

Reading Group Guide

Introduction

Born into wealth as the daughter of the governor of Kabul, Suraya Sadeed had a peaceful childhood among Afghanistan's elite. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, Suraya, her husband, and their daughter fled the country and came to America, where they built a comfortable life in Virginia. Suraya grew a successful real estate business and settled into the American dream, always focusing on accumulating more: more money, more houses, more belongings.

But when her husband, Dastagir, died unexpectedly one night, Suraya plunged into a depression from which her hard-earned possessions could not rescue her. One evening, still despondent over her husband's death, Suraya saw a news report about the plight of Afghan refugees. Moved by the tragic scenes unfolding in her homeland, Suraya felt a spark of energy break through her shell of depression: she had to do something to help. She collected donations from the tight-knit Afghan-American community in Virginia and promised her supporters that she'd take the aid to the needy displaced people inside Afghanistan, where few other humanitarian workers dared venture.

One trip led to another, and before long Suraya and her new organization, Help the Afghan Children, were building medical clinics and embarking on dangerous missions to deliver aid to the Afghans who needed it most. She kept working through Afghanistan's change of power from the Mujahideen, whose rampant violence made every mission a death-defying one, to the Taliban, whose iron-fisted rulers viciously snuffed out any deviance from their strict Shariah laws. Undeterred even by the Taliban's ban on educating girls and allowing women to work outside the home, Suraya secretly organized a girls'

school in her friend's Kabul basement. Suraya is still working today to bring hope, aid, education, and peace to the people of Afghanistan.

Discussion Questions

1. Suraya described many wrenching, sometimes gruesome scenes in the book. Which ones shocked you the most and stayed with you the longest? In contrast, which parts of the book uplifted you and gave you hope?

2. Were there any moments in the book where you felt you must be reading a novel and not a true account of events? How did the inclusion of the photos shape your experience reading the book?

3. Dastagir was “the person who was always helping others” (17), while Suraya described herself as “the master of material possessions” (74). What do you think helped to bring about Suraya's change of heart?

4. Do you think the fact that Suraya went to Afghanistan partly to mend her own heart makes her mission any less noble? If you're reaping a reward from charity, is it any less altruistic?

5. After having to outsmart Ali, one of the refugee camp administrators, Suraya writes, “I had thought the hardest part of this mission would be raising the money, but Anisa and I

were starting to realize that giving it away could prove equally challenging” (31). Were you surprised by the people trying to manipulate Suraya’s aid missions in Afghanistan for their own benefit?

6. Were you surprised to read that in the 1990s, there were virtually no aid workers in Afghanistan because of the violence? Consider also the fact that there were no other NGOs in the Northern Alliance region of Rostaq after the 1998 earthquake. At what point do you think it’s appropriate for aid workers to withdraw from devastated regions?

7. After Suraya began going on humanitarian trips to Afghanistan, she realized that in the West, “There is always enough. We have enough to help others. Always” (87). Do you feel that you always have enough to help others? Do you regularly donate to charity? Why or why not?

8. Suraya describes watching the first explosions of the U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan and thinking, “For the cost of one of those [American] bombing runs, I doubtless could have fed and clothed and cared for those 100,000 displaced people. For the cost of another bombing run I likely could have educated their children” (243). What do you consider to be an ideal balance between foreign military and aid spending? Do you think the United States has a moral responsibility to spend money on international military operations, aid operations, or both?

9. Suraya writes on p. 272, “A purely military solution had never worked here, and any war effort would have to be combined with diplomacy. For the sake of [. . .] the Afghan people, we needed to talk. And if necessary, we needed to talk with some elements of the Taliban.” Do you agree that America should talk with the Taliban? Do you think it will ever actually happen? Consider Suraya’s discussion with the American intelligence expert on p. 276 as well.

10. Consider the following mantras that Dr. Abdullah and Sabera told Suraya in moments of frustration and despair: “Where there is life, there is hope,” from Dr. Abdullah (83), and “Drop by drop a river forms,” from Sabera (14). Which one most closely describes your feelings about Suraya’s aid work, and your understanding of humanitarian missions, after reading this book?

11. In the book’s Afterword, Suraya recommends that Afghanistan adopt a neutral political status while the international community pledges to protect its borders, similar to Switzerland’s status in Europe. What do you make of this proposal?