

Book Club Kits!

THE UNDERGROUND GIRLS OF KABUL



About the Author:

Jenny Nordberg is a New York-based foreign correspondent and a columnist for Swedish national newspaper Svenska Dagbladet. In 2010, she broke the story of "bacha posh" - how girls grow up disguised as boys in gender-segregated Afghanistan. The Page One story was published in The New York Times and The International Herald Tribune, and Nordberg's original research in the piece was used for follow-up stories around the world, as well as opinion pieces and fictional tales.

She has also produced and written several documentaries for American television, about Iraqi refugees, Pakistan's nuclear proliferation and the impact of the global financial crisis in Europe.

Nordberg holds a B.A. in Law and Journalism from Stockholm University, and an M.A. from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

From Goodreads



Inside the kit:

- (8) book copies
- (1) book club guide

About the Book:

In Afghanistan, a culture ruled almost entirely by men, the birth of a son is celebrated but a daughter is often mourned. Yet a third kind of child exists here, in reaction to and subversion of this preference for male offspring—the *bacha posh*, a girl temporarily raised and presented as a boy. Jenny Nordberg, the reporter who broke the story of this phenomenon for the *New York Times*, crafts a powerful and moving account of the people secretly living on the other side of a deeply segregated society where women have very little freedom.

Told with deep insight into everyday Afghan life and anchored by unforgettable characters, *The Underground Girls of Kabul* follows those born as girls but who live as boys through childhood and puberty—only to be forced later to resume their roles as women, entering into marriage and bearing children of their own. Nordberg also offers a new perspective on the extreme sacrifices of women and girls in Afghanistan, set against the violent backdrop of America's longest war, while examining the parallels to *bacha posh* in our own history. *(From the publisher)*

Suggested Reads:

Manoori, Ukmina
I am a Bacha Posh

Armstrong, Sally
Uprising

Hashimi, Nadia
The Pearl that Broke its Shell

Discussion Questions:

1. *The Underground Girls of Kabul* features several women who find ways to resist and subvert power—including Azita, whose status is elevated by disguising her daughter as a son; Mehran, who is able to confidently roughhouse with boys her own age; and Zahra, who fights her parents to maintain her male identity after puberty. Which woman’s story did you find most interesting? Why?
2. Although Afghanistan and its conflicts have been well-covered, the book offers a different entry point into the lives of people there. Before reading this book what (if anything) did you know about Afghanistan? What did you find surprising about the country and its history in reading this book?
3. Do you think the practice of bacha posh is subversive, with the potential to change the strict gender culture of Afghanistan? Or do you see it as women capitulating to and reinforcing a system of segregation?
4. Some of the girls who are raised as bacha posh do not want to go back to living as women. How do you think you would react if you were in their position?
5. The author outlines a pervasive culture of violence and extreme segregation. Which part of the story, if any, made you angry? Why?
6. What historical and current-day parallels to bacha posh, pretending to be someone or something else due to segregation or oppression can you think of: real or fictional, in different countries, for different reasons?
7. Are the lives of Afghan women entirely different from those of women in the West, or do you see similarities in how we behave and how we live? What are those?
8. Do you agree that there is also a “culture of honor” in our society, where girls should be pure and boys should be aggressive and protective? Where do you see examples of that in the reporting of daily news or in your own life?
9. Jenny Nordberg raises questions about whether or not gender is dichotomous, and she even calls bacha posh “a third kind of child”—neither boy nor girl. What do you think: Are we born a certain way or do we become our gender?
10. Under what circumstances would you consider raising a daughter as a son? And in what situation or circumstance could you imagine disguising yourself in exchange for greater freedom?
11. In what way were you treated like a boy or a girl, respectively, when you were little? Were there things you absolutely couldn’t do due to your gender? Do you see a future in which gender roles will be less strict, and how is that a good or a bad thing for men and women?
12. Do you agree with the author’s conclusion that women’s rights are essential to human rights and to building peaceful civilizations? Why or why not?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)