

# **Kabul Beauty School**

## **by Deborah Rodriguez**

### About the Book

Deborah Rodriguez went to Afghanistan with nothing but a desire to help and a degree in cosmetology. There she joined the Kabul Beauty School, which welcomed its first class in 2003. Well meaning but sometimes brazen, Rodriguez, one of the school's first teachers and its eventual director, stumbled through language barriers and overstepped cultural customs as she learned how to empower her students to become their families' breadwinners, teaching them 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 their stories, Rodriguez found the strength to leave her own unhealthy marriage and allow herself to love again, Afghan style. With warmth and humor, Rodriguez reveals the magnificence behind the burqa — and presents the remarkable tale of an extraordinary community of women who come together and learn the arts of perms, friendship, and freedom.

### Praise for the Book

“Fascinating . . . lively and honest.”

— *USA Today*

“[A] rollicking story . . . transcends the feel-good genre largely because of the author's superior storytelling gifts and wicked sense of humor.”

— *The New York Times*

“Delightful . . . [a] bighearted and entertaining memoir.”

— *Entertainment Weekly*

“Composed of heartbreak, hope, poignancy and candor . . . *Kabul Beauty School* is laid out masterfully, pulling readers in from the very first page.”

— *Los Angeles Times*

“[A] jaw-dropping true story, alternately hilarious and moving . . . The school was both an oasis and an opportunity.”

— *New York Daily News*

“Endearingly frank . . . inspirational and engaging.”

— *The Washington Post*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Author

Deborah Rodriguez has been as a hairdresser since 1979, except for one brief stint when she worked as a corrections officer in her hometown of Holland, Michigan. She currently directs the Kabul Beauty School, the first modern beauty academy and training salon in Afghanistan. Rodriguez also owns the Oasis Salon and the Cabul Coffee House. She lives in Kabul with her Afghan husband.

## Author Interview

**Q: In *Kabul Beauty School* you present the beauty salon as an inner sanctum for women in both the United States and Afghanistan. Aside from the absence of men, what creates this atmosphere and almost automatic sense of belonging?**

**Deborah Rodriguez:** I believe that beauty salons and beauty schools are sanctuaries for women everywhere in the world — in that sense, the Kabul Beauty School is no different. In every salon and school, the beauticians are there to take care of women. The customers let their hair down, quite literally! Lifelong friendships develop.

In Kabul, this feeling of closeness is enhanced by the greater culture's exclusion of women. I nicknamed Afghanistan "manistan" because you always feel as if you're surrounded by crowds of men. It's painful to go out and see so few women on the streets. It's a relief to get away from all that testosterone. The school provides a safe haven for my students and the women who work in my salon. We go through family crises, celebrations and hardships together.

Because I am a foreigner I bring up subjects that an Afghan teacher would not. We talk about birth control, joke about sex, our husbands, their lack of sensitivity and other taboo subjects. My girls love it — they laugh and tease each other and get just as silly as any other women. This also creates a bond.

For the foreigners, the salon is also a sanctuary. We might have three customers receiving services at the same time: one could be earning \$30,000 a month, another \$2,000, and the third is volunteering and making little to nothing. But there are no differences here in Kabul. We suffer the same things. None of us has electricity, we can't walk on the streets without being called names or stared at as if we have three heads, and it's difficult for us to move from location to location because of increased security risks. All of us shake for days when there are riots or suicide bombers or rocket attacks. But once in the salon, we shake off the day's dust, sit back to read an outdated magazine, drink tea and gossip. Plain and simple. We dish about who did what with whom and enjoy every minute. The salon is truly an oasis.

**Q: Women in Kabul fought hard to preserve some vestige of the salons and beauty culture in existence before the Taliban, going as far as to bury their tools. What do you think is the cause of this devotion?**

**DR:** Except for during the Taliban years, female beauty has always been treasured in Afghanistan. Beauticians have always had an important and honored role in enhancing beauty — especially during the parties and gatherings surrounding a wedding.

Paradoxically, I think this has to do with the lack of value that women have in this culture. There are huge celebrations when a baby boy is born. Hundreds of people come to the parents' house and bring gifts to the family. But when a girl is born, the mother is often in tears for months. The family scolds her for not producing a son; if she continues to birth girls, her husband often takes another wife. Progressive families celebrate the birth of a girl, but the celebration is still very small compared to that for a boy. From birth on, a girl understands that she has very little value — until someone approaches her parents to arrange a marriage. Then, her value is demonstrated by the kind of dowry her family is offered. She will wear a lot of this dowry at her wedding parties, including the gold jewelry and fine clothes that the groom's family has given her. If a girl isn't draped in gold, then everyone assumes she isn't worth much.

