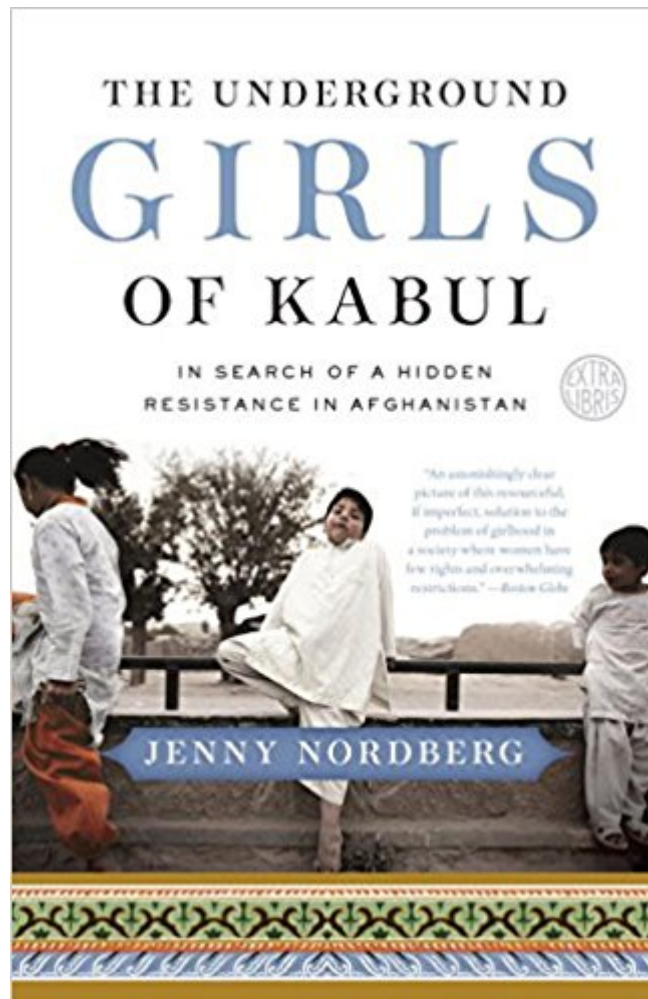


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The Underground Girls Of Kabul: In Search Of A Hidden Resistance In Afghanistan



Synopsis

An investigative journalist uncovers a hidden custom that will transform your understanding of what it means to grow up as a girl in Afghanistan, a culture ruled almost entirely by men, the birth of a son is cause for celebration and the arrival of a daughter is often mourned as misfortune. A bacha posh (literally translated from Dari as “dressed up like a boy”) is a third kind of child – a girl temporarily raised as a boy and presented as such to the outside world. Jenny Nordberg, the reporter who broke the story of this phenomenon for the New York Times, constructs a powerful and moving account of those secretly living on the other side of a deeply segregated society where women have almost no rights and little freedom. The Underground Girls of Kabul is anchored by vivid characters who bring this remarkable story to life: Azita, a female parliamentarian who sees no other choice but to turn her fourth daughter Mehran into a boy; Zahra, the tomboy teenager who struggles with puberty and refuses her parents’ attempts to turn her back into a girl; Shukria, now a married mother of three after living for twenty years as a man; and Nader, who prays with Shahed, the undercover female police officer, as they both remain in male disguise as adults. At the heart of this emotional narrative is a new perspective on the extreme sacrifices of Afghan women and girls against the violent backdrop of America’s longest war. Divided into four parts, the book follows those born as the unwanted sex in Afghanistan, but who live as the socially favored gender through childhood and puberty, only to later be forced into marriage and childbirth. The Underground Girls of Kabul charts their dramatic life cycles, while examining our own history and the parallels to subversive actions of people who live under oppression everywhere.

