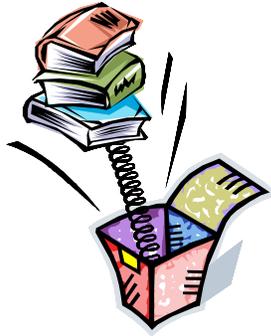




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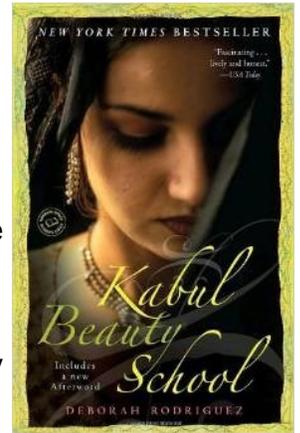


Book Club in a Box

KABUL BEAUTY SCHOOL

About the Book

Soon after the fall of the Taliban, in 2001, Deborah Rodriguez went to Afghanistan as part of a group offering humanitarian aid to this war-torn nation. Surrounded by men and women whose skills—as doctors, nurses, and therapists—seemed eminently more practical than her own, Rodriguez, a hairdresser and mother of two from Michigan, despaired of being of any real use. Yet she soon found she had a gift for befriending Afghans, and once her profession became known she was eagerly sought out by Westerners desperate for a good haircut and by Afghan women, who have a long and proud tradition of running their own beauty salons. Thus an idea was born. With the help of corporate and international sponsors, the Kabul Beauty School welcomed its first class in 2003. Well meaning but sometimes brazen, Rodriguez stumbled through language barriers, overstepped cultural customs, and constantly juggled the challenges of a postwar nation even as she learned how to empower her students to become their families' breadwinners by learning the fundamentals of coloring techniques, haircutting, and makeup. Yet within the small haven of the beauty school, the line between teacher and student quickly blurred as these vibrant women shared with Rodriguez their stories and their hearts *Kabul Beauty School* is a remarkable tale of an extraordinary community of women who come together and learn the arts of perms, friendship, and freedom.



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About the Author



When I was fifteen, I went to beauty school because I figured that I could put myself through college by doing hair. At that time though, I didn't want to be a hairdresser. I saw how hard my mother worked and how tired she was at night, and besides, I had decided then that my calling was in music. I took piano lessons since I was five and although my mother wanted me to take ballet, too, that only lasted a day--I was too big, couldn't balance myself on one leg, and couldn't fit into a tutu. But I loved music and stuck with it. In high school, I played the piano, organ, guitar and trumpet. I liked singing, too, and thought I was good at it, so I enrolled at John Brown College in Arkansas as a vocal performance major. But when I got there and sang along with other students, I realized pretty quickly that I wasn't cut out for it. I de-

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veloped nodules on my vocal chords; when I sang Italian opera, I sounded like James Brown singing Italian opera. So I tried my hand at becoming a band director, but after many embarrassing moments in class, it was clear that I couldn't keep a beat well enough to lead a band.

So I returned to Michigan and worked in my mother's salon. I got married when I was young and stupid and had two beautiful boys, Noah and Zachary. My husband and I were both young and stupid, and we soon got restless and bored with each other. I remember crying in my mother's living room at 26, and asking her what was wrong with me. I had everything a woman was supposed to want—a husband, children, a good job, a nice house and car, but I was miserable. I guess it's no surprise that I was soon a single mom.

One day, one of the salon customers talked about the medium-security prison opening up in the area. I had wondered what it would be like to work someplace where there were actually health insurance and benefits, and this customer told me that the prison was offering both. So I applied for a job and planned to do hair on the side. Since I hadn't finished my bachelor's degree, the only position I qualified for was prison guard. How bad could it be, I thought... Turned out it was pretty bad.

It wasn't long until I quit the prison and on the day I left an inmate said "Good luck, Miss Debbie, you're going to have a good life now."