When you think about it, don't we all do the very same thing? When a girl gets engaged in the States, she proudly shows off her diamond ring. It seems that no matter what side of the world you live on, we all get our social status from other people's approval. But Afghan women don't have a lot of opportunities to show off. Even though all the women in Afghanistan try to look like prom queens for engagement and wedding parties, there is even greater pressure on the bride. That's her one big moment to display her worth — in front of all the important people in her world — with her gold and her elaborate dress and her fancy hairstyle — the bigger the better — and her body weight in makeup. The more beautiful she is on this day, the more she shows that her husband and his family value her. This gives her status in the community. Beauticians are the handmaidens of this status — there are hours and hours of preparation in a salon before the bride goes to the party.

Beauticians also clung to the tools of their trade because they earned a good living — and they ran their own businesses without any interference by fathers or brothers or husbands. They hoped the Taliban were only a brief interruption of business! And, of course, they loved their salons — as I said before, salons were then and are still comfortable havens for women in Afghanistan.

**Q: Though you have often made the decision to stand up for what you believed was right in dangerous situations, you have also had to pick your battles. How do you decide when it is worth the risk to stick your neck out?**

**DR:** I hate to see people being victimized. I wish I could say that I picked my battles, but it was more often the case that my battles picked me. I didn't stand up and make noise about some things when I should have and, sometimes, I made too much noise when I should have kept my mouth shut. But then there were the lucky times when my buttons were pushed, and I stood firm. My stubborn streak came shining through, and a few battles were won.

When I had to flee Afghanistan, I was fleeing for my life and that of my son Noah. Now I wonder if I should have taken more risk and stayed. Should I have fought harder for what I believed in and taken more chances? I ask myself what would have happened if I had stayed. Should I have taken the chance of being thrown in jail, killed or kidnapped or was leaving the only thing I could do? I wish I knew if I did the right thing by leaving. But to be honest with you I don't think I will ever know for sure.

**Q: You are undoubtedly in love with your husband, Sam, yet throughout the book you make it clear that there is quite a significant language barrier between the two of you. How do you communicate in a way that allows you to stay emotionally connected and navigate the cultural differences that you run up against?**

**DR:** There are many days when I would say we don't communicate at all. With time, I have learned what I would call "survivor Dari," and he has learned English pretty well. When we combine my broken Dari and his broken English and some sign language, we do okay. The only thing I can compare it to is when your child is about two years old. Only you can understand what they are saying — it sound like gibberish to everyone else. It is pretty much the same for Sam and me. He often translates my Dari into Dari for Afghans, and I translate his English into English for the foreigners. One day I was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a mixed group of men and women, Afghans and foreigners. Sam looked at me and said politely, "Debbie your *docon* is open." Translated into English, this would mean, "Your store is open." I knew that he was saying, "Close your legs — you are not sitting like a lady." So we have come up with our own language.

Most of the time, we are navigating the cultural differences in the dark. I remember how difficult it was for Sam when a foreign male would greet me with a hug. Sam says that it still bothers him sometimes, but that he understands that this behavior is common among westerners. He told me when we first got married that it would be impossible for either of us to change overnight — "Slowly, slowly, we will learn and change." And that is what we have done. We also know that my past is culturally unacceptable to him and his present is difficult for me. So we have decided to ignore these things. That makes our marriage very different from those in which partners want to know everything about each other.

Since I fled Kabul, Sam and I have only spoken on the phone. This has really put stress on our relationship. He doesn't read English so emails are out of the question, so it is just the phone. And for any one who has tried to talk on a phone while the reception is going in and out and you're missing half of what's being said you will understand how it is for us.

**Q: You mention your distress upon learning that Sam had another wife and, later, that she was going to have another of his children. How have you reconciled the fact of your husband's other marriage to your American upbringing? Though she is in a different country, does the existence of another wife impact your daily life?**

**DR:** Denial, denial, denial — this seems to be the best way to deal with it. There is no place in my American brain to put this other marriage. I have stopped asking about it, and he has stopped telling me anything. He understands that I could never accept it if she lived in Afghanistan — I could not be the traditional Afghan wife who makes way for another wife — so he would never put me in that situation. The culture here complicates this situation. Divorce is not an option for him: It would destroy his family and shame his name, and his children would suffer. It is very complicated. There are other foreign women here who are married to Afghan men and are in the same situation. We are an informal support group for each other.

It was difficult and embarrassing for me to even tell people that Sam had another wife. It took me a long time to talk about the last child; to this day, I don't like to talk about him. It wasn't until I wrote the book that I even spoke of it at all. I hesitated putting it in the book because my mom didn't even know; she found out by reading my story. I kind of hoped she would skip that part.

