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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Escape or Die: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and USA

Faruk B. Sabet
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Every immigrant has a story to tell, but few have had a journey to freedom as fraught with difficulty, danger, and heartbreak as that of Faruk B. Sabet. Born in Afghanistan, the author spent most of the first thirty years of his hard life, as he writes, “searching for a place in the world,” a place “where I could be able to pursue my education and live with respect and dignity.”

The Afghanistan of his youth was not such a place, nor is it today, as he notes after a return visit to his homeland in 2004. In the 1940s, Afghanistan was a place of “twisted tribal minds,” a land of fear and ignorance in which assassination, imprisonment, fear, abuse, and hardship were commonplace. It was a land so resistant to change that, for Sabet and his friends, their only choice, as the title makes clear, was to escape or die.

Much of the recollections of his childhood and teen years have been fleshed out with reconstructions of remembered conversations, yet they sound and feel authentic. In telling his story, Sabet blends lessons on the history, culture, geography, and spiritual makeup of the Afghans and their land. A more personal book on Afghanistan would be hard to find.

Liberally illustrated with family photos, the book draws the reader into the life of this clan under siege, and dramatically and poignantly makes one aware of why, at the age of sixteen, Sabet decides to leave his country.

His escape is a tale worthy of Kafka. Eluding border guards, smugglers, bandits, and murderers, Sabet and his friends have to cross Afghanistan’s Desert of Death to reach neighboring Iran. Instead of being welcomed, they are arrested, tortured, and jailed. Sabet spends his next five years in the notorious Blood-Red Fort, three of those years in solitary confinement, and all of them under the harsh whip of SAVAK—the shah of Iran’s notorious secret police.

Finally, freed at age twenty-one, Sabet flees to Iraq; but he does so when it “was the worst possible time for anyone to be in that country.” Iraq was between coups. The description of his hasty return to Tehran, and how he survives there until making it to New York in 1966, allows Sabet to shine a light on Iran, and how that sad country became what it is today.

Escape or Die is every bit as worthy of a place on store shelves as *The Kite-Runner*, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, or any top-ten book about life in Afghanistan. *Escape or Die* reads like an adventure story, one in which everything is not merely based on truth, but is true.

One small caveat: The unusually tiny typeface can make the book a physical strain to read. This is a 600-page book crammed into 320 pages. An electronic version, where the type face can be made larger, would truly ease and improve what is a compelling read.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (October 11, 2011)

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