saddam and during the war and its aftermath." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor described Seierstad's reporting as "dispatches scorched by the flames of battle and delivered by Seierstad, to enormous effect, in tense, crisp language."

*The Angel of Grozny: Orphans of a Forgotten War* is Seierstad's account of children who suffered and were orphaned by the war in Chechnya. She draws on her travels in the war-torn region over more than a decade as Chechen and Russian politics and leaders were ever-changing.

*Library Journal* reviewer Jenny Seftas called this volume "equal parts history, biography, and ethnography."

In reviewing the book for the London *Times Online*, Christina Lamb noted that when Seierstad returned to Grozny in 2006, she witnessed Moscow-funded construction and everywhere pictures of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechan warlord and puppet of Vladimir Putin. "She is excellent at describing the personality cult she refers to as 'Ramzania.' The warlord turned president keeps four lions, a panther and a tiger, and claims that he spits in their faces before petting them to show who's boss. He is whizzed about town in a motorcade of thirty speeding vehicles she describes as 'silver bullets,' and his ministers and advisers all have his picture on their mobile phones."

The "Angel" of the title is Hadijat, a woman who grew up an orphan in Russia, who is unable to bear children herself but who, with her husband Malik, cares for hundreds of war orphans.

Seierstad writes of grotesque atrocities, including a Russian soldier's torture of a Chechen boy in multiple ways. He hammered a nail into his shoulder, drove a pencil into his chest, and pulled off flesh with tongs. Seierstad writes that the same officer performed a procedure called *zvonok advokatu*, or calling a lawyer, on another victim who asked to see a lawyer. The phone he was handed was connected to wires that shocked him when he dialed. She notes that many of the orphans have been so scarred that they find nothing wrong in beating dogs with rocks or recovering the skeletal remains of a Russian soldier in order to use them to decorate a holiday tree.

Seierstad also writes of Russians who suffered. One is Nikolai, a soldier who stepped on a land mine. He is cared for by his mother who cannot receive help because, according to official records, her son is still serving. "There are many victims but few heroes," commented a *Publishers Weekly* contributor.

Reviewing *The Angel of Grozny* in *Russian Life*, Paul E. Richardson wrote: "Seierstad tells human stories that we all need to hear, shorn of politics. She travels with a perceptive eye and has a Chekhovian gift for literary journalism, for telling stories with meaning, for capturing the ink lines of character and bringing them to the printed page."

## Further Readings About the Author

### Periodicals

- *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*, March 3, 2004, Sheena Gurbakhash, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*.
- *Booklist*, November 1, 2003, Ellen Loughran, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 477; March 15, 2004, Kristine Huntley, review of *A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal*, p. 1261; October 1, 2006, Ian Chipman, review of *With Their Backs to the World: Portraits from Serbia*, p. 23; June 1, 2008, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Angel of Grozny: Orphans of a Forgotten War*, p. 4.

- *Contemporary Review*, July, 2004, Karen Steele, "The Women behind Kabul's Bookseller," p. 54.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, October 31, 2003, S.L. Allen, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 78.
- *Independent* (London, England), December 10, 2004, Julie Wheelwright, review of *A Hundred and One Days*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 2003, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 1116; February 15, 2004, review of *A Hundred and One Days*, p. 220; August 15, 2006, review of *With Their Backs to the World*, p. 829; June 1, 2008, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
- *Library Journal*, December, 2003, Lucille M. Boone, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 148; November 15, 2006, Zachary T. Irwin, review of *With Their Backs to the World*, p. 81; July 1, 2008, Jenny Seftas, review of *The Angel of Grozny*, p. 98.
- *Mother Jones*, May 12, 2005, Lisa Katayama, "A Hundred and One Days: An Interview with Asne Seierstad."
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- *Russian Life*, July-August, 2008, Paul E. Richardson, review of *The Angel of Grozny*, p. 60.
- *School Library Journal*, June, 2004, Jackie Gropman, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 182.
- *Smithsonian*, September, 2004, Eliot Marshall, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 114.
- *Spectator*, August 30, 2003, Matthew Leeming, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 31.
- *Women's Review of Books*, March, 2004, Carol Bere, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 16.
- *World and I*, December, 2003, Linda Simon, review of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, p. 235.

## Online

- *Christian Science Monitor Online*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/> (September 18, 2008), Marjorie Kehe, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
- *Financial Times Online*, <http://www.ft.com/> (March 22, 2008), John Lloyd, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
- *Globe and Mail Online* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/> (October 25, 2008), Hadani Ditmars, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
- *Independent Online* (Dublin, Ireland), <http://www.independent.ie/> (March 22, 2008), Frank Shouldice, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.

- *Independent Online* (London, England), <http://www.independent.co.uk/> (March 11, 2008), Michael Wright, "The 5-Minute Interview: Asne Seierstad, Writer and War Reporter," interview; (March 28, 2008), Virginia Rounding, review of *Angel of Grozny*.
- *Scotland on Sunday*, <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/> (March 9, 2008), Chitra Ramaswamy, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
- *Scotsman Online*, <http://living.scotsman.com/> (March 15, 2008), Tom Adair, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
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- *Telegraph Online* (London, England), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/> (April 1, 2008), Marcus Warren, review of *The Angel of Grozny*.
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## Discussion Questions

1. The 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 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 Khan'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" (page 138). Discuss the implications of this statement.
7. Mansur, who is extremely enthusiastic about the opportunity to make his pilgrimage, almost misses the chance to go. What does his experience tell us about the social and emotional outlets currently available to young men in Afghanistan?
8. Sultan Khan has been on both sides of the judicial system—as a prisoner and as an accuser. How, in each case, was truth pursued and

justice handled? What can the reader learn from the bookseller's experience about crime and punishment in Afghan society?

9. What kind of man is Sultan Khan? The author contrasts the bookseller's behavior at home with his behavior at work. How do his private and professional identities differ?
10. How do Sultan Khan and his acquaintances view the changes in government in their country? Does Sultan's perspective evolve in the course of the book?
11. Seierstad explains that she had a rare opportunity to observe Afghan family life. How did the fact that she is a woman affect her access to Sultan Kan's relatives? How might her background as a European woman have affected her interpretation of the people and events she observed?
12. Seierstad describes how women's access to education, work outside the home, and social freedom changed in Afghanistan immediately after the fall of the Taliban. How have the years of Taliban rule affected women in Afghanistan today? What do you believe are the prospects for the future?

*Courtesy Reading Hachette Book Group*