The good life. What did that mean to me? I liked traveling, but I'd quickly lose interest with the tourist destinations my friends talked me into and would wind up spending time in areas the tourists shunned. When I went to Jamaica, I was bored with jetskis and drinking margaritas on the beach of a walled-off hotel, so I grabbed a bus into town. I wound up meeting a twenty-year old mother with five kids who invited me to her home where we ate soup made with not much more than fish bones. I spent the week visiting her, bringing diapers and groceries—and that's where I felt content.

That was when I started doing what I like to call "vacation with a purpose."

For as long as I can remember, I've been called "Crazy Deb". It was Crazy Deb with the weird hair-

styles, long nails and all that movie-star makeup; Crazy Deb with the boat and the all-night parties; Crazy Deb who worked in the prison and was even friends with some of the inmates. You'd hear, "I'm getting my hair cut next week—you know, by Crazy Deb." I soon became Crazy Deb, the one who traveled around the world to work on humanitarian projects. My first time in India, I traveled from village to village with a friend helping people put in new wells that could sustain them through a drought as their old wells had dried up.

When I finally left for Afghanistan in May 2002, I had no idea that I'd still be there in a couple of years doing spiral perms and introducing the art of foiling. I had taken emergency and disaster relief training two months before 9-11 with a nonprofit organization called the Care For All Foundation and had pleaded for a place on the first team that the organization sent to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. When we arrived in the country, it was worse than I could have imagined. Everything seemed broken - buildings, roads, homes, families and individuals. Thus began the most unlikely story of a lost hairdresser in Kabul, who helped build a beauty school for women and a life of her own amidst the rubble. It wasn't a perfect life, but it was a life I loved nonetheless, in a salon where all women were welcome, regardless of hairstyle, color or baggage. The rest isn't just history, better yet, it's theirs and my story.

<http://www.debbierodriguez.com/mystory.php>

Further Reading

If you liked *Kabul Beauty School*, you might like:

Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China

by Leslie T. Chang

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls

Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Discussion Questions

1. We so often think of ourselves as more socially advanced than Middle Eastern nations. What does it say about this assumption that the author was treated by a preacher husband in the US the same way that Nahhida, wife of a Taliban member, is treated in Afghanistan?
2. Did Debbie take a chance of repeating her abusive history by marrying a relatively unknown man from a culture with a reputation for mistreating women?
3. Were you shocked when she revealed that her husband had another wife?
4. Why do you think Debbie was so emotional upon meeting Sam's father? Would you have been eager to meet him or preferred not to? Were you surprised at his reaction?
5. As a mother of two, was Debbie irresponsible in taking risks like crossing the Khyber pass and confronting her neighbors? Should she have gone to Afghanistan at all, knowing the conditions in the country?
6. Debbie's "bad" neighbors were potentially dangerous. What would you have done in her situation? How would the ineffectiveness of the local police make you feel?
7. Was it foolish for Debbie to continue running the beauty school in the face of government interference and hostility?
8. Debbie goes to Afghanistan in order to change the lives of women there and give them greater power in their personal lives, a mission that she has fulfilled for many women. How have these women changed her?
9. Does the example of a strong self-sufficient woman Debbie sets for the Afghan women provide them with helpful inspirations or does it set a dangerous precedent, encouraging them to model behaviors and aspirations that might be dangerous to them in their environment?
10. Would you have let a known Taliban member and opium addict at that, stay under your roof in order to help his wife? How dangerous do you think this decision really was?
11. Why do you think Hama was unable to follow through and accept the generous offer of a place to live and a new life in the US?
12. How would you have reacted if your son offered to marry Hama? Would you have encouraged him? Argued against it?
13. How do you think the American women are similar to or different from the Afghan women Debbie befriended and works with?
14. Did it surprise you to read about some of the frank discussions and depictions of sex among the Afghan women at the beauty salon and the wedding that Debbie attended?
15. Do you think it was wise for Debbie to help Roshanna escape detections as a non-virgin on her wedding night? Would you have chosen to interfere? Why or why not?