



The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, the True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing

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A riveting, real-life equivalent of *The Kite Runner*—an astonishingly powerful and profoundly moving story of a young couple willing to risk everything for love that puts a human face on the ongoing debate about women's rights in the Muslim world.

Zakia and Ali were from different tribes, but they grew up on neighboring farms in the hinterlands of Afghanistan. By the time they were young teenagers, Zakia, strikingly beautiful and fiercely opinionated, and Ali, shy and tender, had fallen in love. Defying their families, sectarian differences, cultural conventions, and Afghan civil and Islamic law, they ran away together only to live under constant threat from Zakia's large and vengeful family, who have vowed to kill her to restore the family's honor. They are still in hiding.

Despite a decade of American good intentions, women in Afghanistan are still subjected to some of the worst human rights violations in the world. Rod Nordland, then the Kabul bureau chief of the *New York Times*, had watched these abuses unfold for years when he came upon Zakia and Ali, and has not only chronicled their plight, but has also shepherded them from danger.

The Lovers will do for women's rights generally what Malala's story did for women's education. It is an astonishing story about self-determination and the meaning of love that illustrates, as no policy book could, the limits of Western influence on fundamentalist Islamic culture and, at the same time, the need for change.

The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, the True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing Details

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Melanie says

Mixed feelings. The book operates on a couple of levels; one, the story of Zakia and Ali, the "star-crossed" lovers of the title; the other, as a glimpse into life in Afghanistan, a place where Western ideas about women and their rights might or might not--mostly not--be welcome. Zakia and Ali choose each other, triggering attempts from Zakia's family to kill her for their--yes, I have to put this in quotes--"honor." Ali's family, particularly his father, support the young couple, as do a cast of characters including Rod Nordland, the author and *NY Times* reporter, and a number of Afghan women officials and workers in shelters for women. As of the end of the book, after a number of adventures (spoiler alert!!) Zakia and Ali are still together, living, somewhat precariously, in their hometown of Bamiyan, and have a little girl. Their options are sadly limited in terms of trying to find safety in another country; what's even more painful, as becomes clear in the book, is that theirs is by no means an isolated story, or even confined to a particular class or area. Even some of the women who are involved in working at women's shelters say they can't protect themselves from violence by their husbands. As a Westerner, reading this book, I felt like I needed to know more about the culture history of Afghanistan and how women's lives came to be held so cheap. Nordland tells some of that history, but it is constricted by the Zakia/Ali story. Worth a read, but generated the need for more reading. And questions!

Jimmy says

A true horror story of what it is like to be a woman in Afghanistan. And whatever little progress has been made is sure to end as soon as Western soldiers leave the country.

Betsy D. says

This book was incredibly eye-opening, and did not make for a light read (but it was riveting!). I need to go with something a little happier next, I think! Rod Nordland does an amazing job of making the book read like a novel, although it's a true story. Most importantly, though, I felt that for once I have a passable grasp on the real issues in Afghanistan. It was hard to read, but important to note that the jihad that we hear of is actually a "jihad against women." Most of the issues that the Western world has with Afghanistan (and vice versa) can in some way be traced back to their attitudes to women. In a recent study, Afghanistan was labeled as the worst country in the world to be born a woman. In spite of all of that, the love story in this book was incredible. It makes me wonder how many of the love stories in the U.S. would hold up under the extreme pressures that this romance faced. Honor killing, disowning by family members, beatings, and child marriages... and through it all, these two insisted that they would do anything to be together. And they have! The only unsatisfying part is that the dispute over their marriage is still not resolved to this day. Zakia's family still threatens her life. They are living in relative peace at the moment. This was a difficult but important read.

Laura says

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/boo...>

Jeanette says

There just are no words for this experience as researched and reported. Photos are as excellent and as instructive as the copy.

It's just too tragic and portents such dire outcomes of the future for any cultural association, that I can type no more.

Sincerely, I hope this couple can stay alive long enough to raise their daughter. And that all the people on the way who aided them! That they can remain alive in health themselves.

