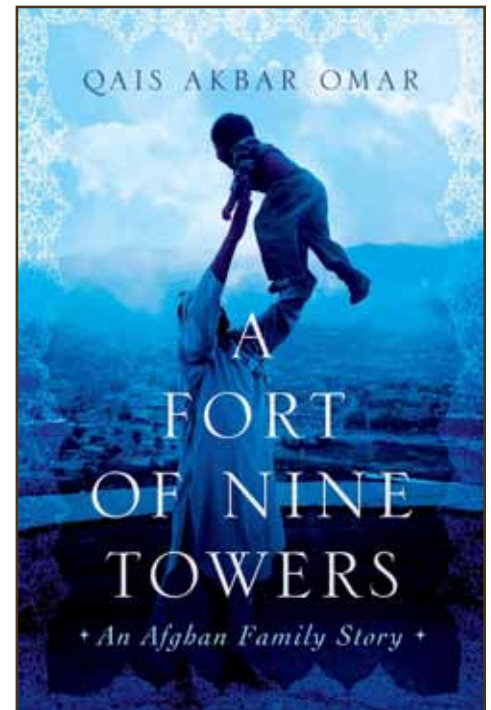


Reading Group Gold

A Fort of Nine Towers

An Afghan Family Story

by Qais Akbar Omar



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One of the rare memoirs of Afghanistan to have been written by an Afghan, *A Fort of Nine Towers* reveals the richness and suffering of life in a country whose history has become deeply entwined with our own.

For the young Qais Akbar Omar, Kabul was a city of gardens where he flew kites from his grandfather's roof with his cousin Wakeel while their parents, uncles, and aunts drank tea around a cloth spread in the grass. It was a time of telling stories, reciting poetry, selling carpets, and arranging marriages. Then civil war exploded. Their neighborhood found itself on the front line of a conflict that grew more savage by the day.

With rockets falling around them, Omar's family fled, leaving behind everything they owned to take shelter in an old fort—only a few miles distant and yet a world away from the gunfire. As the violence escalated, Omar's father decided he must take his children out of the country to safety. On their perilous journey, they camped in caves behind the colossal Buddha statues in Bamyan, and took refuge with nomad cousins, herding their camels and sheep. While his father desperately sought smugglers to take them over the border, Omar grew up on the road, and met a deaf-mute carpet weaver who would show him his life's purpose.

Later, as the Mujahedin war devolved into Taliban madness, Omar learned about quiet resistance. He survived a brutal and arbitrary imprisonment, and, at eighteen, opened a secret carpet factory to provide work for neighborhood girls, who were forbidden to go to school or even to leave their homes. As they tied knots at their looms, Omar's parents taught them literature and science.

In this stunning coming-of-age memoir, Omar recounts terrifyingly narrow escapes and absurdist adventures, as well as moments of intense joy and beauty. Inflected with folktales, steeped in poetry, *A Fort of Nine Towers* is a life-affirming triumph.

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We hope that the following discussion topics will enhance your reading group's experience of this deeply moving journey.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Qais Akbar Omar's portrait of his homeland change your understanding of Afghanistan and the presence of American troops there?
2. How did the author's descriptions of Kabul compare to your previous assumptions?
3. What does hospitality mean to Afghans? What does it mean to you?
4. On pages 121–122, Omar's cousin Wakeel offers a poignant description of what makes Omar's father an ideal parent. How does Omar himself characterize his mother and his father? How do his perceptions of them shape his experiences?
5. How is the author's relationship with his parents similar to or different from the relationships between parents and children in the West? What about the relationship between the author and his grandfather?
6. Omar's grandfather was a deeply moral man whose ability to see peace and wisdom in all things allowed him to flourish. Which of Grandfather's lessons will remain with you?
7. In chapter 11, "My Teacher," Omar is awakened to carpet-making as an art form and a cultural legacy, and he receives lessons in business as well. What is his teacher able to communicate to him that no one had shown him before?
8. Born in 1982, Omar has already experienced many lifetimes of loss and restoration. What do his memories tell us about spiritual and emotional abundance in the face of destruction? What marked his transformation from boyhood to adulthood?
9. How do the responsibilities of a sixteen-year-old Afghan boy compare to those of his Western counterpart?
10. Discuss the women we meet in *A Fort of Nine Towers*. How do Omar's mother and sisters compare to the images of Afghan women you have seen in the media? How do they compare to American women?
11. More than once, Omar and his loved ones are saved by individuals who appreciate the lineage or reputation of their family. What else contributes to their survival? What separates survivors from those who perish? Fate alone? Can you imagine how you might fare under similar circumstances?

