

## **Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan**

by Ann Jones

### **A Dark Season in Afghanistan**

A review by Marjorie Kehe

You have only to turn a page or two of *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan* to understand that this will not be a pretty read.

Author Ann Jones begins her narrative by telling how she flew into Kabul in early 2002. (This is not a trip one sets up with a few keystrokes to Travelocity - Jones had to fly to Dubai and then wait in the airport there until a man with a briefcase briefly turned up to handwrite tickets to Kabul in exchange for hastily offered cash.)

But finally she found herself in the air above Kabul. She looked down and saw, "a mass of black smog, dense and opaque: a tangle of twisted strands of oily soot and smoke, like a great pot-blackened Brillo pad. Here and there it thinned to reveal aspects of the city beneath flat roofs, dirt roads, a ruined fort. Then the plane descended into that soup and the lights dimmed."

The lights never come on again -- not very brightly, anyway -- at any point throughout the next three years that Jones spent in Kabul.

Jones is a writer noted for expertise on the subject of women and domestic violence. She flew to Afghanistan after the United States bombing there in retaliation for the terrorist attacks in 2001 with a desire to help.

Not surprisingly, she was drawn to the plight of women, and during her time in Afghanistan she worked with different national and international organizations to improve conditions for women.

She visited Afghan women living in the medieval setting of cold, dank prison cells, had the frustrating experience of trying to offer domestic-violence training to legal experts seemingly incapable of grasping the concept that women had any rights whatsoever, and taught English to high school instructors supposedly already fluent in the language.

This is an angry book. (Remember that the Afghanistan Jones is chronicling is the *post*-Taliban version.) Here and there an occasional success story offers relief but for the most part the reader must follow Jones through a landscape that is not only bleak but also inconceivably alien to most Western readers.

Jones meets impoverished war widows who are not allowed to work, child brides forced to flee abusive husbands, refugeless abandoned wives, and women serving jail sentences - charged with immorality - because they were raped.

(In an interesting counterpoint, she also tells of the female Afghan professionals she works with, some of whom - not too surprisingly - are reluctant to wed, yet still long for the legitimacy only a husband can bring.)

It is easy to understand Jones's anger. She quotes a Physicians for Human Rights report from 2001 that indicates that "more than 70 percent of Afghan women suffered from major depression, nearly two-thirds were suicidal, and 16 percent had already attempted suicide."

At the same time, she unleashes considerable scorn on the Western aid groups ostensibly lending a hand.

"Members of the great army of foreign invaders - the ex-pat experts - are always going somewhere," she writes. "They drive around Kabul looking for meetings, looking for each other, looking for a decent meal. At times in Kabul ... the very act of driving around can seem to lend some purpose to life."

Jones is harsh as she assesses their scramble for funds and the "solutions" which seem to her too often to ignore both common sense and the culture within which they are working. (An NGO donated sewing machines to a women's prison Jones visited but sent only enough material for doll clothes - in a country without dolls. The unused machines end up in an untidy stack in a corner.)

Jones also never fails to signal her dislike of the Bush administration and its policies. On page one she describes watching George W. Bush (whom she also refers to as "Bush the lesser") "strut and bluster and lug us into violence." If this prevents some readers from continuing on to the next page that will be a shame, because this is a crisis that should transcend politics.

There's nothing lightweight about this tale. Jones lards it with plenty of research and history. While this is inarguably useful and offers a context within which to understand her experiences, there were times when I longed for less of a slog through policy and history and a bit more of the vivid personal experience she occasionally dishes up. The refusal of her driver, Sharif, to speak to her the morning after the US invaded Iraq, for instance, was fascinating and offered a perspective one can only get on the ground - a ground most of us will never have a chance to visit. I was left hungry for more of this.

Yet more often I felt a desire to thank Jones for shining a flashlight on a corner of human experience still so shrouded in shadow. She makes it clear that there are no easy solutions - even as she convinces us that the need for solutions is nothing less than urgent.

# ***Constructing Sexualities: Readings in Sexuality, Gender, and Culture***

by Suzanne Lafont

## **Synopses & Reviews**

### **Publisher Comments:**

Designed to introduce readers to a broad range of relevant ideas and theories and to encourage critical thinking on a variety of sexuality and gender topics, this collection of articles, classic and current, addresses the relationships between sexuality, gender, and culture. The readings include descriptions of variations in sexual and gender ideologies, expressions of sexuality, gender diversity, and global issues. Gay rights, transgendered movements, intersexed awareness, female genital mutilation, male circumcision, AIDS, sex tourism, and the sex.com explosion on the internet are all current issues addressed.

### **Book News Annotation:**

The readings are intended to introduce students to some of the issues that impact sexuality and gender in the modern world. Most of the 33 articles were written since 1990, but classics by Benedict and Malinowski are also included. There is no index.

Annotation c. Book News, Inc., Portland, OR ([booknews.com](http://booknews.com))

# ***Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective***

by Caroline B Brettell

## **Synopses & Reviews**

### **Publisher Comments:**

This reader introduces students/readers to the most significant topics in the field of anthropology of gender—drawing not only from classic sources, but also from the most recent, diverse literature on gender roles and ideology around the world. It takes a clear, accessible approach to the subject matter, making coverage appropriate for students from various levels.