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A Hundred And One Days: A Baghdad Journal



Synopsis

For one hundred and one days Asne Seierstad worked as a reporter in Baghdad. Always in search of a story far less obvious than the American military invasion, Seierstad brings to life the world behind the headlines in this compelling- and heartbreaking-account of her time among the people of Iraq. From the moment she first arrived in Baghdad on a ten-day visa, she was determined to unearth the modern secrets of an ancient place and to find out how the Iraqi people really live. What do people miss most when their world changes overnight? What do they choose to say when they can suddenly say what they like? Seierstad reveals what life is like for everyday people under the constant threat of attack- first from the Iraqi government and later from American bombs. Displaying the novelist's eye and lyrical storytelling that have won her awards around the world, Seierstad here brings to life an unforgettable cast of characters, from foreign press apparatchik Uday, to Zahra, a mother of three, to Aliya, the guide and translator who becomes a friend. Putting their trust in a European woman with no obvious agenda, these and other Iraqis speak for themselves, to tell the stories we never see on the evening news.

Book Information

Paperback: 327 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; Reprint edition (March 7, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465076017

ISBN-13: 978-0465076017

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (23 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,314,063 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #85 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Scandinavian #465 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Military > Afghan & Iraq Wars > Iraq War #563 inÂ Books > History > Middle East > Iraq

Customer Reviews

Asne Seierstad is a brave woman. In this book, she recounts her one hundred and one days in Iraq. The duration spans from before the American invasion/liberation, to a few days after the US "won" the war. Pre, during, and post. Each of the three periods saw its share of hurdles, as Seierstad recalls with journalistic detail (but novelistic prose). Before the war, the trouble was finding a story at

all. She was, at all times, to be accompanied by an interpreter who often served to censor what she could approach and what she could say while also intimidating the interviewee to bite their tongue. In a country where everyone says they love Saddam using the exact same slogans, how can one get a story? It is obvious the pitfalls of being smack-dab in the center of Baghdad during an American invasion. Seierstadt recounts her torn feelings about staying and leaving. On the one hand, an obligation to inform. On the other, an instinct towards self-preservation. While she only stayed a few days into the aftermath of the US "victory," the trouble now was getting the story right. Some praised the US; some were angry at them. Most hated Saddam after all; a few extolled him. Instead of not having a story, the problem now was that everyone - with their new found freedom - could not wait to talk. Seierstad recounts all of this in what feels somewhere between a personal interest story and a suspense novel. In between her recollection, she interfuses the pieces she wrote as a newspaper reporter. As she says many times throughout the book, her primary aim was to get at the human story behind the geopolitics. She does a good job of it.

Although this is not the caliber of Seierstad's *THE BOOKSELLER OF KABUL*, this is still a strong piece of non-fiction. Seierstad is a Norwegian reporter who eventually ends up reporting for almost 8 news groups before, during, and after America's war in Iraq. Seierstad's tone is engaging, her writing clear concise and tight. Perhaps the most interesting section of the book is the part entitled "Before," because when she first arrives, instead of interviewing people and getting them to tell her about their hate of the regime, she is made to go on "tourist" trips. She goes to Saddam's Art Centre, a museum that houses two floors devoted to the former Iraqi President. She interviews a man who only paints the President in different poses, a man that has memorized Saddam's face and can paint it by memory. When asked if he gets bored always painting the same subject he retorts, "Our president is a continuous source of inspiration," a reflection of the Iraqi attitude, or at least the required attitude of every Iraqi under Saddam. Seierstad's interpreter Aliya is a true believer in Saddam and does not waver in her belief until after Baghdad has been taken and she is able to walk with Seierstad through Saddam's palace in Baghdad. An American soldier is their "tour guide" and grills Aliya with questions and then says, "Your president waltzed around under crystal chandeliers while you guys didn't even have clean water!" Aliya only responded with "Hm." The night before Seierstad leaves Iraq, Aliya says, "People say he never cared about us...They say he only cared about himself." Seierstad shows the fear under which the Iraqi people lived, their inability to contradict the decisions of their leader for fear of disappearing in the night.

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