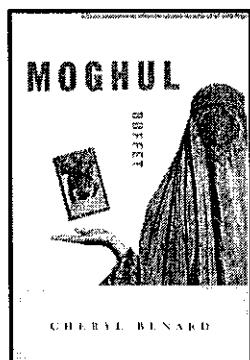


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NoveList



Moghul buffet

Author: Benard, Cheryl, 1953-

Set in Peshawar, a border town in Pakistan, a murder mystery about a missing American businessman offers a glimpse at the situation of women in the Muslim world, from Afghan refugees to maverick women politicians

New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, copyright 1998, 263 p.

Popularity: ★★☆☆

Level: Adult

Subject Headings:

- Feminist fiction -- 20th century
- Women -- Pakistan
- Feminists -- Pakistan
- Muslim women -- Pakistan
- Muslim women -- Social conditions -- Pakistan
- Americans in Pakistan
- Missing persons -- Pakistan
- Detectives -- Pakistan
- Pakistani detectives
- Cultural relations -- Pakistan
- Mystery stories
- Serial murders -- Pakistan
- Pakistan
- Pakistan -- Social conditions
- Pakistan -- Social life and customs

Reviews for this Title:

Booklist Review: Peshawar, a remote city in Pakistan, is the kind of place where hardly anyone wants to be--especially if you're an American businessman trying to avoid the Moghul buffet at the Hotel Kyber. Things go wrong: the businessman is kidnapped, possibly murdered, and a major international scandal brews. Inspector Iqbal is sent from the capital to solve the case, arriving with his wife, Gul, and her friend, Lily, a sophisticated Pakistani journalist and friend to the victim's sister. As more murders occur and Iqbal puzzles, Benard takes readers on a fascinating tour of life in Peshawar. Women are the focus of the book, from Muslim wives struggling to cross the busy streets while swaddled in their *burqas*, to a virtuous village girl, abused by the Pakistani version of a televangelist, through the independent women around Iqbal--women who, in effect, run his investigation for him. With finely honed, double-edged humor, Benard both ridicules the tunnel vision of righteous multiculturalists, while at the same time expressing great compassion for the victims of a society caught in the throes of change. A memorable first novel. ((Reviewed April 15, 1998)) -- Bill Ott

Publishers Weekly Review: Both a wickedly funny cross-cultural comedy of errors and an edgy murder mystery, Benard's lively debut begins with the disappearance of timid, pudgy U.S. businessman Micky Malone in Peshawar, an ultraconservative, crime-ridden Pakistani backwater on the Afghan border. As other corpses pile up (victims include a Pakistani banker, a closeted gay Indian movie star and an anti-American Islamic fundamentalist publisher), dogged but inept Detective Iqbal stumbles from suspect to suspect. Bernard choreographs a series of comic misunderstandings (between East and West, men and women), training withering irony on a range of characters: Mara Blake, an earnest American refugee-camp worker reeling from her failed marriage to a wealthy Pakistani; the Maulana, a self-righteous Islamic fundamentalist televangelist; Fatima, his young housemaid and pregnant sex-slave; and the Maulana's nephew and chauffeur, Mushahed, a leftist economics student in love with Fatima. Even if the comedy occasionally sputters with indignation, Benard nimbly swings from farce to social satire, describing with devastating wit and fiery feminist passion Pakistani sexism, censorship, corruption and human rights abuses. (May)

Library Journal Review: The American director of an Austrian research institute and author of several nonfiction works

(e.g., "The Government of God": Iran's Islamic Republic, LJ 6/1/84), Benard debuts with a surprisingly successful black comedy/mystery reminiscent in its droll narrative style of the works of Australian author Peter Carey. The omniscient narrator weaves together seemingly disparate plotlines featuring rabid Islamic religious leaders, corrupt Pakistanis and Afghans, naive American businessmen, feminists from all cultures and walks of life, journalists and policemen, Afghan refugees, the Taliban, and sexually exploited village girls, creating a compelling whodunit that races along to a bloody climax in the inhospitable desert of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. Micky Malone, a quiet American like so many others trying to follow the rules while doing business in Asia, seems to have been murdered in his Peshawar hotel room, but his body is missing. As more killings occur and notes left at the scene point to a serial killer--clothed in a chaddri, the voluminous woman's coverall de rigueur in the province--tensions mount inexorably. Is the killer working in disguise, or could it be--horrors!--that a lowly woman is offing these creeps? Clever, witty, and politically and culturally on the mark, this book is recommended for all collections.--Jo Manning, formerly with General Books Lib., Reader's Digest

