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Dancing In The No-Fly Zone: A Woman's Journey Through Iraq



DANCING IN THE NO-FLY ZONE

A WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH IRAQ

"Remarkable...written with elegance, wisdom and compassionate humor..."
—The Globe and Mail

HADANI DITMARS



Synopsis

Here is a unique perspective on Iraq, before and after the recent war. When Hadani Ditmars first went to Iraq in 1997, for the

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Customer Reviews

There is a place where a non-profit agency arranges for homeless people to live in an abandoned swimming pool, where a 12-year-old diabetic boy works in a shoe factory to buy insulin, where a woman who was once an engineer now defends her property with a Kalashnikov, and where a musician continues playing Beethoven's Sonata in G-minor while missile strikes light up the night. Canadian journalist Ditmars toured these and other lesser-known quotidian realms of post-invasion Iraq in 2003, and in this book shuttles back and forth between her pre-and post-invasion reporting trips to create a portrait of a land that is now more dangerous than ever, especially for Iraqi women. Ditmars does not flinch in the face of irony, nor is she shy about her politics and anti-American perspective as she presents a persuasive and sympathetic case for her point of view, but the book would be richer if these stories were better balanced and anchored to a deeper historical-political context. A reader who is already familiar with the complexities of contemporary Iraq will reap the greatest benefit. Nonetheless, the world Ditmars reveals to general readers is both fascinating and heart wrenching, adding often overlooked human stories to the war in Iraq. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Iraqi teenagers have never known a time without war; the present conflict is the third war the

country has been subjected to in 20 years. Furthermore, a report to the United Nations reveals the bitter truth: children were better off under the rule of Saddam Hussein, and one-fourth of Iraqi children under age five are now chronically malnourished. As Canadian journalist Ditmars relates her experiences in Iraq then and in 2003, she reminds us of the consequences of years of sanctions and now of war. On an almost regular basis, parents are forced to sell precious art and family heirlooms to buy medicine for their children, some women are forced to prostitute themselves in order to feed their families, and others are abducted and never heard from again. It seems that women, like children, actually fared better under Saddam. Although artists still create and musicians still perform, these are desperate times for the Iraqi people, and Ditmars portrays their plight with great sensitivity and respect. Pamela Crossland Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature - that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance - and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth?" - Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Brothers Karamazov

Early in *Dancing in the No Fly zone*, Hidani Ditmars cites Madeleine Albright's famous reply when asked about UNICEF's estimate that 500,000 children died during the sanctions on Iraq: "I think it is worth the price." *Dancing in the No fly Zone* provides a chilling look at exactly what that price is. Ditmars visits Iraq in 2003 and reports on life in the streets of Iraq, strewn with garbage and washed by raw sewerage. She tells her story through visits with Iraqis: business men, artists, press handlers, and mothers. And she tells it without apology. She is at her best when telling the stories of mothers trying to hold her families together, alienated husbands and starving children. As one Iraqi says near the end of the book, Iraq has gone steadily down hill since Saddam came to power in 1968. She does neither glorify nor demonize. She simply tells us how Iraqi people fared under sanctions, and she lets Iraqi ambivalence about the American overthrow of Saddam and our subsequent occupation of Iraq speak for itself. Above all she toasts the spirit of the people she clearly loves. We hear on the news about the utter lawlessness in Iraq, about the lack of medicine, the lack of electricity and clean water. No matter what one thinks of our intent in removing Saddam, one must admit that we have not delivered on our promise to the Iraqi people. I never really knew what life under sanctions were like. Children suffered, maybe fewer than 500,000 but certainly more than 1. Does it really matter who is most responsible for their suffering? As to the previous reviewer, Michael Rubin is

mouthpiece-for-hire, a consultant to the infamous Pentagon propagandists the Lincoln Group. His is an Iraq of 3.5 million cell phones, political debate, and Internet cafes in dusty hamlets. Ditmars Iraq is an Iraq of a long-suffering people who when asked to choose between the past and the present choose the future.

As the tragedy unfolding in Iraq increases daily, It's sad to see how right wing apologists in the US continue to bash this important book. But as UK reviewer Maryam Cook puts in in her review[...]this book is a "reference on human courage and normalcy in the face of utter chaos." Boyd Tonkin of the London Independent says, "Not just another batch of war stories, Ditmars' fine reports from Iraq reveal aspects of the country - both pre- and post-invasion - that the battlefield junkies overlook. From the comic actor who adores Mr Bean and the conductor who brings Berlioz to Baghdad to the artists and cabaret stars, she seeks out Iraq's dogged creative spirits, and touches places in the nation's soul that horror-headlines never reach" Consider the words of Mariam Cook. Hadani Ditmars is a Canadian journalist who has been writing from Iraq since 1997. Of the plethora of books out there on Iraq (now three years since the US-led invasion) *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone* has a sense of reality and immediacy difficult to match. The author is of mixed heritage, with French and Lebanese roots, and her appearance and Arabic skills means she manages to get to where most reporters cannot. In one scene we find her gyrating to traditional Iraqi music, and in another prostrating with conservative Shi'a women for evening prayer. No stranger to criticism, Ditmars has been witch-hunted by sections of the western media for her exposés on the impact of sanctions on Iraqi children and suspected of spying by Iraqi Ba'athists. *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone* deftly places the reader beyond stereotypes, into the lives of the people who have lived decades under war, sanctions, oppression and terror. Often passing as an Iraqi, and often using her ability to skip between various European languages - intermittently waving her Canadian passport in defence - Ditmars compels with her audacity. Journeys around dangerous areas in post-invasion Iraq are juxtaposed with memories of her experiences of life under Saddam. With a variety of cunning disguises, at one moment a peasant, another in traditional Muslim veil, she moves among the people like some sort of multiple identity secret agent, often staying too long in perilous circumstances. One almost breathes a sigh of relief to reach the end of the book and find she has not been bundled into the back of an untraceable car. Yet the action-packed, almost darkly glamorous drama that unfolds is merely superfluous relief for the profound feelings of compassion and disbelief that are conjured alongside. A poignant question seems to run throughout: how can human beings, by fault or design, engineer such misery for others? A lack of pretentious language

allows the narrative to flow easily. Any political messages can be drawn subjectively; there are no sweeping conclusions or easy answers offered. This means whatever your opinion on Iraq, the narrative does not exclude. Instead, Ditmars adds layers to the nameless, countless individuals we see for nanoseconds, flashing across our screens, as another atrocity is announced. The cultural richness, stoicism (which reminded me of grandparents' stories of Londoners during the Blitz) and adaptability of Iraqis clenches at the heart muscle. In contrast to many books that provide a political commentary, such as Tariq Ali's *Bush in Babylon*, and the less intense but more forgiving *Revolution Day* by Rageh Omar, this book paints a picture of the tortured country itself, and ordinary Iraqi's experiences. Instead of long-winded allusions to times long gone there are real people, conversations and compelling portraits. This text is a reference on human courage and normalcy in the face of utter chaos, it highlights human triumphs without pretence at happy endings, and it teaches us who, and how, rather than why.

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