



The Honey Thief

Najaf Mazari , Robert Hillman

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This enchanting novel of interwoven legends burns with both gentle intelligence and human warmth

This extraordinary book, derived from the long oral tradition of storytelling in Afghanistan, presents a mesmerizing portrait of a people who triumph with intelligence and humor over the oppressions of political dictators and an unforgiving landscape.

A musician conjures stones to rise in the air and teaches his art to a mute child. Master Poisoner, Ghorroob of Mashad, has so perfected his craft that it is considered an honor to die from his meals. These are stories of magic and wonder in which ordinary people endure astonishing extremes in a world of bloodshed and brotherhood, miracles and catastrophes.

With lyrical wit and profound simplicity, *The Honey Thief* reveals an Afghanistan of greater richness and humanity than is conveyed in newspaper headlines; an Afghanistan not of failure and despair, but of resilience and fulfillment.

The Honey Thief Details

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Author : Najaf Mazari , Robert Hillman

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From Reader Review The Honey Thief for online ebook

Kavita says

I have always loved folk tales from any part of the world, because beneath the outer layers of morality, you can find the culture and history of the place where they originated. This book is a set of folk tales from Afghanistan, told by Najaf Mazari. Mazari, from the Hazara tribe and born and brought up in Afghanistan, had to flee his country when the Taliban wiped out the Hazara. He sought asylum in Australia and has written about his life in Afghanistan as a rug-maker prior to the Taliban rule in one of his books. This book, however, is a very different Afghanistan of dreams and magic.

This book consists of a number of short stories on different subjects. There is a little bit of what I would call 'fictionalised history'. Other stories are about beekeepers, animals, triumph of the spirit over human failings, and even a love story. And food. I especially enjoyed the food chapters a lot. The author explained about the place food has in the culture of the Afghans and the Hazaras in particular. At the very end, there are a few recipes for what are obviously the author's favourite dishes. They looked rather nice and elaborate, but being vegetarian, didn't do much for me. Except for the Boulanee, which has gone into my list of trial recipes. It looks a lot like the Paratha, so let's see how it works out!

I must say that I was slightly annoyed by the tone taken by the author in a couple of 'historical' stories, where he makes excuses for the Hazara's 'inability to let go of grudges' for centuries as a cultural phenomenon. So it was probably a wise move to end with food stories, because I completely forgot any annoying stuff that came earlier! Smart, Mazari, smart!

Denise says

Full disclosure: I was chosen a First Reads winner, and received a paperback copy of The Honey Thief in the mail. That in no way influenced the review that follows.

This is a collection of stories arranged in a very logical progression, often continuing from one story to the next, and set in Afghanistan. The storytelling is masterful, and this would make a great book to read aloud. It reflects the long heritage of the oral tradition of the Afghan people and, although it is fiction, the stories are amazingly plausible and the characters seem very real. I had to force myself to read it slowly, to savor its flavors. And there are many references to Afghan food, too, including some recipes that are written in as much of a folk tale style as are the stories.

This is a simple book full of the voices of cultural wisdom. I would highly recommend it, and am so happy to have had the opportunity to read this collection. A sincere thank you to the authors, Najaf Mazari, who is an Afghan who fled the Taliban and lives in Australia, and Robert Hillman, who is Australian, and to Penguin Books.

Rosanne Hawke says

The Honey Thief encapsulates so much of what I enjoy in such a book: stories full of wisdom, culture and

writing which shows the voice of the people from which they came. The authors Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman have captured a true voice of Afghanistan in telling these tales. There is a preliminary note telling the reader that the inspiration for the tales is derived from the long tradition of storytelling in Afghanistan. I read these stories sparingly, one at a time, trying to make them last. But now I will read them again. This is what Arnold Zable, who suggested I read *The Honey Thief*, wrote: 'Moving effortlessly from the oral to the written, from folktale to modern-day fable, and from the earthly to the transcendent, this beautiful, life-affirming book probes the heart and soul of a remarkable culture, while paying homage to the universal power of story.'

Lesa says

Dear reading friends, please please read this book. This beautiful collection of short stories based on Afghani oral storytelling is exquisitely written, informative, sometimes funny and often heartbreaking. So worth the investment of your reading time. And it even contains recipes. What more could you ask?

Oana says

A book I picked up on a whim while at the library, it turned out to be really fun and charming. Yes, there was a big patch with the genocidal massacres of the Hazara (remember them from *The Kite Runner*?) and the really sad deaths of the nice guy who was hanged on his doorstep, poor Konrad and the bus of innocent travellers.

Yet there are glimpses of magic: "He told Abdullah of a great master of the *tula* from the land of Iraq who could make stones rise from the ground and float in the air with his music," and "...victims died not by digesting his poisons only; Nightfall fashioned mists that drifted on the breeze and sought out one man alone in a gathering of a thousand."

