



Reading Group Gold

Born Under A Million Shadows

Andrea Busfield

Andrea Busfield's Kabul Chronicles

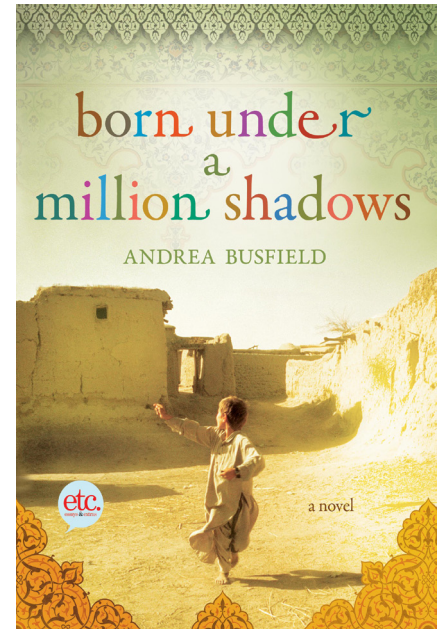
Until recently, I lived in Kabul. To the outside world, Afghanistan's capital was a city creeping into lawlessness. The Taliban had burst back onto the scene with a series of headline-grabbing suicide attacks. According to reports, Kabul's expatriate community was living in fear, barricaded behind bomb-proof barriers, inside fortified compounds. But the reality was very different. Kabul was fun.

After shaking off the shackles of the fundamentalist regime following 9/11, the capital pulsed with life and possibility. Young men no longer hid handsome faces under fist-length beards. Afghan women were able to walk the city freely, to get an education, and to work for the first time in years. Shopping malls mushroomed, restaurants grew in sophistication, bars opened for business, and Western NGO workers and security personnel descended on the city in their thousands. Afghanistan promised opportunity, tax-free wages, and excitement—and Kabul offered postwar thrills with few of the risks of Baghdad.

In 2005, I applied for and won the post of print editor on the fortnightly newspaper Sada-e Azadi (The Voice of Freedom). The publication was a hearts- and-minds exercise financed by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The premise was simple: sixteen pages documenting the reconstruction effort in order to bolster support for the government and its military backers. In reality, most Afghans dismissed it for the propaganda it so evidently was and used it to line vegetable boxes and drafty windows. The job was a means to an end—I had been itching to move to Afghanistan ever since I was sent by a British newspaper to cover the War on Terror. From the moment I set foot on Afghan soil, I was hooked; the country was breathtakingly beautiful and its people proud, fierce, and gallant. By the time I moved to Kabul, the place felt like home.

I was well aware of the challenges I might face as a Western woman in an Islamic country precariously balanced between recovery and relapse. I always took care to respect the customs and I also learned the language. Most ordinary Afghans were not even remotely hostile to Westerners. When men stared at me in the street, it was out of curiosity, not malevolence. I was never made to feel unwelcome or vulnerable, which is why I declined the free accommodation offered behind the barbed-wire walls of the ISAF headquarters. I planned to spend at least two years in Afghanistan and sharing a metal container with another expatriate was not the way I planned to do it. So I hired a driver, employed a cook, and moved to a house on Lane 2, off Street 15, in Wazir Akbar Khan, a relatively plush suburb that was home to embassies, NGO compounds, and good restaurants.

By the time I moved in, spring had arrived and I was as happy as I'd ever been. I had a much-longed-for puppy, Blister; a two-story home opposite a Thai restaurant; a man to cook and "guard" the place; a decent job; and a mobile phone that buzzed with gossip and invitations. Kabul gave me a life I could



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never have dreamed of. Which is not to say that it didn't have its difficulties.

In Kabul, electricity was a rare visitor that appeared for five hours a night every forty-eight hours—or every seventy-two hours when the rivers ran dry and the hydroelectricity dams shuddered to a halt. As a consequence, the capital hummed with the constant buzz of generators, which invariably broke down or ran out of fuel when you needed them most.

Being 5,900 feet above sea level, the winters were exceptionally harsh, hitting -20°C outside and -15°C inside. Pipes would freeze, water had to be drawn from a well, toilets were flushed manually using a bucket, and heating was a source of frustration and danger. One night, my diesel fire exploded, startling my dog and me, as well as the guards from the compound next door. They came running to help, suspecting some fiendish Taliban plot, only to find me in my pajamas, my face smeared with black soot, watching my crippled bukhari (stove) burn out.

