FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Autobiography & Memoir

**Lost Decency: The Untold Afghan Story**
Atta Arghandiwal
Seattle Book Company
978-0-615-55758-8
(September 4, 2012)

*Lost Decency: The Untold Afghan Story* is aptly named. In this memoir, Atta Arghandiwal links his personal history with the history of Afghanistan from 1959 to the post-9/11 era. He attempts to show how war and the upheavals in government affected his family, the country, and the people of Afghanistan. This assessment becomes most evident when the author returns to Kabul years after his immigration to the US, looking for the beautiful place and people he remembered. He finds that his former country has lost its self-respect, the respect of the world, and its "decency." These losses are Afghanistan's untold story.

*Lost Decency* gives a sweeping view of Afghanistan's history punctuated with the writer's insights, but the story comes alive whenever Arghandiwal focuses on his own experiences. As a boy, he accompanied his father, a military liaison, across the Oxus River into the Soviet Union. This experience and his later work in the Afghan military provide Arghandiwal with insight into the nature and reality of military-industrial power. He also describes his home and family life in the '50s and '60s, emphasizing the peace and harmony of his everyday routine in the melting pot of ethnic groups in his Kabul neighborhood. The contrast between public power and private peace is an abiding theme of this work.

As in all life stories, chance and coincidence play a definitive role. After his father develops a heart condition, Arghandiwal is sent to English language school to help support his family; his education subsequently results in other opportunities in Afghanistan and the US. Arghandiwal and a friend plan to leave Kabul on the very day in 1978 when a military coup plunges the capital into chaos. An officer he knew while in the military becomes a key government official after the coup, and this chance connection assures Arghandiwal's continued employment under the new government.

Arghandiwal's prose is especially effective when he renders particularly emotional or dramatic moments, like the entry of Russians into Kabul or the tense minutes before his plane

takes him out of the city. As the writer is neither a historian nor a journalist, a careful reader will question the accuracy and source of his statistics and political analysis about present-day Afghanistan.

Regardless, this twenty-first-century immigrant tale reveals the faces behind the headlines, those with the courage to choose to leave the familiar behind in search of a better life.

*Geraldine Richards*