Best of all is that we learn about the nice Afghans, something rather lacking in most books about the country. One of my favourite parts are when a Hazara character and a British visitor decide, after their failed attempt to find and photograph a snow leopard, that the expedition helped them become friends and that that was of itself the reward. As parting gifts, one gives a stone to the other and the other gives the first a sports medal and teaches him a football song.

The book is jointly written by an Australian-born novelist, Robert Hillman, and a Hazara-Australian immigrant. As I read it, I wondered how much of the novelist's voice came through as opposed to Najaf Mazari's. The end of the book has an appendix of spice descriptions and recipes, and here was where I think Mazari's voice comes more fully. I suspect that the recipes were recorded and transcribed, as the tone is conversational and quite hilarious. That part alone makes me recommend this book to anyone to pick up and at least read that part. For example:

"Add the spring onions to the bowl, and the coriander. Did you know that the leaves of the coriander bush are spoken of in in the stories of Scheherazade - in *One Thousand and One Nights*? Yes, they are said to have the power to arouse in those who eat them thoughts of romance. If you wish to be aroused in this way, my best advice is to eat a great deal of coriander. Back to business. You add the arousing coriander, cut very finely as I say, and the

ground pepper..."

Or:

"The dough is going to develop its flavour over the period of an hour under the damp cloth. Do not be tempted to hurry this process along. Have a book to read, or a magazine. Not a magazine about film stars and diets and scandals. A sensible magazine. Not too many pictures."

Overall, very recommended, especially with the holidays coming up if you need something charming, yet not saccharine.

Jennifer says

The Honey Thief by Najaf Mazari is a beautiful compilation of short stories, which take place in Afghanistan. The characters are well thought out and relatable; the stories are descriptive and easily bring the reader into each one. At the end of the book, Mazari has added traditional Afghanistan recipes and of the ones I have tried they are delicious and surprisingly easy to make. I truly enjoyed reading The Honey Thief and would recommend it to others.

Sarah Stevens says

I picked this book up on a whim from my local library. It called to me, reminding me of books I had enjoyed like Three Cups of Tea. And I'm glad I did - I was not disappointed.

The Honey Thief is one part history book, one part folk stories, and one part cookbook. Yes, cookbook. That part surprised me. And made me hungry - I'm a huge fan of Indian food, and these recipes are somewhat similar.

The history is fascinating, tragic and compelling, but my favorite part are the stories. The history is woven throughout the stories, but the characters are so real and lovely. It really is very well done. Each vignette of an event or character resonates with beauty and insight, often culminating in glimpses into the heart of the common human experience. And there is always a healthy dose of humor in the form of the narrator's asides that keeps things at just the right level of heaviness.

All in all, I would highly recommend this book. Especially for book groups - there is a little something for everyone here. And then you could serve the food from the recipes at the discussion - and invite me. :)

Holly Madison says

The Honey Thief, by Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman is an extraordinary book. This book is a series of short stories that all take place in Afghanistan, from the Hazara tribe point of view. Before reading this book, I had never even heard of the Hazara, which are to Afghanistan almost what Native Americans are to the United States. This is a crude comparison, but it is the closest way I can relate to the Hazara in my mind. They are a tribe of people who are secluded from other Afghans and have often been abused and mistreated, yet they endure.

I am a college educated 30 year old woman, and probably one of the least likely types of people that would read a book like this in Afghanistan. Yet here, a world away from where these stories take place, I found myself swept away by this book, which has completely changed the way I think. Afghanistan is more than just bombs and terrorists - more than just what we see on the news. It is a land that combines magic with misery and hosts some of the most resilient people that have ever lived.

Now I feel that I must explain my rating of this book, which I am giving only 3 out of 5 stars. I believe that this book deserves a 5 out of 5 star rating (or higher if such a thing were possible), but certain things would need to happen in order for that to change. First of all, I went into this book thinking that the stories would be ancient legends, when in fact many of them were fairly modern, taking place only a couple of decades ago. There did not seem to be a huge amount of organization in the book, as it went from almost magical stories to tales about that Hazara's violent history without any real transition. I think that grouping the stories into more specific sections would help the flow of the book a bit more. The ending was the most disappointing for me, as the book ends with a chapter full of recipes and no story at all. I think that section should be after the end of the book, maybe in a small little "recipe appendix" section on its own. I would have liked the last story in the book to be as powerful as some of the ones before it, and was left feeling like there was more out there that hadn't made it onto the pages.

