
March

by Geraldine Brooks

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“Sidelights”

Geraldine Brooks the author (not to be confused with Geraldine Brooks the film and stage actress) has won awards for her Mid-East correspondence for the Wall Street Journal, which included covering the Persian Gulf War. She channeled a unique part of that experience into her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. When Brooks first arrived in the Middle East she felt cut off, as a female correspondent, from much of Muslim society. But she turned that liability into an advantage when she donned the hijab (the black veil worn by most Muslim women in the Middle East) and thereby enabled herself to penetrate the cloistered world of Muslim women.

The title of *Nine Parts of Desire* comes from an interpretation of the Koran offered by the Shiite branch: “Almighty God created sexual desires in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men.” As Laura Shapiro, writing for *Newsweek* commented, “Good enough reason to keep women under wraps.” But Brooks uncovered a complex picture in her investigation of Muslim women’s lives that goes beyond the Western assumption of women’s oppression and isolation from public life.

Brooks interviews a wide range of Muslim women, from belly dancers to housewives, and from activists to female army recruits; her list of interviewees includes Queen Noor of Jordan and Ayatollah Khomeini’s daughter. Her discoveries are fascinating and wide-ranging, if sometimes contradictory. According to Brooks, wrote Booklist contributor Mary Ellen Sullivan, sexual gratification is considered “an inherent right” for Muslim women, but genital mutilation is still a common practice. It may surprise some Americans to read that women fare better in Iran than the rest of the Middle East. Brooks explains, “To Muslim women elsewhere... the Iranian woman riding to work on her motorbike, even with her billowing chador gripped firmly in her teeth, looks like a figure of envy.” By wearing the chador herself, Brooks discovers a camaraderie among the women that she has experienced elsewhere, as when she bakes bread with Kurdish women. But when she notices a young boy sampling bits of bread that his sister sweats to make, she sees the negative side of strict sexual divisions as well: “His sister, not much older, was already part of our bread-making assembly line. Why should he learn so young that her role was to toil for his pleasure?”

Reviews of Brooks’s first book were generally very positive. Sullivan called Brooks “a wonderful writer and thinker,” noting that her study gives readers new insight into the lives of Muslim women. *Publishers Weekly* called the book a “powerful and enlightening report” that brings Westerners much closer to the reality of Muslim life for women. And Laura Shapiro of *Newsweek* admired the first-hand reporting that led Brooks to an “intimacy with these women [that] made it impossible either to romanticize or to demonize the tradition that ruled them.”

A few years later Brooks followed up her first book with *Foreign Correspondence*, a memoir of her childhood that focuses on the importance of foreign pen pals to her sense of an independent identity and freedom from what she then considered the boring backwater of her hometown, Sydney, Australia.

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The frame of the narrative is the approaching death of Brooks's father, which brings her back to Sydney from her life as a foreign correspondent for the Wall Street Journal. While going through family papers she finds letters from pen pals--from as far as the United States, France, and Israel--she had long ago forgotten. Rereading these letters brings her back to her youthful sense of restlessness and early belief that "real life happened in far-off lands." During her childhood and adolescence, the pen pals fulfilled her yearning for the exotic, and gave a sense of breaking away, as Booklist's Donna Seaman commented, from "Australia's mid-century, Anglo-focused insularity." The experience was formative in bringing Brooks to her current position as a traveling journalist and "fireman" for the Wall Street Journal (the term identifies journalists who can report on controversial subjects and issues). Brooks's rereading inspired her to look up her old pen pals, and among other things to tell them the story of Joannie, her pen pal from the United States who spent the summer in Switzerland and Martha's Vineyard, but whose glamorous-sounding life ended early from the ravages of anorexia.

Reviews of *Foreign Correspondence* ranged from hot to cold. Seaman termed the book a "magnetic memoir," while Publishers Weekly deemed it "competent but unexciting." A critic for Kirkus Reviews offered unadulterated praise, calling it an "evocative, superbly written tale of a woman's journey to self-understanding."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

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AWARDS

Hal Boyle Award, Overseas Press Club of America, 1990, for the best daily newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad.

CAREER

Journalist. Wall Street Journal, Middle Eastern correspondent, 1988--.

WRITINGS

- Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women, Anchor Books (New York City), 1995.
- Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over, Anchor Books/Doubleday (New York City), 1998.
- Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague, Viking (New York City), 2001.
- March, Viking Press (New York, NY), 2005.
- People of the Book, Viking (New York City), 2008.



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FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, September 15, 1994, p. 88; November 1, 1997, p. 436.
- Kirkus Reviews, November 1, 1997, pp. 1616-1617.
- Newsweek, February 13, 1995, p. 81.
- New York Times Book Review, January 8, 1995, p. 14.
- Publishers Weekly, November 21, 1994, p. 64; October 27, 1997, p. 57.

ONLINE

<http://www.geraldinebrooks.com/> Official website of Geraldine Brooks

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