**Q: You describe both your life in the United States and your life in Afghanistan. Many people feel that they have a hard time balancing work and home when work is only a one or two hour commute away. How do you stay connected to your family in the US? As a mother, how do you maintain your relationship with your sons in the US?**

**DR:** Thank God for the internet and telephones! We email and talk on the phone a lot. I'm very close to my mother and my kids; even though I don't see them very often, I feel that they are always with me. Sometimes that's not enough, though: I brought Zach to Kabul because I really felt he needed to be closer to me. Now, he is going to school in Northern Cyprus — just a short flight away.

I feel that my experience in Afghanistan has opened up a different world for my boys. For my mother, too — she left America for the first time ever to visit me in Afghanistan. And if I had not been in Afghanistan, I would have never thought about sending Zach to school in Northern Cyprus.

Its hard for any mother — even with what is considered a normal life — to be without guilt. We all wonder if we're good mothers. I struggle with this on a daily basis. I also battle the guilt that I was not in the States with my mother when my dad died, nor was I there when her house burned down. If I think about it too much, I would drown in guilt.

**Q: Your son Zach came to stay with you in Kabul for a while and became involved in your efforts to save Hama from her disastrous relationship with Ali. How did it feel to have your American and Afghan family lives collide in such a dramatic way? How did Hama's inability to take the help offered to her affect you and Zach?**

**DR:** Zach is a bleeding heart, like me. So it didn't surprise me that he wanted to help Hama. It is really hard to be in Afghanistan without being affected by the lives of the people here — it is as if you are caught in a tornado and can't get out.

Foreigners here have a catch phrase to describe the world we grew up in, with its very different set of rules and expectations: we talk about how people do things “in the real world.” Would Zach have offered to marry an abused girl to get her away from her abusive boyfriend “in the real world?” I don't think so. The situation with Hama was very hard. So many tears were shed for this little girl. I wanted more then anything to see her freed from her captor, but nothing helped. I will never forget the look on Zach's face when he saw that she had been beaten because of his efforts to save her. The cruel reality of this hit him hard. I knew then it was time for him to leave Afghanistan.

**Q: The women you work with in Kabul appear to be interested in the beauty of hair, makeup, and dress largely for themselves as women and not for the pleasure of men, who are rarely allowed to see them made up. How does this relate to the way American women perceive personal beauty and the very public manner in which they often display it? What are the similarities between your Afghan customers and your American customers? The differences?**

**DR:** All women want to be beautiful. That is the bottom line.

In the United States, women dress to attract the male and impress the female. In contrast, for Afghan women there is no necessity to attract men because marriages are arranged and the mingling of men and women is forbidden. Consequently, Afghan women dress for themselves, to impress other women, and to show their financial status. In Afghanistan a beautiful woman is worth her weight in gold.

Americans appreciate beauty in all colors: Oprah Winfrey, Christie Brinkley, Nicole Kidman, Penélope Cruz, and Lucy Liu. Here, a woman would be committing fashion suicide if she showed up at the big party wearing the same dress as another guest. Americans love to think outside the box as far fashion and hair and are always striving to have the newest look, latest fashion and the trendiest haircut. Where do we get our influence? Fashion magazines, movies, actors, musicians all create what we perceive as

beautiful and fashionable.

One of the few influences on fashion and makeup in Afghanistan is the women who are portrayed in the Indian Bollywood movies. These actresses have long dark thick hair, pale skin, curvaceous bodies, dark large almond-shaped eyes, perfectly-groomed dark eyebrows and huge false eyelashes. There is enough “bling” in their dresses that the average American would need sunglasses to take in the whole fashion experience. Afghan women all strive for this same look. Applying the makeup for a bride is much the same as making color copies. Individuality is not as important as having “the right look”.

In the U. S., we spend hundreds of dollars on tanning creams, sun beds, and vacations to bake ourselves to a dark golden tan. In contrast, very white pale skin is what is culturally preferred for Afghan women. Having dark skin is considered a terrible fate, even though the typical Afghan has dark skin, darker eyes, and dark hair. All too often, I have heard women say about their soon to be daughter in law not “what a nice personality” she has, but “what beautiful light skin” she has. Full-figured, feminine women are the ideal, not the tall, skinny, child-like women worshipped by Americans.

Unlike in the U.S., where we have as many avenues to make ourselves as beautiful as we can afford (cosmetic surgeries, Botox, hair extensions), in Afghanistan you get what you get. If an Afghan woman is not blessed with thick beautiful hair, pale skin, and a curvy figure there is not much she can do about it.

