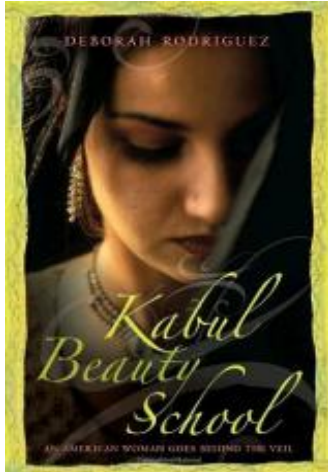


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# Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil

by Deborah Rodriguez and Kristin Ohlson

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## 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: the newlywed who faked her virginity on her wedding night, the twelve-year-old bride sold into marriage to pay her family's debts, the Taliban member's wife who pursued her training despite her husband's constant beatings. Through these and other stories, Rodriguez found the strength to leave her own unhealthy marriage and allow herself to love again, Afghan style.

With warmth and humor, Rodriguez details the lushness of a seemingly desolate region and reveals the magnificence behind the burqa. **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.

## Discussion Guide

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 inspiration 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 American women are similar to and, at the same time, 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 detection as a non-virgin on her wedding night? Would you have chosen to interfere? Why or why not?

## Author Bio

Deborah Rodriguez is the author of the nonfiction *New York Times* bestseller *KABUL BEAUTY SCHOOL* and the internationally bestselling novel *THE LITTLE COFFEE SHOP OF KABUL*. The hairdresser and motivational speaker was a cofounder and director of the first modern beauty academy in Afghanistan, and also founded the nonprofit Oasis Rescue. She lives in Mazatlán, Mexico, where she own Tippy Toes salon and spa. Her latest book is *MARGARITA WEDNESDAYS: Making a New Life by the Mexican Sea*.

## Critical Praise

"Rodriguez writes an eye-opening and heart rendering story of tenacity and courage as she empowers, employs and enriches the women of Kabul to run their own beauty parlor businesses. In her writing she gives a new voice to the people of Afghanistan. You will finish it and want to meet her!"

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