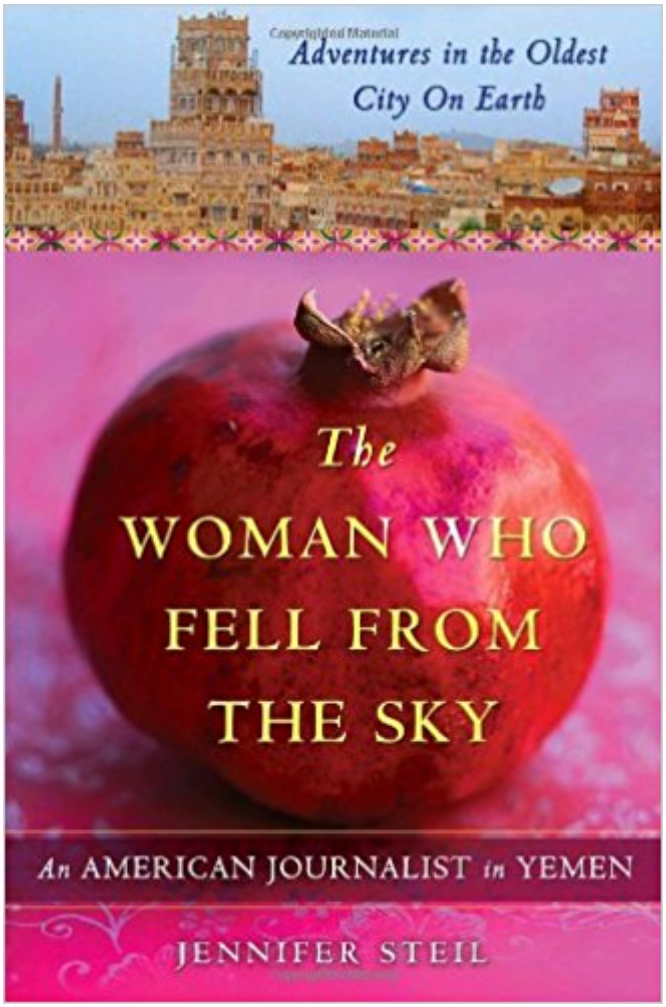
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The Woman Who Fell From The Sky: An American Journalist In Yemen



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Synopsis

Ã Â Ã Â "I had no idea how to find my way around this medieval city. It was getting dark. I was tired. I didnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t speak Arabic. I was a little frightened. But hadnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t I battled scorpions in the wilds of Costa Rica and prevailed? HadnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t I survived fainting in a San JosÃƒÂ© brothel?Ã Â HadnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t I once arrived in Ireland with only $10 in my pocket and made it last two weeks? Surely I could handle a walk through an unfamiliar town. So I took a breath, tightened the black scarf around my hair, and headed out to take my first solitary steps through SanaÃ¢â ¬â„¢a."-- from The Woman Who Fell From The SkyÃ Â In a world fraught with suspicion between the Middle East and the West, it's hard to believe that one of the most influential newspapers in Yemen--the desperately poor, ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden, which has made has made international headlines for being a terrorist breeding ground--would be handed over to an agnostic, Campari-drinking, single woman from Manhattan who had never set foot in the Middle East. Yet this is exactly what happened to journalist, Jennifer Steil. Ã Â Restless in her career and her life, Jennifer, a gregarious, liberal New Yorker, initially accepts a short-term opportunity in 2006 to teach a journalism class to the staff of The Yemen Observer in Sana'a, the beautiful, ancient, and very conservative capital of Yemen. Seduced by the eager reporters and the challenging prospect of teaching a free speech model of journalism there, she extends her stay to a year as the paper's editor-in-chief. But she is quickly confronted with the realities of Yemen--and their surprising advantages.Ã Â In teaching the basics of fair and balanced journalism to a staff that included plagiarists and polemicists, she falls in love with her career again. In confronting the blatant mistreatment and strict governance of women by their male counterparts, she learns to appreciate the strength of Arab women in the workplace. And in forging surprisingly deep friendships with women and men whose traditions and beliefs are in total opposition to her own, she learns a cultural appreciation she never could have predicted.Ã Â WhatÃ¢â ¬â„¢s more, she just so happens to meet the love of her life. Ã Â With exuberance and bravery, The Woman Who Fell from the Sky offers a rare, intimate, and often surprising look at the role of the media in Muslim culture and a fascinatingÃ Â cultural tour ofÃ Â Yemen, one of the most enigmatic countries in the world.

Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages
Publisher: Broadway Books; 1 edition (May 11, 2010)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0767930509

ISBN-13: 978-0767930505

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.2 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 42 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,785,759 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 inÃ Â Books > Travel > Middle East > Yemen #109 inÃ Â Books > Travel > Middle East > Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United-Arab-Emirates & Yemen #595 inÃ Â Books > Travel > Middle East > General

Customer Reviews

Tahir Shah Reviews The Woman Who Fell from the Sky Tahir Shah is the author of The Caliph's House and In Arabian Nights. Read his review of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: Just about everyone I meet is writing a book. At parties and dinners they usually trap me in a corner between a potted plant and a wall, and they harangue me about a their masterwork. As a published author they expect IÃ¢â ¬â„¢ll be able to smooth the way up the long hard slope to Print-hood and success. Most of the time I tell Would-be-writer dinner guests that they're fabulous, and that they're assured easy success, because of their rare and blatant talent. I tell them that because most people only want attention and, when they've been given it, they move on to someone else. Sometimes, at the end of a long evening of being savaged by Would-be-writers, I lash out and hint at the truthÃ¢â ¬â œ-that the first 100,000 words that most people knock out ought to be chucked in the trash right away. ItÃ¢â ¬â„¢s the dirty water that comes through pipes that have never been used. But once in a while you come across an author who hits the mark first off in the most lively, and enlivening way. Jennifer Steil is one such writer. It's clear to me from the first line of her sleek, intelligent and charming book, that she has done her time in that gymnasium of authorship, the newspaper world. There is nothing like it to build the craft, although the majority of writers these days seem to shun it like the plague. As a result, Jennifer doesn't waste words. And, more importantly, she knows how to use them, like a mason selecting the right rock for a spot in a dry stone wall. It would be enough for this first book to be a delight, which it is, but it captures something far deeper and far more poignant. Through it, she has reached the hallowed ground of the most successful travel writers. By this, I mean that she has triumphed in showing a place, revealing the sensibilities of a people and events, through anecdotes rather than direct description. It's something which most writers fail miserably at, but a one that has the ability to depict a society in the most enticing way-Ã¢â ¬â œfrom the inside out. I won't waste space here detailing the ins and outs of Jennifer's story in Yemen, because I coax anyone with an interest in the East-West dynamic to read

her prose for themselves. But I will preface the book by saying that it is an extraordinary achievement: both eloquent and elegant, hilarious in parts but, most of all, sensible to a society so differing from her own. Questions for Jennifer Steil Q: How does writing a memoir compare to writing news stories? A: Writing a memoir is in many ways much easier than writing news stories. News stories require such intensive reporting and running around, and then must be written on very tight deadlines. I had a year to write this book, and nearly another year to edit it, which felt very leisurely to me! Of course the book required research as well, but much of it was based on the daily journals I kept during my first year in Yemen. Writing a memoir is also a much lonelier business than writing news stories. When I am working as a reporter, I am constantly talking with people, either interview subjects or colleagues. Writing a book required long solitary hours in my office, and I found myself longing for someone to talk to at the water cooler! Of course, there are also huge differences in structure. I found myself struggling with the structure of the book, whereas I can fairly easily structure news stories. I figured out the structure the book as I went along--with lots of help from my editors! There are also some commonalities between book writing and news writing. Both memoirs and journalism require scrupulous reporting of facts. I always try to be as honest and fair as possible. A memoir, however, includes plenty of my own opinions and feelings, which news writing excludes. Q: At one point, you were surprised to find yourself sounding patriotic as you explained American constitutional rights to Farouq. How did being an expatriate affect your sense of what it means to be an American? A: I feel that living abroad has deepened my affection for America, while also making me more critical of certain aspects of American culture. When I left the U.S., I was furious at our government and the country in general. A dedicated Democrat, I was bitter about the last two elections and outraged by pretty much everything George W. Bush ever did. I was embarrassed to be American and pessimistic about the future of the country. Living in Yemen did not improve my view of the Bush administration, but it did make me grateful for the many privileges of life in the US. All the things I took for granted--drinkable tap water, free speech, freedom to dress however I wanted, a variety of healthy food available everywhere, dental care, good hospitals, decent education, diversity--became more precious to me. I felt proud that I came from a country where I could rant about whatever I wanted without fear of the government tossing me into jail. I used to complain about sexism in America, which does still exist. But it is nothing compared to what women are subjected to in Yemen--and in so many other places. I feel so lucky that by the sheer accident of my birth I grew up in a country where I have had the freedom to go to school, be critical of religion, make friends with men and women, and choose a career for myself. I appreciate the fact that in the U.S. I feel that I am seen as a person with an intellect and rights,