**Q: How are your friendships with women in Afghanistan different than with women at home in the US?**

**DR:** Sometimes, I feel that my friendships with Afghan women are a bit unbalanced. I always feel pressured to fix everything because I am American — and the truth is, I often have access to resources that they don't. This makes me uncomfortable, but the sweetness of their friendship is such a treasure. They could never tell me anything bad. When I ask, “Do you think I look fat in this outfit?” and their response is always, “No, Debbie you look so beautiful!” When I know I look like a giant pumpkin. My friends in the States would tell me I look like a giant pumpkin.

**Q: You write that in your “darkest moments” you wonder if your decision to help Roshanna fake her virginity on her wedding night was any help to her in the long run (258). While you certainly impact the lives of the individual women you teach, do you think that it is possible for outsiders to effect change in Afghanistan or does that change have to come naturally from within the culture itself? How is it possible for women to help these changes happen from within when they have so little political standing?**

**DR:** Education is the key to all change. Getting the girls back in school will make a huge difference. Afghan women are tough, and with education for ALL the Afghan people, I feel the country will advance. It might not advance in the pace and the way westerners want it to, but it is not our country. I feel that outsiders can make a positive change, but we are just here to help them get back on their feet. The real change will happen within each person, and then some day the country will find some sort of balance. This is an old culture; things have happened in a certain way for a long time for a reason.

**Q: The culture shock you experienced while adjusting to life in Afghanistan figures prominently in Kabul Beauty School. Was it difficult to readjust to life in the United States when you returned for a month to tour and speak about the book? Were there any particular aspects of American life that resulted in “reverse” culture shock?**

**DR:** One of the things that made me laugh was seeing a Hummer in LA or Manhattan. I kept saying to myself, now why do they need this car? The roads are paved and they don’t have holes the size of Texas. Electricity and hot water were really nice to have at a flip of a switch or turn of a handle. I had almost forgotten what that felt like. And ice cubes, a true luxury!

I was struck by the sense that people just don’t have time for each other. They are always so busy with work and other activities that there isn’t a lot of free time for just dropping by someone’s house. Kabul is a tight knit community of expats. We are all going through the same thing at the same time whether it’s that day’s security concern or power outage — all the daily inconveniences of living there. Despite all those difficulties, there is always time for spending time with your friends — something that makes life in Kabul very different than that in the US.

The saying don’t sweat the small stuff can really sum it up. In the US a lot of small things become huge problems. Living in a war zone makes you understand what a real problem is.

*Courtesy of Random House*

## Discussion Questions

1. We so often think of ourselves as more socially advanced than Middle Eastern nations. What does it say about this assumption that the author was treated by a preacher husband in the US the same way that Nahhida, wife of a Taliban member, is treated in Afghanistan?
2. Did Debbie take a chance of repeating her abusive history by marrying a relatively unknown man from a culture with a reputation for mistreating women?
3. Were you shocked when she revealed that her husband had another wife?
4. Why do you think Debbie was so emotional upon meeting Sam's father? Would you have been eager to meet him or preferred not to? Were you surprised at his reaction?
5. As a mother of two, was Debbie irresponsible in taking risks like crossing the Khyber pass and confronting her neighbors? Should she have gone to Afghanistan at all, knowing the conditions in the country?
6. Debbie's "bad" neighbors were potentially dangerous. What would you have done in her situation? How would the ineffectiveness of the local police make you feel?
7. Was it foolish for Debbie to continue running the beauty school in the face of government interference and hostility?
8. Debbie goes to Afghanistan in order to change the lives of women there and give them greater power in their personal lives, a mission that she has fulfilled for many women. How have these women changed her?
9. Does the example of a strong self-sufficient woman Debbie sets for the Afghan women provide them with helpful inspiration or does it set a dangerous precedent, encouraging them to model behaviors and aspirations that might be dangerous to them in their environment?
10. Would you have let a known Taliban member, and opium addict at that, stay under your roof in order to help his wife? How dangerous do you think this decision really was?
11. Why do you think Hama was unable to follow through and accept the generous offer of a place to live and a new life in the US?
12. How would you have reacted if your son offered to marry Hama? Would you have encouraged him? Argued against it?

13. How do you think American women are similar to and, at the same time, different from the Afghan women Debbie befriended and works with?
14. Did it surprise you to read about some of the frank discussions and depictions of sex among the Afghan women at the beauty salon and the wedding that Debbie attended?
15. Do you think it was wise for Debbie to help Roshanna escape detection as a non-virgin on her wedding night? Would you have chosen to interfere? Why or why not?

*Courtesy of Random House*