Kirkus Reviews Benard's fiction debut starts out as a crackling mystery set on the Pakistani frontier, but the author's deft blend of humor and suspense lapses into a confusing tangle of subplots. Micky Malone, salesman for a prefab-housing company, gets suckered into a weeklong journey to Peshawar, Pakistan, to close a major deal, The Hotel Khyber Inter-Continental feels frighteningly foreign to novelty-averse Micky, and as his business contact starts making sinister allusions to smuggling, Micky's only comfort lies in his discovery that a female college classmate is living in the area. Fast forward, then, a couple of days, when Iqbal, a big-city detective, is dispatched to Peshawar to investigate Micky's sudden disappearance. Iqbal and Lilly, a journalist, initially focus on Mara Blake, Mickey's college friend, with whom he'd indeed had a brief fling before falling out of sight. But then other bodies start to turn up, suggesting a broader conspiracy. A dizzying cast is introduced before Lilly recognizes the cryptic scrawlings left on the crime scenes as lyrics from a feminist song. Is one of the women--maybe Fatima, a village girl forced into prostitution--the killer? As it turns out, though, Micky isn't dead at all. Ruffled by an unsolicited visit from Fatima, who was impersonating a belly-dancer, he panicked and, with Mara's help, went into hiding in a shed at a remote refugee camp. In a burst of idealistic frenzy born out of crushing boredom, he inspires a pack of Taliban warriors to build a latrine for the women--and, in the meantime, murky explanations of the various killings may or may not hold up under scrutiny, while the author's attempts to weave character sketches into a complex portrait of an Islamic border town also prove only half-successful. The problem: plot and pacing. In her best moments, though, Benard hits a sure tone of fond satire. Still, overall, an overstuffed grab-bag of suspects, victims, and bystanders that invites indifference.

(*Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 1998)

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Biography Resource Center

Cheryl Benard

1953-

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2003.

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"Sidelights"

Scholar and author Cheryl Benard lives on two continents, speaks two languages, and, as a sociologist, works as the research director for the Boltzmann Institute in Vienna, Austria. Additionally, she works as a consultant for the RAND Corporation think tank--specifically, the Center for Middle East Public Policy in Washington, D.C. Interestingly, Benard's nonfiction books written in German, have also appeared in Spanish, Turkish, French, Hungarian, and Russian; the one language in which she has never published books about women's issues is English.

Benard met her husband, Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy to Afghanistan, at the University of Chicago when he was working on his doctorate. They have two children and live in North Potomac, Maryland, but Benard also maintains a home in Austria. Talking to an *Amazon.com* interviewer about how she went from writing scholarly articles as an assistant professor to writing fiction, Benard said, "it didn't seem right to take interesting material, lively interviews, and absorbing case histories and then publish them only in dry professional journals, so I wrote a popular version of my first research project, it was well received and I just kept going on that path."

Benard's first novel published in the United States, *Moghul Buffet*, is set in the border frontier town of Peshwar, Pakistan. The story focuses on several characters: Mara Blake, an American who works in a refugee camp and struggles to recover from her broken marriage to a Pakistani aristocrat; the Maulana, an Islamic fundamentalist televangelist; Fatima, the Maulana's young mistress and housemaid; and his nephew and chauffeur, Mushahed, an economics student who has fallen in love with Fatima. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor remarked that although Benard's novel had great potential, "the author's deft blend of humor and suspense lapses into a confusing tangle of subplots." Jo Manning, however, reviewing the novel for *Library Journal*, noted that "Benard debuts with a surprisingly successful black comedy/mystery reminiscent in its droll narrative style of the works of Australian author Peter Carey." In addition, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that "Benard nimbly swings from farce to social satire."

Benard's second novel, *Turning on the Girls*, is part science fiction, part feminist comedy. The story takes place in the middle of the twenty-first century, ten years after women have taken over the world. In this new world order, aromatherapy is used in the workplace, and an entire bureaucracy is devoted to de-programming men and women of patriarchal thought patterns. Lisa, the protagonist, is an operative of the Ministry of Thought, whose task is to find an acceptable sexual fantasy for women. In the process, she infiltrates Harmony, a counterrevolutionary men's movement, with Justin, her administrative assistant. A *Booklist* reviewer commented, "If Dorothy Parker had written *Brave New World*, it might have resembled Benard's satiric vision of a utopia designed and run by women." Janelle Brown, in *Salon.com*, found the novel, at times, "laugh-out-loud funny," particularly when it mocks gender theory; however, Brown also remarked that Benard's "plot gets so convoluted that it's impossible to follow, and even more difficult to care." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor, meanwhile, remarked, "this contra-Atwoodesque social fiction may satirize political correctness, but it also manages to salute present and future feminist triumphs, albeit in a roundabout fashion."