The negatives aside, this book was incredibly powerful. It is rare that a book has such a profound influence on the way a person thinks, and this one certainly did. It also made me appreciate the country I grew up in, as I have been incredibly fortunate in my life compared to many people in Afghanistan. For example, in one of the stories a boy shoots a man at his school, and all of his teachers and even the school principal are hanged just for knowing the boy. His friends are also hanged without a trial or any sort of justice, even though the boy acted on his own accord. This sort of thing would never happen in the United States, and it made my heart ache for the innocent people whose lives were so easily thrown away. Some of the stories feel incredibly recent, even when a time line is not given, and some stories feel like they could have happened centuries ago. One consistent element in all of the stories is the undertones of violence - guns are as common in Afghanistan as cars are in America, and people are never really safe. The Hazara in particular have had an age-old struggle, just trying to survive in a country that does not respect or appreciate them.

Yet Afghanistan is not portrayed as being all bad -- it is often described as being enchantingly beautiful with mountains as far as the eye can see and hidden valleys filled with lush fruits falling off the trees. This is an image that has burned itself into my head, an idea that makes me wish I could become a bird and fly over Afghanistan to see all of the beauty for myself. I find myself hoping that someday, somehow, it will become a safe place where people can live peacefully and others can visit without fear of harm. It is tragic that such an amazing place can have such a devastating past - and present.

Above all else, the stories in this book make me realize that the Hazara are a tribe of people with kind, family-oriented roots, and they deserve more than just our respect -- they deserve to be known, remembered, and preserved. And the best way to do that is to start by reading this book.

Calzean says

A book of short stories - part history, part folk lore, part cook book - about the Hazara people of Afghanistan. Hazara's are a minority and are persecuted for who they are.

This collection are the author's own stories, written down from traditional verbal tales. They show a poor, proud and resilient people.

The most humbling parts is in the prologue and cooking recipe parts where the author's feelings and emotions are so wise, funny and a reminder of how people are unique but still the same no matter where you come from.

Linda says

A charming book which shares the culture/history of Afghanistan, mostly of the Hazara ethnic group, through folk stories and recipes. At times the tales are sad, at others humorous but are always enlightening. This country has an ancient and tangled history which few Americans know much about. Read this book and learn.

Debbie says

"The Honey Thief" is a collection of folk lore stories. Some of these short stories are historical tales, others are more moral tales, but all are set in Afghanistan and come from the viewpoint of the Hazara--a minority tribe in Afghanistan. These stories give insight into the mindset and customs of these people along with a history lesson about what they've lived through. May of the stories have a rural setting and give insight into daily rural living throughout their history.

The storyteller, Najaf, understood that Westerners come from a different mindset and explained the differences with gentle humor. I found the tales interesting because they offered a look into a different culture. The recipes at the end are worth reading even if you don't cook. They give insight to the culture and some of the directions were quite funny as you'd never find them in American cookbooks: "...leave them alone for maybe half an hour. Read a book, a good one....a peaceful book" (from page 276).

Overall, I'd highly recommend this book to those who like folk lore and are interested in other cultures.

I received this book as a review copy from the publisher.

Claire McAlpine says

A beautifully narrated book of stories handed down the generations, about the Hazara people of Afghanistan. They are stories that repeat through the generations, situations that continue to recur, but that give these people hope and help them endure hardship in its many forms.

As the author himself says:

In the city where I now live, all the stories are in books. They are studied in universities. I am not sure that these stories pierce the flesh of those who hear them and make a life for them in the listener's heart. In Afghanistan, we have very few universities and very few professors. The history of the Hazara is told in the fields, in our tents, in our houses. Many of the stories I heard growing up, even those from centuries ago, came to life again before my eyes.

They are stories of shepherds and wolves, beekeepers and a mute musician, an elusive snow leopard, a boy reading Mark Twain, a grandson given the task of forgiving a slight against his grandfather to a dying man. They are simple but extraordinary, life-affirming stories, offering a unique insight into a little known culture, within a country we hear too many negative stories about.

My full review here at Word by Word.

Li Sian says

Vaguely interlinked stories about the Hazara people in Afghanistan. Mmm I enjoyed these stories VERY MUCH - the narration was just perfect, with the kind of wryness and appreciation of beauty that is very hard to convey at all, let alone to the level of subtlety that was achieved in this book. Mazari and Hillman never linger on descriptions for long, but I feel very enamoured with the setting portrayed here.

The setting, the characters, the STORIES. All three are in the bag - this is a fantastic mastery of the short story form (which, as Mazari is keen to emphasise, is drawn from the oral tradition of the Hazara). Definitely recommend it!

The Lit Bitch says

I really liked learning about these people and culture. It's easy to forget that there is a culture beyond the terrorism ideals that are so closely linked and so much a part of the Afghan culture. I thought Mazari did a nice job showing the reader there was more to Afghan culture than what we read about in the news.

If you are looking for a unique way to explore a little known culture then you should NOT pass up this book! You will gain new insight and perspective about a beautiful remote culture in a land that is not necessarily known for its beauty.

See my full review here

Rosemarie says

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