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BOOKS OF THE TIMES | 'KABUL IN WINTER'

Lowly Status of Women in a Land Struggling to Rise

By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

In December 2002, Ann Jones flew to Afghanistan and volunteered her services to a small charity. It was a year after the United States, in hot pursuit of [Osama bin Laden](#), had ended its high-altitude bombing of the countryside. "Somehow I felt obliged to try to help pick up the pieces," writes Ms. Jones, a journalist and the author of "Women Who Kill." That job, she quickly learned, was impossible, for reasons she itemizes in this furious polemic. There were too many pieces, too many warring factions, too many agendas, too much bad faith and too little money.

"Kabul in Winter" is three things at once. It is, in its own way, a travel book. Ms. Jones, a keen observer, captures her surroundings in crisp vignettes, some appalling, others quite comic, like her description of a senseless melee on the street in Kabul, or the manic protocols of Afghan drivers. The humor is mordant. This is a country whose main English-language guidebook cheerily informs its readers: "There is a lot to see in the city, even if most of it is wrecked."

"Kabul in Winter" is also a work of impassioned reportage, a sympathetic observer's damage assessment of a country torn apart by warlords, religious fanatics and ill-advised superpower conflicts dating back more than a century. Ms. Jones pays special attention to the condition of Afghan women, visiting them and talking with them in their homes, in the schools (where, for a time, she teaches English instructors) and in the prisons.

Last and least, "Kabul in Winter" is a diatribe, a barely coherent rant directed at President Bush (sneeringly designated, far too many times, as Bush the Lesser) and a host of other actors, both domestic and international. Ms. Jones comes loaded with so much ammunition that by the time she stops blazing away, there's no one left standing. Aid organizations, journalists, warlords, the mujahedeen, the [Taliban](#), President [Hamid Karzai](#), the British, the Russians, Afghan men, development experts, contractors, the World Bank and the Agency for International Development — all earn her withering scorn.

Ms. Jones starts from a political position that many readers will distrust. She views the United States as an imperialist power bent on shaping the world to its narrow interests and, with malice aforethought, imposing free-market economics on the oppressed peoples of the world. She considers the hunt for Mr. Bin Laden a foolish adventure and, although she does not say so outright, seems to regard his criticisms of American foreign policy as quite sensible.

On the big picture, then, Ms. Jones offers a fairly predictable catalog of abuse. But as an observer and analyst of Afghan society, and of the multiple problems bedeviling it, she can be eloquent and persuasive. Above all, she is a compassionate voice for the plight of Afghan women, who, on her

evidence, will have to make enormous strides to move from miserable to merely abject.

Ms. Jones visits the obstetrics ward of a hospital where midwives, to speed a difficult birth along, resort to beating the mother and showering her with curses. The mother, if she is lucky, will give birth to a son. Women in Afghanistan have no value other than their bride price, which poor families hurry to collect as soon as possible. (When Ms. Jones tries to explain the concept of a blind date to her language students, one says, "Like my wedding.") A friend tells Ms. Jones that her cousin has recently given birth to a baby girl, who is fat and happy, although the mother, "of course," is sad. Her husband has not spoken to her except to say, "If you do this to me again, I will kill you."

Wife-beating is universal. Many young women, in despair at being married off to a man they fear or loathe, douse themselves with gasoline and light a match. The hospitals in Afghanistan are filled with such cases. When a woman brings shame on her family for any reason — the reasons can be many and, by Western standards, trivial — suicide is the only option. Most discouragingly, Ms. Jones found, women themselves see nothing particularly wrong with this arrangement.

Afghans created this social structure all by themselves. But the West has plenty to answer for in other areas. Most frustrating of all is the evil born of good intentions. Ms. Jones, in her search for housing, quickly discovers that the stampede of international relief organizations, who buy up the best apartment blocks, has created a negative trickle-down effect. As real estate prices go up, residents at each step of the economic ladder drop by one rung.

Western aid organizations pay high salaries, by Afghan standards, distorting the local economy. Teachers, doctors and other desperately needed professionals prefer to work as drivers, interpreters or messengers for Western companies, whose missions overlap or duplicate one another, and whose thinking tends to be overly ambitious and unrealistically short-term. Just a few schools, built at minimal cost, might make more of a difference than the current goal of attaining universal literacy, Ms. Jones argues.

Afghans keep hearing about international support and a torrent of foreign aid, but with no electricity, few roads, houses reduced to rubble and overcrowded classrooms (where the old jihadist-inspired textbooks are still in use), they have begun to wonder where the money is. Nostalgia for the days of Soviet occupation is growing, Ms. Jones writes. The Soviets, at least, put up some apartment buildings.

Ms. Jones learns to cherish small gains. Rosemary Stasek, a Democratic City Council member from Mountain View, Calif., breezes into Kabul with \$5,000 in donations from her constituents and in two weeks renovates the five main rooms of a women's prison. The author herself is also responsible for changing the equation, if only by the merest fraction. Despite hardships and setbacks, she gets her students, all high school English teachers who can barely speak English, to forget the rote method of learning and start to talk. This, she writes, "was to be my personal response to 9/11 and my tiny contribution to the recovery of Afghanistan." It's something, in a country that has nothing.

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