Crossing the River Kabul: An Afghan Family Odyssey

Kevin McLean
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Baryalai “Bari” Popal fled his native Afghanistan in 1980 after the Soviet occupation and only returned after the Taliban was ousted in 2002. The result of ten years of collaboration, lawyer Kevin McLean’s Crossing the River Kabul: An Afghan Family Odyssey narrates the shifts in Popal’s family fortunes and follows him from Afghanistan to Germany to the United States, and finally back home.

Popal and his family descend from the Popalzai, one of Afghanistan’s two royal families, and over the decades they have held great political influence. However, the country has frequently changed hands and allegiances, and the Popals have not always been on the “right” side of history. Whereas Bari’s grandfather was exiled by the “Iron Amir” in the late 1800s, his father, Abdul Rahman Popal (simply called “Baba”), served in the country’s foreign ministry, and Uncle Ali was the ambassador to Japan.

During the time that Popal was a student at Kabul University, the Communists came to power. He refused to register with the military and would hide in the chimney crawl space whenever National Security guards came looking for him. In 1980, he and a cousin finally escaped the country via Pakistan. Family connections rescued him more than once, and after a decade in Aachen, Germany, he got his longed-for chance to move his family to America. He purchased a SpeeDee Oil franchise in San Diego, California, in 1992 and became a US citizen in 2002.

McLean writes from Popal’s perspective, delivering a convincing first-person narrative attuned to local speech: “nay” fills in for “no,” and Popal remembers “a pomegranate sunrise.” Photographs plus details of meals and clothing lend authenticity, while scenes like falling in love with Afsana, his future wife, convey the intimacy expected from an autobiography. The book gives a keen sense of Afghanistan’s volatile history throughout the twentieth century and up to the present, especially as Popal makes return trips to Kabul starting in 2002 and reclaims his home, which had been taken over by drug lords. Now he admits to the exile’s split loyalties: “my heart is in two places—California and Afghanistan.”

REBECCA FOSTER (July/August 2017)

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