Once the snow thawed and the sun came out, everyone followed it. In the center of town, Chicken Street would wriggle with Westerners bartering over Persian carpets, scarves, pakoul hats, and antique guns dating back to the Afghan-Anglo wars.

On nonwork days, I would meet up with my best friends—Frauke, thirty-nine, a Dutch woman working for an NGO promoting textile and cashmere projects, and Rachel, thirty-five, a BBC producer. We would do lunch at Le Bistro before trawling the shops for new scarves, tunics, cosmetics, and toiletries, all the while followed by a small posse of children offering their services as bodyguards or bag carriers. But it was when the sun set and the call to prayer died on the breeze that the city turned magical. Shops decked with fairy lights and brightly colored bulbs gave evenings a festive air; smoking charcoal from kebab stalls wafted along pathways; and, from Wazir Akbar Khan to Shahr-e Naw to Qala-e Fatullah, Land Cruisers clogged the streets, ferrying people to dinner invitations, restaurants, and bars.

At night, we would discard our headscarves, rearrange our cleavages, apply our lipstick, and head for favorite spots such as the restaurant-bars L'Atmosphère, Gandamak, and La Cantina. (Afghanistan is, of course, an Islamic country but the alcohol ban only applies to Muslims. The only rule imposed on Western revelers was one of leaving firearms at the door.) Although spring signaled the start of renewed Taliban assaults—following the traditional hiatus in hostilities over winter—the main topics of conversation among the women I knew involved hairdressers, waxing, and men. Life was normal. Even in Kabul.

A typical day began at seven o'clock, when I would be woken with coffee by my cook, Mohammad Sharif. He lived in a hut at the back of my house. He had asked me for a gun, thinking this would be an easy request given my military contacts, but the most dangerous weapon I allowed on the premises was the gas burner. In Wazir Akbar Khan, the streets crawled with heavily armed guards and I didn't feel it necessary to add to the neighborhood's arsenal.

At 7:45 a.m., I would jump into a Toyota Corolla expertly driven by my driver, Sharabdin, through nightmare traffic jams and sudden road closures, as politicians and dignitaries sprang from one fortified residence to another. If we happened to come across an ISAF patrol, we kept our distance. They were a target for suicide bombers and if they came under attack we might get caught in the crossfire.

By eight o'clock, I would be at ISAF headquarters, attending the "huddle"—a daily meeting to issue



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orders and recount hostile incidents. Following the huddle, work began on the newspaper, but, as the whole publication could be written in two days, time was usually spent debating lunch venues, going for coffee, and scheming up ways to leave the office early.

Occasionally, the UN and the larger NGOs imposed curfews on their staff following Afghan protests triggered by perceived injustices, or after attacks on Westerners. In May 2006, the Afghan government stamped a weeklong curfew on the city after riots broke out following a fatal collision in the north of Kabul involving a U.S. military truck. At the time, rather than being fearful, much of the expatriate community was only irritated by the 10 p.m. lockdown. Most restrictions were short-lived, however, and, within days, L'Atmosphère's swimming pool would again be decorated by women in bikinis.

This wasn't bravado; Kabul veterans honestly believed they had little to fear from insurgents. Although tragedies such as a shooting of a female South African Christian aid worker in the west of the city were not unheard of, they were nevertheless rare events, and quite random. Everyone in Kabul accepted that there was a risk, but most crimes committed against the expatriate community were opportunist, not planned, and therefore the general feeling was one of "wrong place, wrong time." No matter what happened—or to whom—our work continued and the parties never stopped.

I adored Afghanistan. I enjoyed the frantic pace of the city, the enormity of the circling mountains, and the camaraderie I found there. And in the autumn of 2006, something happened for which I was totally unprepared: I fell in love.

Lorenz was a captain in the Austrian army, and he was deployed to the hearts- and-minds section of the ISAF machine. Although I recognized that he was good-looking, he was a soldier and therefore of little interest to me. He was also six foot three with blond hair and blue eyes: not my type. Then one Thursday night, I pitched up at L'Atmosphère and found him drinking beer in civilian clothes. I decided to make him my boyfriend.