Janice Forman says

Although this book tells the triumphant story of how Zakia and Ali defied their families and escaped an honour killing, I found the book depressing. The Afghanistan culture is so radically different than ours and so steeped in the importance of honour, I have difficulty in foreseeing any changes, particularly for women. I often question why we believe our culture is better than another countries and I feel we need to sometimes step back and respect the diversity of cultures. However, I am left with the feeling that this culture has a long way to go before I could look at it with respect. When cultural practices such as public stoning, child marriages, and legalized rape are so deeply ingrained, it is difficult to believe that any changes will take place soon. Technically, Afghan has outlawed these practices, but they remain.

This is still a good read and provides the reader with an insight into Afghanistan. Rod Nordland has provided an excellent window into the world of Afghanistan, particularly in the rural areas.

Anne-Marie O'Connor says

I began this book early in the evening, and couldn't put it down until well after midnight, until my kindle battery finally died. The story of this romance reads like a thriller, rendered with a wealth of detail that makes it compelling, vivid and immediate. This is the story of a forbidden love match in a society where marriages are carefully arranged by families. It reveals a world in which women are the property of fathers, husbands, and brothers, who answer the women's desire of individual autonomy with the "honor" killings reserved for women who have transgressed this patriarchal code. It reveals the obstacles faced not just by one Afghan woman, but all Afghan women, and any Afghans who do not conform to a male-dominated tribal society that has proven fertile kindling for extremism. As Nordland peels away the layers of this world, recounting romantic Afghan poetry, folk tales, and social attitudes, he reveals an awakening struggle against coercive "cultural" practices that eclipse any new laws put into place to prevent such things as the marriage

of child brides to older men, stonings of women who speak to a man surreptitiously by cell phone--and the punishment of errant couples like these lovers. The author offers up some very interesting less-reported nuggets of history. Such as his conclusion, after many years of reporting in Afghanistan, that the Afghan mujahideen's resistance to Communism was fueled in great part by the Soviet attempt to elevate the status of women. In his view: "At its heart the jihad was not a response to Communism, it was holy war against feminism. In the narrow worldview of Afghanistan's jihadis, Communism and feminism were synonymous." If this is true, then why haven't we heard more about it, from reporters, who sometimes glamorized the mujahideen back in the 1980s, and American policymakers, who supported them? These historic tidbits alone are worth of the price of admission. This is a meticulously reported account by one of the rare reporters who cover the status of women, not as an obscure subplot, but with urgency, as if it were important to the destiny of a country, or a region. In one of Nordland's stories, an Afghan senator tell him women must be allowed to participate in the country's peace talks: "Because women want peace more than men do." The book is also an interesting meditation on the the social forces that conspire against individualism and autonomy in many traditional societies. It is a must read for anyone who wants to understand this region, and any place in the world where the strictures imposed on one sector of the population have the power to hold back entire countries.

Kelsey Hanson says

Actual Rating: 3.5

This book is both incredibly inspiring and completely frustrating. On the one hand, it shows the power of love and how two young people are willing to risk everything just to be together. Plus, it shows how willing people around the world are to help them. On the other hand, it also showcases just how difficult it can be to enact social change in third world countries. The challenge of breaking through social mores and traditions that had been in place for years is extremely difficult. It is shocking how completely and violently Zakia's whole family turned on her, and the desperate lengths they were willing to go to kill their own family member. Also, the couple themselves are young and have no education. This lead to them making a ton of bad decisions. Plus, it still seems that even though they are a bit more enlightened than previous generations, Ali still expects his wife to be obedient to him and Zakia also seems to go along with this. Also, I'm still not sure how I feel about the writer. He certainly helped them (I looked it up and as of May 2016 the couple was applying for assylum in New York City), but the publicity seems to be a double-edged sword, showing the couple to both their enemies and potential allies. This book shows that even now after the Taliban has been gone for many years, Afghanistan is still going through a lot of social change and when it comes to resolving issues like violence against women there are no easy answers.