rather than as property. That said, one thing I liked about leaving America was shedding so many THINGS. I gave away or threw out most of my possessions (aside from books and notebooks, which I stored in my parents' barn) and it was really freeing to realize that I could easily live for a year with just two suitcases worth of clothes and other things. So much about life in the U.S. seems excessive from here. I mean, do we really need 97 flavors of chewing gum and 53 flavors of iced tea? I would go to stores and just get overwhelmed by the choices. I have become more critical of the frivolity of American life. It's hard to get worked up about my own small problems when Yemenis are worried about the most basic things: access to water, access to schools, starvation, sickness, and war. Q: Despite the hardships, you truly fell in love with Yemen. What was the turning point? A: There were many little turning points--meeting and having tea with my neighbors in Old Sana'a, finally finding time to eat lunch outside of the office (it made such a difference to get away for an hour!), figuring out how to do all of my shopping and errands in Arabic, and taking time to get out of Sana'a and explore more of this gorgeous country. I am glad I came here alone, because I got such a huge sense of accomplishment from finding my own way and becoming self-sufficient in this strange land. Perhaps my biggest turning point came as a result of getting the newspaper on a regular schedule. Once I had achieved this Herculean feat, I was finally able to spend more time with my reporters individually. I could give them the training and attention they needed. I could also spend some time with them outside of the office. This made my job suddenly much more enjoyable. I loved spending time with my staff. They are the reason I came to Yemen, and the absolute best part of my first year here was watching their progress and forming relationships with them. Once we were on a regular schedule, I also had more time to explore Yemen and meet people outside of work. Q: How do you hope the book will affect readers? What stereotypes would you like to overturn? A: So many westerners I meet in the U.S. and England have not even heard of Yemen. If they have, they only know it as a hotbed of terrorism, which is how it's generally described in the news. News coverage of Yemen is extremely skewed--western papers rarely write about the country unless embassies are being attacked or tourists are getting blown up. What you hardly ever read about is the amazing hospitality and generosity of the Yemeni people. The overwhelming majority of people I have met in Yemen have been kind, open-hearted, and curious about westerners. Yemenis will invite you home to lunch five minutes after meeting you. And if you go once, they will invite you back for lunch every week. This kind of immediate and sincere hospitality is not often found in the west. I hope my book helps eliminate the stereotype that all Yemenis are crazed terrorists. I want people to come away with the understanding that Yemen has a diverse population, and the majority are peaceful people. Q: Most books about Yemen have been written by men. What's different about

your perspective as a woman--a western woman at that? A: Western men have pretty much zero access to women in Yemen (and Yemeni men donÃ¢â ¬â„¢t have much more!). Therefore, the books written about Yemen by men are missing half of the story--the women's story. At least one male writer I've read admits he knows nothing of the world of Yemeni women, but adds that it is his understanding that Yemeni women may have little influence on political and public life, but that they rule the home. I did not find this to be true--certainly not for most of the women I have met here. The women I know have to obey the men in their family in every sphere--they are not free to go to school, fall in love, stay out after dark, work, go out, make friends with men, etc. without permission from men. Because I am a westerner, I am sure there is still plenty I do not know about Yemen and Yemeni women in particular. While I've become close to many women who have confided in me, I am still ultimately an outsider. Yet some women confide in me because I am an outsider--they tell me things they are afraid of telling other Yemeni women, for fear of being judged. Q: What is your next challenge as a writer and editor? A: I would really like to write a novel. I've written one before, but I am not sure it should ever be published! So I'd like to start again. I think it would be fun to write something completely untrue for a change. Though it is tempting to write something about diplomatic life... Photographs from The Woman Who Fell from the Sky

Rootless and restless in New York working for the Week, Steil accepted an opportunity to travel to Yemen, ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden, to teach Western journalism to the staff of the Yemen Observer. The staff of untrained reporters, who barely spoke English, nonetheless hungered for her guidance on setting deadlines and professional standards of objectivity, reviving her own love of journalism. The short-term arrangement turned into a yearlongÃ¢â ¬â •but surreptitiousÃ¢â ¬â •assignment as editor because it is illegal for foreigners to run a Yemeni paper. Steil prepared herself to deal with cultural differencesÃ¢â ¬â •the women cannot interview or travel with men or stay out past darkÃ¢â ¬â •as well as suspicions that the paper was little more than a mouthpiece for the president, a friend of the publisher. Steil clashed with her editor and publisher, formed genuine friendships with her staffÃ¢â ¬â •chewing khat and visiting with familiesÃ¢â ¬â •and helped lead coverage of everything from presidential elections to kidnappings and bombings. Along the way, she gained a fresh perspective on journalism, Middle Eastern culture, and her own personal life. --Vanessa Bush

American journalist takes temporary assignment to help raise standards in English-language newspaper in Yemen. This bk is her very personal memoir abt her experiences in a culture and

country so foreign most people couldn’t find it on a map. It’s the uniqueness of her experience that gives her real-life story it’s "stranger in a strange land" perspective.There are clashes, when her sometimes naive assumptions abt what she can accomplish hit the stone wall of centuries’ old traditions, and comings together, when she enters into the behind-the-veil lives of her female staffers. Add in an almost fairy-tale ending, and this is a great combination of travel diary, memoir and commentary on what’s going on behind the scenes in a country that almost never makes the news unless the news is bad.

