The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan by Kim Barker

Disappointed

A true-life Catch-22 set in the deeply dysfunctional countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan, by one of the region’s longest-serving correspondents.

Kim Barker is not your typical, impassive foreign correspondent—she is candid, self-deprecating, laugh-out-loud funny. At first an awkward newbie in Afghanistan, she grows into a wisecracking, seasoned reporter with grave concerns about our ability to win hearts and minds in the region. In The Taliban Shuffle, Barker offers an insider’s account of the “forgotten war” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, chronicling the years after America’s initial routing of the Taliban, when we failed to finish the job.

When Barker arrives in Kabul, foreign aid is at a record low, electricity is a pipe dream, and of the few remaining foreign troops, some aren’t allowed out after dark. Meanwhile, in the vacuum left by the U.S. and NATO, the Taliban is regrouping as the Afghan and Pakistani governments flounder. Barker watches Afghan police recruits make a travesty of practice drills and observes the disorienting turnover of diplomatic staff. She is pursued romantically by the former prime minister of Pakistan and sees adrenaline-fueled colleagues disappear into the clutches of the Taliban. And as her love for these hapless countries grows, her hopes for their stability and security fade.
Swift, funny, and wholly original, The Taliban Shuffle unforgottably captures the absurdities and tragedies of life in a war zone.

My Personal Review:
This girl had no clue. She was a mess. She was disorganized, in a crappy relationship, did not know what was going on around her, was ignorant and arrogant. Then she flew to Afghanistan, acted even more clueless, insulting and arrogant. Then, she developed some interest in the country, and later downright fell in love with it. And that changed her. The arrogance disappeared, and was replaced by respect for other people, other cultures. She became a war junkie during that time, did some seriously stupid things, but she matured, became a real grown up. She ended this chapter of her life with having a clue.
That is the story Kim Barker tells in this book. The story of personal growth, interwoven with her adventures as a foreign correspondent for a Chicago newspaper.
The stories she has to tell do not reveal any big surprises about Afghanistan, the war there, the Taliban or the US handling of all that mess. There are other books out there, which already dealt with those aspects. What makes this book stand out amongst them is the unique perspective of a somewhat naive American girl, who was thrown into this alien world with no preparation at all. She eventually learns to get a grip on this strange world, and on herself. She learns, matures, and lets the reader take part in this process.
Some adventures she describes are downright hilarious, others are very sad, some are a bit strange, but all are interesting. Her writing style is not the most polished one can imagine, but it gets the message across. She is a no frills person, sometimes harsh, sometimes brash, and that is beautifully reflected in her writing style.
The book is very entertaining, especially for someone like me, who has read about half a doyen books about the current Afghanistan war, most of them are more serious historical and political scholarly works. This book tells the tale from a refreshingly different, very personal perspective.

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