



Audio essayist: Tamim Ansary

Title: A novelist's tale of Afghanistan in 1841

Duration: 4 minutes, 59 seconds

About this transcript

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

Introduction

In 1877, Harper's Weekly published a knowing cartoon by Thomas Nast that shows European and Russian military generals dividing up the map of Afghanistan for themselves.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Tamim Ansary talks about *The Widow's Husband*, a novel set in a mid-nineteenth-century Afghan village that looks at the imperial battle for control of Afghanistan from an Afghan point of view.

Presentation

The story is set in a small village in northern Afghanistan. It begins in the year 1841. You know, the British attempted their first occupation of Afghanistan



beginning in 1838 and it ended catastrophically at the beginning of 1842.

What happened in 1838 to 1842, that first British occupation, was Afghanistan became the field of competition between the power of the south, which happened at that point to be Britain, and the power of the north, which happened at that point to be the Soviet Union [that is, Russia]. And for both of those powers, control of Afghanistan meant either gaining access to or losing access to the rich plains of India and the ports on the Indian Ocean.

Those were the stakes in 1841.

But in the village of Char Bagh, where my story begins, the people are not aware that the British are even in the country, and they're not even aware that the king has been replaced.

Generally, in Afghanistan, a small town like that would be so cut off from the capital that they're completely involved in their very own small local affairs. And the big event for them locally is that a mysterious figure has



wandered over the hill and parked himself on the slopes overlooking the village.

You know, in Afghanistan and in the Muslim world generally, at least in that part of the Muslim world, there are these figures who are called malangs, and they're people who are suddenly taken with a passion forgot and they abandon all their possessions and just go wandering off and become essentially homeless vagabonds. Of course, there's always the question of the vagabonds, is this one of those spiritually intoxicated madmen or is this some crazy guy who has lost his wits?

So that discussion breaks out about this guy who's wandered into Char Bagh. And as it happens, Ibrahim, the head man of this village, is a person who is tormented by spiritual longing. And he's the only guy in the village who can read. He learned it from his father who learned it from his father. And he has 20 or 30 books, but he has no one to talk to about them. So he gloms on to the mysterious figure, and he makes himself the acolyte.

At the same time, he's having to deal with the fact that he's a young man who has accidentally happened into being



the head man of this village. His brother, a much older guy, was the head man. He died. Our main character is in love with his brother's widow. And according to the mores of that area, it actually would be not only his right but his obligation to marry her. He already has a wife, but that's okay. He's entitled to have a second one.

But there's politics of the domestic scene in Afghanistan in these situations. And to marry this woman, there are many ramifications. There's people who oppose it. There's this mother-in-law. And so there are reasons why he can't do that.

So this bundle of dramatic events are going on, just when, for separate reasons, the British authority in Kabul decides to put a watch on this village because they have a suspicion there may be a conspirator here who can be held responsible for the growing insurgency in the country. And then as a result of that, the people of Char Bagh get drawn into this big historical event which is the first Afghan British war.

And some of our characters end up in Kabul and our main character, Ibrahim, ends up in the passes of the Hindu Kush



where the entire British mission finally came to a disastrous end. So that's in sum what the novel is about.

Valedictory

You can hear a longer version of this episode at www.bookpod.wordpress.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value