For the first time in Afghanistan, I lived my life not as a single woman—dodging curious questions from my Afghan friends about when I planned to marry and have children— but as part of a couple. Despite the threat of an instant disciplinary action—and probable dismissal—Lorenz snuck out of the ISAF camp every night. At 5 a.m., the alarm would sound in my bedroom and he'd pull on his jeans, sit on the bed, snap his gun into its holster, and pull on his T-shirt. Although Mohammad Sharif was initially aghast at having a man staying overnight, he soon grew fond of Lorenz—no doubt because he possessed his own gun.

While Lorenz was in Kabul, it was like seeing the city with new eyes. We hired a Land Cruiser and drove the tourist trail, visiting the bombed-out shell of Darul Aman Palace, the spectacularly renovated Babur's Garden, and the Shah M bookstore (of The Bookseller of Kabul fame). We spent every evening together and our nights keeping each other warm through the long freeze of winter. By the time Lorenz had to leave, I knew my time in Kabul was coming to an end. I loved the city, but I also loved him. And so in January 2008, I resigned from my job and began the sad work of saying good-bye—to my friends, expatriate and Afghan, and to Kabul. However, in that same month, gunmen attacked the supposedly bombproof Serena Hotel. Six people died and six others were injured. The incident threw a grenade into the lap of the expatriate community. Embassies and NGOs imposed immediate lockdowns, only allowing staff out on "mission-critical" business, and the city turned into a ghost town.



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Leaving now felt like a betrayal. I spent my last few days walking my dog, as I had always done, along Wazir Akbar Khan's streets—causing one of my exasperated friends (the country manager of a risk control company) to send me a map of the embassies and NGO compounds in my area that were deemed to be bomb targets, entitled “Andrea's IED [Improvised Explosive Device] Dog-Walking Route.”

As I divided my furniture between Mohammad Sharif and Sharabdin, I was filled with sorrow. I was leaving a country that felt like home at a time when she needed all the support she could get. Afghanistan had been generous to me. I went there single and curious, and I left two and a half years later richer and wiser, with a dog and a boyfriend. One day, I will return—and perhaps with the husband and children my Afghan friends so dearly wish to see me with. Inshallah.

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A Conversation With Andrea Busfield

Born Under a Million Shadows came out of the two and a half years you spent living in Kabul. Was there a specific child who was the inspiration for Fawad? If so, could you tell us more about him?

If you are a first-time visitor to Kabul it is almost certain that you will be befriended by a child—they are everywhere. This is, of course, a sad indication of where the city is at, since all of these children will be asking you for bakhsheesh (charity). Anywhere there is an abundance of U.S. dollars—from the military bases and foreign embassies to the tourist hub of Chicken Street—you will find groups of youngsters “working” to feed their families. As a rule, the kids are pleasant, charming, and hugely entertaining. They also speak ridiculously good English.

The first time I set foot on Chicken Street, I was befriended by an eight-year-old boy called Fawad who presented himself as my “bodyguard” and who insisted on carrying my bags as I moved from store to store. Right from the start, I found Fawad, quite simply, amazing. A beautiful-looking boy with an easy smile, he worked the foreigners with his friends under the watchful eye of his older brothers and widowed mother. The family was obviously poor, yet Fawad was always a ray of sunshine. His love of life was astonishing—and incredibly humbling.

Therefore, when I first thought about writing a novel, and more precisely a novel narrated by a young boy, I wanted my hero to be as charming and as intelligent as the real-life Fawad from Chicken Street. This is why I took his name—it is my small tribute to a very special little boy.

Today, Fawad and I are still in regular contact—he calls and lets my phone ring twice before hanging up when he wants to say hello; I then call him back—and, though I've tried to explain why I've used his name in my book, I'm not sure that he realizes what a wonderful impact he had on my life. Hopefully, when he is older he will come to understand that.

The community of expatriates living in Kabul is vividly depicted in your novel, and Georgie and her two roommates are quite involved in their local community. Georgie's romance with Haji Khan is particularly moving. Did you witness many romances between foreigners and Afghans when you lived in



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Kabul?