Olivia says

I think Zakia and Ali's story is a story worth telling, especially because it speaks to dangerous cultural norms in Afghanistan. It also contributes to a wider narrative about ensuring the rights of women around the world. However, I'm not sure that Rod Nordland did their story justice. To me, it seems like he is self-congratulating himself on considering ethical implications and then helping them anyway. Further, he continuously uses the word "backwards" when discussing Afghans, which I find to be in extremely bad taste. He constantly criticizes the people he writes about, as though he knows that they won't be able to read it (the

two main characters are illiterate). Nordland could have written a book about Afghanistan that *includes* their story, rather than writing a book that feels so exploitative of their poverty and ignorance of the world. Jeesh.

Christopher says

In America and the West, we take a lot of our freedoms for granted: free speech, freedom of religious belief, rights to due process under the law, etc. But love? The freedom to choose who we fall in love with and not worry about our families approval? Sadly, that is the case of women in Afghanistan and this book, by detailing the tribulations of two young Afghans who fell in love, sheds a light on how little things have improved for women in Afghanistan after 15 years of spilt blood and treasure by the U.S. and its Western allies. There are so many different things to write about this book and very few of them don't make me want to dry heave into a paper bag. The two lovers are clearly brave, if not exactly the most thoughtful when it comes to making plans or trusting people. But who can really blame them? They've been used and betrayed by so many people in their struggles that it is hard not to have sympathy for them for that fact alone. What is also interesting is how involved the author, Mr. Nordland, became in the story. His plight to assist the lovers highlights the dilemma that all Westerners face when working in Afghanistan: to help prevent a tragedy, but potentially make matters worse, or allow the tragedy to run its course in the hope that things will work themselves out. Mr. Nordland may have sacrificed some journalistic integrity to assist the lovers, but I would argue that he was able to retain his humanity for it. The other great thing about this book is how Mr. Nordland ties this case to other cases of abuse going on throughout Afghanistan. While alluding to different stories throughout the main narrative, Mr. Nordland adds two supplementary chapters at the end that go into detail about other cases of abuse and rape against women in Afghanistan and how Sisyphean a task it seems today. My emotions ran a gamut from sorrow through revulsion to outright indignation. Clearly there is a morally degeneracy so deep in Afghanistan right now that it calls into question everything that the West has been doing there since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Yet, at the same time, to pick up sticks and leave Afghanistan to its fate would be like blowing out a small candle in a large room already covered in darkness. I hope everyone, especially those who want to completely abandon the country right now, reads this book and remember that our work is not done. The Taliban is still out there and gaining ground and women are born into one of the worst places to be born a woman in the world. The road is long, but it is one that we must walk down for the future generations of lovers in Afghanistan.

May says

come find me in 3d for thoughts

Alan Marchant says

Ignore the subtitle: parallels with Romeo and Juliet end with the fact that the protagonists, Ali and Zakia, are irrational young lovers. The journalist author injects himself excessively into both the lovers' circumstances and the telling of their story. On the other hand, this perspective increases the importance of the book as Nordland salts it with a cross-section of recent cases that illustrate the callousness and ubiquity of honor killing and misogyny throughout Afghanistan.

Nordland suggests three possible motives for the opposition of Zakia's family to Ali's courtship: religious

intolerance (Sunni vs. Shia), racism (Tajik vs. Hazara), and social class (hereditary land-owners vs. serfs). But religion appears to be only a secondary attribute of racial/tribal affiliation, and the two families were economic equals, cooperatively working neighboring fields. So the fury of Zakia's family is probably motivated by racism.

Nordland provides an interesting answer to the question, where is the honor in an honor killing? The confusion arises from mistranslation of a word that does not denote "moral obligation." The word instead refers to the principle of men owning their women. The shame that drives an honor killing arises from the unrequited loss of "wealth" and an obligation to reinforce the subservience of all women in the tribe. It's much more important to punish a suspect woman than an associated man, and evidence of her "innocence" does not relieve the demands of "honor."

Nordland's examples suggest that this perverted concept of honor is a social construct that runs counter to personal moral instincts. One family, for instance, chose to fake an honor killing (to satisfy the locals) and then secretly send their children out of the country.