In a *Borders Books Web site* online interview, Benard told Jessica Jernigan: "I wanted to write a realistic utopian novel. So I took what I know about feminism and about women's ways of approaching things, including the annoying and exasperating parts, and extrapolated. They tend to be meddlesome, to micromanage, to know what's best for everybody, to be on the hypersensitive alert at all times, to lack a sense of humor, and to be competitive and back-stabbing while pretending they're not. There's a politburo aspect to organized feminism."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born 1953, in New Orleans, LA; married Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad (U.S. envoy to Afghanistan); children: Alexander, Max.
Addresses: Agent: c/o Publicity Director, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 19 Union Square W., New York, NY 10001.

CAREER

Writer, consultant, and sociologist. Bltzmann Institute, Vienna, Austria, research director; consultant on Middle Eastern affairs for RAND Corporation.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

FICTION

- *The Moghul Buffet*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Turning on the Girls*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 2001.

NONFICTION

- (With Zalmay Khalilzad) *"The Government of God": Iran's Islamic Republic*, Columbia University Press (New York, NY), 1984.
- (With Daniel Byman and others) *Strengthening the Partnership: Improving Military Coordination with Relief Agencies and Allies in Humanitarian Operations*, RAND Corporation (Washington, DC), 2000.
- *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 2002.

Contributor to periodicals and author of nonfiction books, primarily on women's issues, published in German. Benard's work has been translated into several languages, including Spanish and Turkish.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 15, 1998, Bill Ott, review of *Moghul Buffet*; February 15, 2001, Bonnie Johnston, review of *Turning on the Girls*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 15, 1998, review of *Moghul Buffet*.
- *Library Journal*, March 1, 1998, Jo Manning, review of *Moghul Buffet*.
- *People*, April 27, 1998, review of *Moghul Buffet*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 23, 1998, review of *Moghul Buffet*; 2001, review of *Turning on the Girls*.

OTHER

- *Amazon.com*, <http://www.amazon.com/> (March 7, 2001), interview with Cheryl Benard.
- *Borders Books Web site*, www.bordersstores.com/ (February 2, 2002), Jessica Jernigan, "Grrr! Talk Interview: Women on Top."
- *Salon.com*, www.salon.com/ (April 23, 2001), Janelle Brown, review of *Turning on the Girls*.*

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Mystery & Thriller Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. How is the book structured? Does the author use any narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect your reading of the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
3. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read his or her favorite passage out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) How does this particular passage relate to the story as a whole? Does it reveal anything specific about any of the characters or illuminate certain aspects of the story?
4. Discuss the mystery aspect of the plotline. How effective is the author's use of plot twists and red herrings? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened, or did the author keep you guessing until the end of the story? Did you find that the novel held everyone's interest throughout the story, or were there times when it failed to totally engross members of the group?
5. How important is the setting to the story? If applicable, discuss the time period in which the book is set. Does the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story?
6. What is the most important part of a mystery or thriller to each member of the group—characterization, action, dialogue, or setting? How does this book rate in each of these areas?
7. Is this book part of a series? If so, did your group read the series in order? How has reading the books in order—or not reading them in order—affected your group's enjoyment of the book? How does this book stack up against others in the series?
8. Is the author equally invested in both character and plot? Or did the author put more effort into developing the story than in creating



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compelling and believable characters? Were the motivations of the characters believable, or did their actions feel like a means to further the plot?

9. Agatha Christie wrote in her autobiography about her dislike of mysteries having a romantic subplot. Do you agree or disagree with her views? Did this book have an element of romance? If so, do you feel the love aspect enhanced or detracted from the story?
10. Would you recommend this work to a non mystery/thriller fan simply on the basis of its literary merit? Would you endorse it purely because of the skillful writing and the well-developed characters? Or do you think the work would strictly appeal to fans of the mystery/thriller genre.
11. Is your group familiar with the author's previous works? If so, did this book live up to or exceed your expectations of the author?
12. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read more work by this author?

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