Although marriages between Afghan men and Western women have been documented, it is by no means the norm. Even though I have heard of relationships taking place, it is rare to witness such affairs because they are conducted in private and well away from the public eye, out of necessity. Afghanistan remains a very conservative society and there are rules to follow, both traditional and religious. There is no dating culture in Kabul!

In my experience, Afghan men are charming, chivalrous, and hard as nails—both inside and out. I know this because I count some of them among my best friends! If a Western woman seriously wanted to enter into marriage with an Afghan man it would be extremely testing—and she would almost certainly have to conform to the strict rules of Afghan society and ideally convert to Islam. However, when you truly love someone anything is possible and, I guess, that's the beauty of it.

On the more general topic of expat relations with Afghans, most of the foreigners I know in Kabul enjoy genuine friendships with the locals they work with or meet by chance. The strict rules that pose such an obstacle to a romantic relationship do not apply to the same degree in a social context. It would be hard to find a more hospitable place on earth than Afghanistan.

One thing your novel explores is how vibrant the city of Kabul is, despite the poverty of many of its residents. When you lived there, was it difficult to face the lack of resources of many of the Afghans? Was it difficult to write about?

I didn't flaunt my comparative wealth while I was in Afghanistan—while some had armored Land Cruisers I traveled in a battered Toyota Corolla. However, it's hard not to feel like a heel when you are being driven to work in the depths of winter and you spy a child walking in the snow in bare feet. The poverty is appalling, but you do what you can to help where you can.

I certainly didn't find it a difficult subject to write about; poverty is a fact of life for the majority. You can't ignore it. Besides, I wanted people to understand how challenging life is for ordinary Afghans. Afghanistan has the world's second-highest infant mortality rate. The average life expectancy is forty-four. This is the reality. The other reality is that Afghans are bewilderingly stoical.

Your work as a journalist has taken you all over the world—what prompted you to turn to writing fiction? Was it a challenging switch for you to make?

I've written for various media outlets, but I also spent nine years working for tabloid newspapers, so some might argue that the transition to fiction wasn't that great a leap to make! Of course, I'd beg to differ.

Like most reporters, I'd always harbored romantic dreams of becoming an author, but it was only in Afghanistan that I seriously decided to have a crack at it. To cut a very long story short, my boyfriend, a captain in the Austrian army, had finished his tour in Kabul—where we met—and I was desperately trying to work out a way to join him in his homeland. (There's not much call for non-German-speaking ex-tabloid hacks in Vienna.) So, one morning I decided I would write a book. I knew it would have to be about Afghanistan because it was a country I had grown to love and one that I felt was little understood. Although there are numerous fantastic history books, travelogues, and novels I wanted to



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capture about the place, I the beauty I found there—the fun, the laughter, the love. Therefore, I opted for a romantic plot and decided it should be narrated by a hero who was still young enough to see the good in life—and bounce back from tragedy. Within forty minutes I'd sketched thirty chapters and that evening I started writing. Four months later the first draft was finished. And two months after that I said good-bye to Kabul.

In all honesty, I found writing *Born Under a Million Shadows* a hugely enjoyable experience. I loved seeing my characters come to life and I wanted people—readers—to care about each and every one of them. It was challenging to consistently write as an eleven-year old boy because there are times when you simply want to show off. However, after a break I'd come back and scrap any pompous pretense of literary greatness and return to character.

What do you hope your readers take away from your novel?

Ultimately, that Afghans are deserving of our continued support—and as the last page turns that they discover a little piece of Afghanistan in their hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. *Born Under a Million Shadows* is narrated by Fawad, a young boy, rather than by an adult. What is the purpose in having the novel narrated from a child's point of view? Are events in the novel clarified or obstructed by the use of this perspective? Can you think of any examples?
2. How is the Taliban depicted in this novel? Did the novel change your perceptions of the Taliban? Of the Afghan people?
3. Fawad, Jamilla, and Spandi are very close friends. Does their friendship help to protect them from some of the dangers of Kabul? How does poverty affect their bond?
4. What are some of the major differences between Afghan and Western societies shown in the novel? Are there certain aspects of Afghan society (its famous hospitality or deference to elders, for example) that you'd like to see more of in Western society? What about vice versa?
5. Ismerai tells Fawad, "Education is the key to Afghanistan's successful future." The importance of education is one of the novel's main themes—how is this shown? What does Georgie do that makes this clear? What about Pir Hederi, Haji Khan, or Shir Ahmad?
6. The "foreigners" in the novel form a close friendship—a family, really—despite being from different backgrounds and having differing opinions. Do you think their bond is stronger than it might have been otherwise because of their expatriate status? Have you ever made friends with someone you might not have usually because you found yourself in the same position as that person?
7. Fawad notes that "Afghanistan is famous for two things: fighting and growing poppies." Jahid declares, "This 'stop growing poppy' shit is the West's problem, not ours." Do you think that's true? Would Afghanistan be better off without poppy farming, or is it merely the West's "war on drugs"?