Islam cannot be blamed directly for the evils of honor killing. But it continues to enable these practices by legitimizing slavery, undermining the rule of law, and profiting from tribalism. Afghanistan will continue to be a heart of darkness until Islam is reformed into a religion of virtue.

Gsmyles says

Long and repetitive in many aspects, but interesting to learn about honor killing and the horrors of falling in love in Afghanistan. The book went on forever and felt like I was reading the same plot over and over as the two main characters hide, move, hide, move, ask for money, hide, ask for money, hide, etc.

Patricia says

I learned so much from this book about honor killing, patriarchal dominance, police and mullah corruption, and humanitarian aid through changing laws and the establishment of safe houses for women and girls subjected to rape, abuse, child brides, and attempted murders by their family.

The reporting and true story of two Afghanistan youths, Zakia and Muhammad Ali, both from different ethnicities and religions being hunted by Zakia's father and brothers to save "honor" of the family was horrific and they were so brave to stand by their convictions. They eloped and were on the run within Afghanistan for several years. NYT reporter, Rod Nordland, first reported their story and with the help of others, including a New Jersey Rabbi Schmuly Boteach and benefactor Miriam Adelson, and the legal team from Women for Afghan Women (WAW), to date they have avoided being killed.

I am still appalled by the medieval mindsets of the Afghan culture and religions to hold girls and women to such demeaning standards. When an Afghan father is asked how many children he has, he will only state the number of sons. Women only have one name and many people outside their immediate family will not know the names of the females. If a brokered marriage falls apart for some reason, the female's male family members will seek revenge on her so they do not lose their "honor." The women and girls are never seen as victims but only as perpetrators.

Zakia and Ali's families (parents, siblings) are completely uneducated potato farmers. They live by traditions

and suspicions established centuries ago. The "honor" killing is to keep women oppressed and to not challenge male authority.

Organizations and laws have been established since 2009 to help women as they are awaiting trials, etc. one is Elimination of Violence Against Women passed in 2009 which defends women's rights against rape, wife beating, forced child marriages, and denial of relationships for true love versus traditional arranged marriages by the father or brothers. While in a safe house they are essentially imprisoned because if they go outside the safety of the house they will be killed.

Nordland cites many other tragic stories of couples killed because they loved one another without the consent of the female's father and male family members. A horrific story was of Bibi Aisha, a child bride who ran away, and when captured her "husband" cut off her nose and one ear. She was brought to America through an aid organization for reconstructive surgery and has been adopted by a family in Virginia. Social media has helped the fate of some people by bringing their stories onto the global stage where it may be a bit more intimidating for the female's father and brothers to commit honor killing.

The laws and customs are ancient. All the wars that have been fought and blood shed have not made a significant impact on the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Ken Dowell says

The Lovers is a love story. Of course it is. But it's also a news story. A news story about women's rights. A news story about what U.S. intervention has and hasn't done in Afghanistan. And a news story about some of the most backward social customs on earth.

The author, Rod Nordland, is a journalist who at one time was the New York Times Kabul bureau chief. He was on the hunt for a story about an honor killing. Instead he found the story of an Afghani Romeo and Juliet. Zakia and Ali are illiterate peasants from a remote region of Afghanistan where they met when their farming families worked side-by-side in the fields. They had never seen a TV or a personal computer and had never been on the Internet. Zakia is Tajik, a Sunni Muslim. Ali is Hazara, a Shia Muslim.

They are now in hiding from Zakia's family who are out to kill them. Zakia's crime: she fell in love with Ali, and at age 18 ran away with him and married him. That, in Afghanistan, is wrong in so many ways. First there's the ethnic mismatch. Then there's the fact that Afghani girls and women are generally considered the property of their men, whether it be father or husband, and thus not free to make their own decisions about who they should marry. And last, but sadly not least, 'what will the neighbors say?'

