

August 08 - SUMMARY – KABUL BEAUTY SCHOOL by Rodriguez

Phylliss was an inspiration to all of us as she led the 12 present and our East Coast contingent through The Kabul Beauty School by Deborah Rodriguez. Two new members, Joy and Cecelia, joined us and stepped up to the plate with comments and impressions. THANK YOU LADIES.

Phyllis always raises the bar with her research and eye for detail as she began our discussion with facts about Afghanistan. In brief, Afghanistan is a land locked country that has been at the crossroads of culture and trade for centuries. It has come to notice recently in 1979 with the Soviet invasion and the Taliban from 1994-2001. The city of Kabul at 5900 feet is estimated to house 1 million people, but the number is suspect due to the recent wars and transience. Over 10 different languages are spoken with Dari being the most common. Major exports include the gem, Lapis and the drug, opium. Literacy rate is extremely low, around 51% in men and 21% in women, and unemployment extremely high (50%). Phylliss also passed around a map of the country for our review. From what we had heard of Afghanistan in Three Cups of Tea, many of us were aware of the situation for women in the country and their hunger for education as a means for advancement.

Then we jumped into our discussion of the book; Crazy Deb and her exploits of expanding the beauty school in Kabul to help more women find a means to support themselves and their families.

Our first topic was the author's marriage to a man she barely knew and with whom she could not communicate. Initially, she indicated it as a justification for her to stay in the country. Others felt it was at the behest of her friends who were concerned about her safety. With her history of marriage and her pattern of abusive men, we marveled at her bravery considering what she wrote about the male dominated society in the country. From what we could piece together of her history of marriage and relationships, some felt she was a "user" and got out of things when things no longer served her. We marveled at her patience and quiescence in the early part of the relationship that was such a sharp contrast to her strong nature as the marriage progressed. Her husband was incredibly "advanced" considering his tolerance to some of her more extreme adventures.

The one area where the group was very impressed with Deborah was her evolution as a teacher. She started out with an ambitious curriculum of advanced concepts for a group of women who at times had little or no

training or education. She nimbly shifted her style and quickly moved to find the one student who caught the concept and had her instruct the others. By the time she left, it appeared that most of the teaching was in the hands of her most capable graduates and she evolved into more of an administrator/manager/fund raiser. She wisely included new services such as preparing bridal parties and showed her students the treatments preferred by the Ex-pat community as well as the local women.

There were times of great humor in the book including the incidents with the feather duster, selecting the Thanksgiving Turkey and the custom of who dances with whom at weddings and gatherings. My personal favorite was the elaborate set of instructions she had to give Ex-Pat clients on how to locate the salon. Without street names or house numbers in view, I can only imagine what it took to navigate your way in the city.

Some of the group had been aware of the book since 2007. Soon after it was released, there was controversy about the accuracy of her comments during a TV interview. While not openly acknowledging that she was the founder of the Kabul Beauty School, she did not correct the misconception. Literary reviews of her book took issue with her writing style which some of our group also saw. Characters appeared and disappeared without closure and her topics jumped around. Most people felt however, that her stories were engaging and kept you reading and wanting to know more. The group wished however that they had access to her, as there was a long list of incompleteness that begged for closure. Has she gone back? Why is she in California and not Michigan? Is she legally married in the US or just in Afghanistan? Who took care of her kids when she left? Most of us felt that her portrayal of the women she met and grew to love was the outstanding part of her writing.

Curt, our Maryland member asked the group to do an exercise after reading the book. His two words for her were Impulsive and Strong. He asked each member to give a word to describe her. Here is the list - forward, brave, kooky, scattered, passionate, hi-energy, feisty, compassionate, adventurous, flexible. The group on the whole admired her and her courage, yet at times, shook their heads in disbelief of her aggression, risky behavior and combative style when dealing with obstacles, real or imagined.

Crazy Deborah appears to be a complex character full of contradictions. Her willingness to marry in a foreign culture to a man with another wife in Saudi Arabia with 7 and then 8 children, the chutzpah to approach major companies for donations, taking on the local mafia with vocal in-your-face

tactics and yet fleeing the country with her son. We agreed she would be fascinating to visit for at least for a short time.

Other books suggested during the meeting included Kabul in Winter by Ann Jones (2006), The Bookseller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad, Sewing Circle of Herat by Claire Robinson. Other books/movies include the Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns both by Khaled Hosseini and Osama

Phylliss, another hit! We look forward to your next suggestion next March!
Thank you!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED INTEREST.

We look forward to reading with you in the future.

Jane Stanfield, Where Is She Heading
303-988-1356
wiladyjanes@gmail.com
www.janestanfieldwish.com