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12. In chapter 6, “Under the Earth,” Omar and his father are saved by a young Hazara who goes by the name Berar (Brother), who kills a brutal commander and apologizes for the suffering he caused. Earlier, when Omar and his grandfather are spared by a Hazara commander who turns out to be a former student of Omar’s father, that commander justifies the horrors unleashed by his people: “We Hazaras have been treated like slaves in this country” (page 86). He goes on to describe the ways in which the Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Panjshiri warlord Masoud have harmed his loved ones. Ultimately, where is the line between a quest for vengeance and a thirst for violence? Is there a line between them? Is it possible to keep retaliation from escalating?
13. Discuss Omar’s deepening understanding of Islam. How does his faith evolve?
14. When Omar’s family adapts to Kuchi (nomad) ways in chapter 12, “Caravan,” what rewards do they discover in living off the natural world?
15. How did Omar’s story enhance your understanding of the Taliban’s rise to power? Discuss your reactions to the decrees outlined in chapter 17, “A New Kind of Justice.”
16. How is Omar affected by the chemistry teacher’s experience captured in chapter 19, “A Precious Jewel”? What does she teach him about the best and worst of human nature?
17. On page 367, Omar’s father explains his abrupt decision to stay in Afghanistan after the American invasion: “We have a long tradition of raiding and plundering each other. But two things unite us: love for Allah, and hatred for our invaders and enemies.” This statement echoes Omar’s words in the prologue, as he contemplates how to explain to his aunt, who lives in Canada, that he wants to stay in Afghanistan. Do you feel a similar connection to your homeland? Would you be able to stay, regardless of the danger?
18. What do you make of the difference between the Afghan custom for many generations of a family to live together and the Western tendency for adults to live independently?
19. How much or in what way has *A Fort of Nine Towers* changed your perception of Afghanistan and of Afghans?

PRAISE FOR *A FORT OF NINE TOWERS*

“In this stark, unflinching memoir, Qais Akbar Omar illuminates the beauty and tragedy of a country pushed to the brink by war. *A Fort of Nine Towers* gives voice to the unbreakable spirit of the Afghan people.” —G. Willow Wilson, author of *Alif the Unseen*

“Omar tells this staggering true story of a life and a land of radiance and terror with magnificent humility, grace, and power . . . He renders every facet with . . . glorious precision and [a] rich palette.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

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“At a time when Afghanistan threatens to recede into a bloody and debased footnote, Qais Akbar Omar reminds us of the honor and courage of his people. A remarkable feat of memory and imagination.” —Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, author of *The Watch* and *The Storyteller of Marrakesh*

“As lyrical as it is haunting, this mesmerizing, not-to-be-missed debut memoir is also a loving evocation of a misunderstood land and people . . . A gorgeously rich tapestry of an amazing life and culture.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“From squatting inside a cave in the head of a Bamyān Buddha to escaping torture at the teeth of a dog and his master, Qais Akbar Omar’s tale of one family’s journey during the Afghan civil war is inscriptional: its images carve themselves into the reader’s mind. Unlike most accounts of life in exile, *A Fort of Nine Towers* never leaves Afghanistan, as a boy and his family remain trapped within the nation’s borders by familial ties and by war. This book is essential reading for anyone eager to learn what more than three decades of war have cost the Afghan people.” —Eliza Griswold, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Fault Line Between Christianity and Islam*

“[Qais Akbar Omar’s] prose is deliciously forthright, extravagant, and somewhat mischievous, and very Afghan in its sense of long-suffering endurance and also reconciliation.” —*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Qais Akbar Omar (whose first name is pronounced “Kice”) manages his family’s carpet business in Kabul and writes books. In 2007, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Colorado. He has studied business at Brandeis University and is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Boston University. Omar has lectured on Afghan carpets in Afghanistan, Europe, and the United States. He is the coauthor, with Stephen Landrigan, of *Shakespeare in Kabul*.

Guide written by Amy Clements