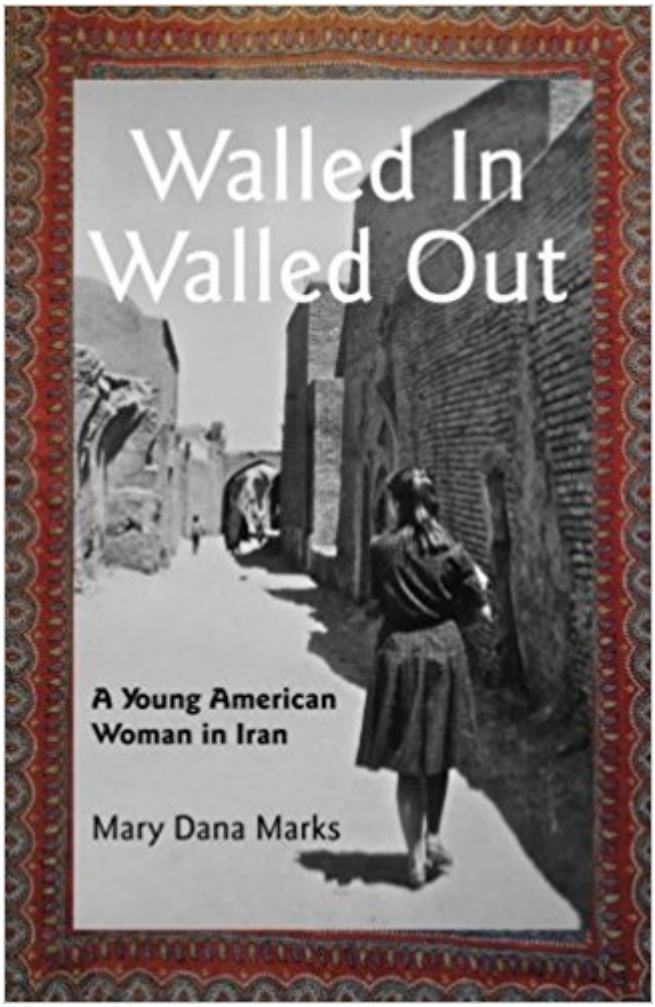
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Walled In, Walled Out: A Young American Woman In Iran



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Synopsis

When Mary joins the Peace Corps the shah reigns in Iran and John F. Kennedy has left his mark on the world. Sent to Kerman, a conservative city on the Iranian plateau, she teaches English to high school girls. In the classroom, or walking through the bazaar amid turbaned Baluchi tribesmen and chanting Sufi dervishes, she is the exotic one. The adobe walls that seclude women exclude her, a bareheaded foreigner. Woven throughout are dusty travels from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea, colorful feasts, rich history and hidden romance. Walled In, Walled Out recounts her convoluted, often humorous journey from ignorance to understanding in a country where the people speak with many voices.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mary Dana Marks served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kerman, Iran from 1964-66. After earning a masterÃ¢â ¬â„¢s degree in library science from the University of Michigan, she returned to Iran where she worked as librarian of the UNESCO-affiliated International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods in Tehran and taught English as a second language. She and her family left Iran five years before its 1979 revolution. Marks spent most of her career as library director for the Museum of the American Indian in New York. Editor of the award-winning Native America in the Twentieth Century: An Encyclopedia, she lives with her husband in New York City.

This is a beautiful memoir that reads like a novel. It begins with the idealistic Mary being sent by the Peace Corps to help people in an Iranian city, where she is immediately made to feel it is she who is

lacking in civilization and, in fact, is told that she needs to learn to be ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“human.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Mary finds herself faced with social restrictions that go against her independent and adventurous spirit. She is put up in a compound that walls her out from most interactions with the city and yet puts her on display for the young women inside, who watch her every move.Mary is a normal girl in her early twenties who enjoys associating with young men her age, and we cheer as she insists on being ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“humanÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• in this sense of the word. She is honest with us about her frustrations as she navigates this alien culture and its restrictions while still managing to develop relationships with young men. Her story makes it clear that serving in the Peace Corps in Iran was a very different experience for a woman than it was for a man. The male Peace Corps volunteers in Kerman have much more freedom to act like Americans.Mary has been trained to teach English using a very effective method, but she is ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“placed,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• as her Peace Corp field officer terms it, in a situation where she is not allowed to teach. Instead she is required to sit in the front of various classes listening to an Iranian teacher instruct the students in Farsi. Her field officer doesnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t want to hear about the absurdity of her ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“placement.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Mary is undaunted, however, and she and her Peace Corps colleague Betsy start after-school English clubs at four girlsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ high schools.Mary provides a rich picture of the Iranian people and customs she gradually comes to know. The book is filled with exotic descriptions, not only of Kerman but of the places she visits while stationed there. Here is her description of a woman she sees in Bandar Abbas:Slight in build, her dress was a riot of bright colors draping over loose pants intricately embroidered at the ankles, orange plastic sandals flapping on her brown feet. But it was the shiny, bronze-toned mask that stopped me short. Obscured from hairline to lip, her face resembled a prehistoric reptile.This woman would have drawn attention even in Kerman. And yet, Mary realizes that to the Iranians she lives among, she is the one who seems exotic.An underlying theme of her story is that her stay in Iran benefitted her more than it did Iranians. Each time Mary returns to Kerman from a trip, she feels more like she is returning home. Their culture seems less foreign. There is a particularly striking example of this. When she first comes to Kerman, she meets a young woman who had an arranged marriage. The custom seems unimaginably alien to her. But near the end of her stay in Kerman, a group of women offers to arrange a marriage for her to an Iranian doctor. Here is her initial reaction: ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Marry me? Someone wants to marry me? Really?ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• This probably isnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t much different from an Iranian girlÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s first reaction. Could it be that sheÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢d become even more ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“humanÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• than she was?

I too, like the writer, thought about joining the Peace Corp. back in the 60s but for various reasons didn't. Now ,after reading Mary Danna Marks' finely crafted memoir, I am truly sorry that I lost that experience but reading her book was the next best thing.Imagine fresh faced, long-limbed Mary-looking like the poster child representing the "All American young woman of the 60s". Follow her as she meanders through the market place towering head and shoulders over the crowd of chador-cloaked women.What does this straight forward American girl do when she finds herself living in the walled off little town of Kerman, ready to teach English to the High School girls, ready to spread the "American Way, only to find that she is also walled of from even doing this.Find out that the answer to all problems in this small conservative community in Iran is to serve tea, and plenty of it.Can you imagine seeing "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" dubbed in Farsi?Or Try to picture when Betsy, Mary's first roommate, paints the bedroom a deep electric blue and it causes Mary to feel like she is sleeping at the bottom of a watery well every night.Or try to picture Mary's second roommate, a feisty 60 year old trying to buy an eggbeater in the market place and because she doesn't know the language, has to become that eggbeater, whirring and spinning arms and legs for all the market to see.The best parts are the humorous attempts of Mary and her roommate to put on a musical show using the young Iranian girls in their classes or when Mary find herself the hit of the party of Iranian and American bigwigs and starts giving lessons in "Twisting" and "Jitterbugging."Meet the Rubbish Lady of the Water Pump. Meet Mr. Sayeed-Nejad, friend and mentor to Mary. Meet the men and women of this dusty plateau and grow to love them as Mary does.

Must reading for anyone who has ever lived in or dreamt about living in a foreign country. Mary Dana Marks beautifully portrays strangeness, adjustment, and eventually love. I couldn't put it down.

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