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that has made poppy farming so contentious? How is drug use portrayed in the novel?

8. What role does Fawad's stabbing of Philippe play in the novel? Is it just comic relief or is it more than that?
9. Haji Khan and Georgie's love affair is one of the central points of the novel. Do you think they're meant to be together? Did your opinion of their love change as the novel progressed? Can two people from totally different worlds really put their differences aside and live happily ever after? Do you think you would be able to make the sacrifices Georgie makes for Haji Khan or the sacrifices he makes for her?
10. What role does religion play in the novel? Georgie calls herself a "Godless kafir" at one point, but by the novel's end she has professed her belief and converted to Islam. Do you think that she truly believes?
11. How does Spandi's death affect Fawad? Fawad says, "Although more than half of my family had gone the same way, it had never seemed real." Can you remember the first time death seemed real to you?
12. How does the ending reinforce some of the novel's major themes? Is it an ending worthy of Laila and Majnun, the couple in Jamilla's mother's story? Do you think it's a hopeful ending—not just for the characters of the novel but also for Afghanistan?

Five Books Andrea Busfield Can't Live Without

An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan
by Jason Elliot

This is a remarkable and beautifully written account of Elliot's travels in Afghanistan, first in the midst of the Soviet occupation and then during the emergence of the Taliban. It is one of the few books I have read twice and it's like falling into a vat of chocolate—luxurious, lyrical, and deeply satisfying. There are also some laugh-out-loud moments such as Elliot's wonderful examination of Afghanistan's relationship with her neighbors.

Emergency Sex (and Other Desperate Measures)
by Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait, and Andrew Thomson

I started reading this shortly after moving to Kabul and almost regretted not having gone to university—a largely insurmountable barrier to joining the United Nations. The book is the work of three civilians who worked for the UN and the Red Cross and who first met in Cambodia. It is a wonderful, fast-paced, and often humorous account of their growing friendship against a backdrop of some of the world's worst war zones. At times funny, shocking, and tragic, it is a very personal story that left me inspired.

Kestrel for a Knave
by Barry Hines



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This is the first book that broke my heart. It's the tale of a disillusioned teenager growing up in a small Yorkshire mining town who finds a kestrel hawk he names Kes. It's a slim novel that grabs you instantly and leaves you battered. I read it in one sitting and twenty years later just thinking about it raises the hairs on my neck.

Birds Without Wings
by Louis de Bernières

If I am writing, about to start writing, or even thinking about writing, I absolutely do not, under any circumstances, pick up a Louis de Bernières novel. Quite simply, I think the man's a genius and I suspect a part of me actually wants to be him, albeit with more hair and less manly. *Birds Without Wings* is perhaps my favorite of his novels. Set in the period when the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, the story centers on a small community in southwest Anatolia where Christians and Muslims have peacefully coexisted for centuries—until the outside world intrudes. A long and sometimes complicated tale, this is a novel that requires your absolute attention because there's a cast of characters to get your head around. But, as ever with a Bernières work of art, those who persevere are always rewarded. Tragic and magical.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time
by Mark Haddon

I fell in love with this book on a beach in Tunisia. A quick read packing a massive punch, it's the tale of a teenager with autism who is determined to uncover a crime (the title should give a clue as to what crime has been committed). Engaging and human, it is one of the few books I've read that deserves to be described as hysterically funny. It is a joy from start to finish and in my mind an absolute masterpiece because there's a fine line between laughing at someone and laughing with them, and in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* you are firmly in tune with the hero.



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