Nordland quotes Maniztha Naderi, executive director of one of the women's shelters that at one time protected Zakia, "...most families think this way in Afghanistan. They would rather kill their female family members if they are thought to have committed wrongdoing than lose face in the community."

During a stop at the Montclair Public Library to promote the book, Nordland suggested that Afghanistan might be the worst place on the planet to be a woman. He compared the status of women in that country to what it was for European women in the 1600's.

Maybe none of that comes as a surprise, but reading some of the details is nonetheless shocking:

-- "The age at which many girls are married in Afghanistan would be considered criminal sexual abuse in most countries."

-- "Though a daughter can bring a substantial bride price to their fathers, they are disdained. Many Afghan men don't even know how many daughters they have."

-- "It is plausible, and even commonplace, for a father to tie a neka (formally marry) his daughter without her presence."

--"Under Afghan penal code even rape was not a crime."

-- "Baad is a common practice, in which young girls are exchanged to compensate for a marital infidelity, a murder or other transgression, or just to settle a debt."

-- Another unique Afghan crime is Zina, which is attempted adultery. In some rural areas if a woman is found out on her own she can be apprehended by police and given a virginity test, which determines whether she will be charged with adultery or attempted adultery.

Zakia is not the only Afghan woman hiding from her family. Nordland also reports on the story of Breshna, a 10-year-old girl who was brutally raped by a mullah in a mosque. Breshna was protected in a women's shelter from a family that threatened to kill her. Ultimately the shelter turned Breshna back over to her family when they vowed not to kill her. So instead they solved their "honor" problem by forcing her to marry her rapist.

Journalists are trained to report on the story not become part of it. To his credit, Nordland admittedly 'crossed the line' on this one. "It came down to this: abandon your principles and stick to your humanity or stick to your principles and abandon your humanity." So he and some colleagues have tried to help the couple, shuttling them around in their car and funneling money to them that has come from American donors who read their story.

Where he didn't get any help was at the American Embassy. Apparently they were concerned about intervening and offending the sensibilities of the government with which they are supposed to be allied. Nordland's comment: "Give me break. We're not talking here about a woman who wants to put on a miniskirt and dance at the disco – she wants to marry the man she loves and live an Islamic, religious life."

According to Nordland, the U.S. has made an investment of more than \$1.2 million to promote women's rights. The shelters that protected Zakia, Breshna and others are largely American financed. Some of our efforts, however, border on the ludicrous. Consider this one:

There was a "\$35 million 'go fly a rule-of-law kite' program, dreamed up and funded by a United States Agency for International Development contractor. Their idea was to stage a public event at which they would hand out kites, comic books and posters with slogans printed on them touting equal rights for women and respect for the rule of law. Hundreds of kids and some adults showed up. First, no one could read the slogans on the kites and poster, let alone the text-heavy comic books. Then handing out the kites went badly awry when policemen systematically stole them from the kids who had come, in order to take them home to their own children, beating some of the kids at the event with sticks when they didn't cooperate. Finally, gender equality was hard to come by. The few times any girls got their hands on the free kites, their fathers took them away and gave them to their sons instead."

When you consider that this young couple, whose lives are endangered, cannot get any help from the U.S., despite the large number of private American citizens willing to help and support them, it is totally infuriating to listen to the blowhards and posers who are running for president with the promise that they will ban Muslim immigration. Personally I'd much prefer to welcome Ali and Zakia to my home than Trump or Cruz.

This is a story with no end. Zakia and Ali managed to flee Afghanistan once going to Tajikistan, largely because it was the one place they could go where they could understand the language. Tajikistan is, in Nordland's words "a country characterized by pimping policemen and roving drug dealers." So the couple

was robbed by police of the donated money they were carrying, Zakia's jewelry and all of their possessions. And though they were deported and driven to the border, they had a bit of trouble crossing back into Afghanistan due to the border police who were expecting a bribe.

Zakia has given birth while they were on the run. They now have a daughter who Ali maintains will be able to choose her own marital partner. This is a story with no end. As of a month ago when I heard Nordland speak, Ali and Zakia are still in Afghanistan, still in hiding, and still in danger.