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Customer Reviews

There is a poignant universality to this book. Every culture deals with its values, customs, and norms in its own way. In the West, we have come to accept (albeit not in all religious practices) people living as a different gender from that which they were born. We categorize them with a variety of labels: gay, lesbian, homosexual, cross-dresser, transsexual, metrosexual, etc. The decision to live this way is made by the person when s/he is old enough to determine it for her/himself. Imagine then, an entire society (viewed by the West as extremely conservative and primitive) that permits and encourages girls to be raised as boys "only until puberty. This is the cultural secret that Award-winning Swedish author Jenny Nordberg reveals. The book is the result of her documentary and five years' worth of research and reporting. Nordberg explains how Afghan culture's roots stem from Zoroastrianism and a patriarchal society. Girls here are commodities to be sold and bartered. The higher the family's reputation, the greater the value placed upon the female and her bride price (paid to the father by the groom's family). Should anything happen to tarnish her (and her family's) reputation, her value plummets. Keeping their "gold" protected and virtually under lock and key is how the society operates. Nordberg discusses patriarchy in other countries, but focuses on Afghanistan and how it deals with the differences of sex and gender, freedom and privilege, and captivity and slavery. She has divided her book into four distinct parts: Boys; Youth; Men, Mothers; and Fathers. In a society where only males have rights, it is easy to understand why girls embrace being raised as boys.

I don't know whether to be sad or angry by the information in this book. The author follows amongst others, a highly educated female doctor, who dresses her youngest daughter like a boy so their family can avoid the stigma of not having a son. The young girl is allowed to have all privileges that boys have, such as playing with abandon, speaking loudly and looking others in the eye. She is treated by her parents as the special son they never had. And, apparently, this is not an isolated case as this happens all over Afghanistan. Not only are girls treated worse than animals in the Afghani culture, but any woman who does not provide her husband with a son is beaten and ridiculed. These women loathe themselves and become depressed when they give birth to girls. Families without a son are harassed. Men make their wives feel ashamed because they have not given him a son. Therefore, in order for family not to be put out by having only daughters, many will raise a daughter, sometimes from birth, as their son. Doctors will announce that a family with

many daughters has given birth to a son, when in fact she is a daughter. The oddest thing is that most people in the community and school know that it's a girl just dressed like a boy, but everyone goes along with it. The worst part is that when a girl reaches puberty she must then become a girl again. Ending her life of freedom of movement and speech and the privileges she once had when pretending to be a boy. Some girls can't wait to be able to just be a girl again. Some girls want to continue being a boy because they say they feel more like a boy than a girl. The author delves into the psychological ramifications of gender confusion of girls who don't change back until after the on-set of puberty.

I can read a 300 page novel in a day but it took me a really long time to read this book, I mean months. The reason is that I could only take it in small doses. It's dry. It's depressing and its content takes digesting. I'm really interested in the lives of woman in Afghanistan (or any culture so far removed from my own). My first degree was in anthropology and the reason was that the way people live fascinates me. This isn't the first time I've tried to get a handle on the Afghani culture and I'll give this book credit for trying to be more well-rounded than most. And I think Nordberg managed it up to about 40% through. Up to that point I was loving that she took a lot of time to place some of the practices that just make no sense by Western standards within a historical, political and religious context so that, while they still feel wrong, wrong, wrong, the reader is able to understand how the practice developed and at one point made some sort of sense. And this was part of why I could only take small doses of the book. When I've read plainly inflammatory texts (some of which I can barely deem better than anti-Afghanistan war propaganda) it's easy to dismiss a lot of the bad stuff as over exaggerated or tell yourself they just left the good stuff out. But when it's presented as balanced and therefore believable it's hard to face in bulk. And let's be clear, life in Afghanistan for women is horrendous. The main problem I had was that this is presented as a piece of nonfiction, as research. And certainly, Nordberg did a lot of fieldwork, conducted a lot of interviews and observed a lot of Afghani daily life. But this is not a piece of straight research. At best, I might call it a well structured, well padded field journal.

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