On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Pittsburgh native and graduate student Ben Orbach traveled to the Middle East to experience the region first-hand. Despite having a degree in Middle Eastern studies, he was completely unprepared for what he discovered. Beyond the anti-American sentiment he expected, he found a complex, curious people whose lives were made even more difficult by an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness. Live from Jordan is the story, told via his letters home, of Orbach's one year trip through Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Turkey. As he begins his unforgettable journey which takes him from bustling bazaars to underground brothels, he meets all kinds of characters: a falafel cook who hates Americans because they have no mercy, a kindly baker who wishes him peace and blessings every time he buys pita bread, and the curious, impassioned 21-year-old medical student with a penchant for debating U.S. foreign policy. From the angry streets of Cairo to the living rooms of ordinary people in Jordan and Palestine, Orbach offers an honest, balanced portrait of a region in turmoil and the vivid, misunderstood, and often welcoming people who inhabit it. With humor and wit, he sheds new light on a culture that few Americans understand. Engaging and evocative, Live from Jordan is a myth-breaking book that combines the lyricism of a travelogue with the insight of reportage.

My Personal Review:
Sincere, honest, and funny are words that come most readily to mind when summing up this book. Young American Ben Orbach showed significant courage in traveling to the Arab World (and Turkey) post-9/11, and he was on the ground with war in Iraq brewing and then breaking out. He is a true traveler in the classical sense, going afar to seek wisdom and change, not to impose or justify prejudices or preconceived notions. He is clear about his convictions, but humbly does his utmost to understand the many different opinions he encounters along the way. His insights, informed by
his knowledge of the local language, are passed on to us through the e-mails that he wrote home from the Middle East--those missives are the substance of the book. His distinction between America haters and American policy critics will help Americans who are struggling to grasp the nuance of Arab/Muslim politics and society. In this and some other sections of the book, Orbach outlines what he believes are some of the implications for U.S. Middle East policy.

The authors personality comes through with a great sense of humor. His account of using the facilities in high-class hotels is hilarious--something any young and cash-strapped traveler who has searched desperately for clean restrooms in developing nations can surely relate to. The Jordan snowball fight is awesome.

This will be a sort of guide book for Americans studying in the Arab/Muslim world. It can also be a Middle East primer for any Americans who are seeking to be more-informed citizens.

Perhaps the most important question to ask of any text is, what of it? At first glance, pursuing peace might seem a somewhat grandiose ambition to link with this book, but I believe that is the authors primary motivation. His search is in the spirit of U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, who dedicated his book To the Children of the Middle East. The Middle East is controversial, and readers will surely find cause to disagree with Orbach at points along the way. But they will also find his views to be balanced, fair, and reasonable.

In sum, the authors sincerity, credentials (advanced Arabic, SAIS masters degree), and his travel and work experience (notably with the U.S. governments Middle East Partnership Initiative) demand that his book gets a serious look and a fair read. At a time when the need for mutual understanding between the U.S. and the Arab (and Muslim) world has never been more vital, this is a timely, important, and enjoyable book.

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Live From Jordan: Letters Home From My Journey Through the Middle East by Benjamin Orbach - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!