I really like some of the information in this book as I’m interested in Yemen and the culture, BUT I found the author to be quite full of herself, her beauty, the new friends who did everything for her from cook to guide her in Sanaa and on 10 day holidays.She failed to say whether she paid the locals for their work or just relied on her good looks and long hair down to her waist.I did not like the bragging about taking a husband from his wife and daughternor the bragging about his titlenor did I like hearing in each chapter about how hard she worked...and how lazy the Yeminis are.She said she saved a newspaper with her genius and wanted to be acknowledged through out the book.I found this American journalist to be much too self involved which is disappointing as she had some very interesting facts about Yemen. It could have been fun instead of irritating.I would recommend Tim Mackintosh-Smith book "Yemen, Travels in Dictionary Land". I found him much more engaging; he just loves Yemen and is likable and fun.Another suggestion might be some of Freya Stark’s work in her discoveries in Yemen.

I would have wanted to know what information I could find out about Yemen. I found it interesting That the author did not mention anything about the pirates around Yemen. I did enjoy her description of the houses and how the town looked. I also found it interesting about the rituals and the wayt they treat women. Interesting anyway.

Loved the book, what more can I say. I like books about peoples life experiences. This one fit the bill.

Jennifer Steil writes of her time in Yemen, trying to bring the `Yemen Observer’ up to good journalistic standards. What is interesting in the book is her insight into life in a foreign country that most will never visit. Her descriptions and pictures of life in the city of Sana’a and in villages where no one is aware of 9/11, no one knows how to read, has no knowledge of Hollywood are well done;

as are her descriptions of the smells of jasmine, frying beans, lamb, frankincense. But then as so many other places in the world, modern life in the form of plastic bags and soda cans as trash and men wearing pin stripe suits intrudes.If you have ever lived in a foreign country and have been lucky enough to integrate yourself with the `native' population, you know how much that can add to the appreciation of living. She learns from the women; that they wear the hijab to respect themselves, "when beauty is hidden, more important things rise to the surface". This does seem to be wishful thinking, as Jennifer experiences the same disrespect men show to women - the perverse and awful comments and constant harassment. Jennifer is able to see much, because as a western woman she is looked upon as a 3rd sex - able to socialize to some extent with the men.She seems to ignore much of the danger westerners face, but does come to realize what the people , especially the women of Yemen lack and what we, as Westerners take for granted. These are the main contents of what the book contains. There is a small section at the end, which almost seems as if another person has written it, as love overtakes her life when she meets the married British ambassador, but that is not the main part of the story.There is an unevenness in the writing, but the interest would be there, especially for those concerned with the Middle East, and especially the state of affairs of the lives of women. Journalists and those who are interested in writing for newspapers would also find this book appealing.

This book had everything I look for in a 5 star read: great writing, fully fleshed out characters, and settings that are described through the five senses plus emotion or reaction from narrator or protagonist. The other quality of the book is that the pace is quick and it's hard to put down because you want to stay in the story.The author was 37 years old when she left New York as a successful journalist and accepted a three week assignment teaching wanna be reporters for a small Yemen newspaper in Sana'e.The novel is fascinating, humorous, and sometimes frustrating. The authors three weeks ends up being a one year assignment with reporters who have their own ideas of writing news. She shows us Yemen, its food, culture, and language through her anecdotes and relationships with the reporters. More importantly, the story is a great read about women, gender roles, and society.What captured me was the authors full characterizations of the news staff. The men often committed loutish behavior, but she also balanced this with their cultural mores. The women reporters especially fascinated me with their intelligence, struggles, and persistence. The pacing is quick, the setting colorful, and the writer keeps the readers attention.Jennifer Steil was somewhat derided in book reviews because she shares her personal relationship with the married British Ambassador. There are perhaps five pages interspersed at the last quarter of the 332 page

book. The romance is not a central theme in the book although it's given much attention by some reviewers. The Ambassador is now her husband. The title of her upcoming novel is, "The Ambassador's Wife." This book is on my TBR list.

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