



The Wasted Vigil

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"Even the air of this country has a story to tell about warfare." Momentarily disregarding its centrality to the centuries-old great game, in just the last 30 years Afghanistan has endured an imperialist war with the Soviet Union, a civil war with the Taliban, and now America's ongoing war on terror. "It is possible here to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following it back to its origins, collect a dozen stories concerning war." It's within this post-9/11, roiling milieu that four disparate characters, all touched in some way by these wars, find their individual stories intertwined in unexpected ways. Marcus is an English doctor whose wife was stoned to death by the Taliban, whose kidnapped daughter is presumed dead, and for whose grandson he continually searches. He opens his home to Lara, a Russian looking for decades-old evidence of her brother's disappearance during the Soviet invasion; David, a former CIA agent who helped support the mujahideen against the Soviets; and Casa, a young Afghani Islamist bent on jihad against America.

In a compelling narrative, the London-based Aslam, whose two previous novels have won prestigious international awards, ties the four principals together in a way that puts a personal face on current Middle Eastern affairs and illustrates how wars continue from one generation to the next. Are the martyred jihadists so very different in their extreme, black-and-white religiosity from the blindly jingoistic warriors of the Western world? The Pakistani-born author spares neither side while empathizing with the innocent victims who continually bear the brunt of the ceaseless fighting. "The entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country, but mistakes had consequences." Aslam takes temporary respite from the turmoil with wonderfully descriptive passages of Afghanistan's natural beauty, descriptions that vividly underscore the ongoing tragedy of this war-torn nation. In a sobering parting shot, we're reminded that the world is much less isolated now: "Pull a string here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world."

This story was found at:

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/review?oid=671525>