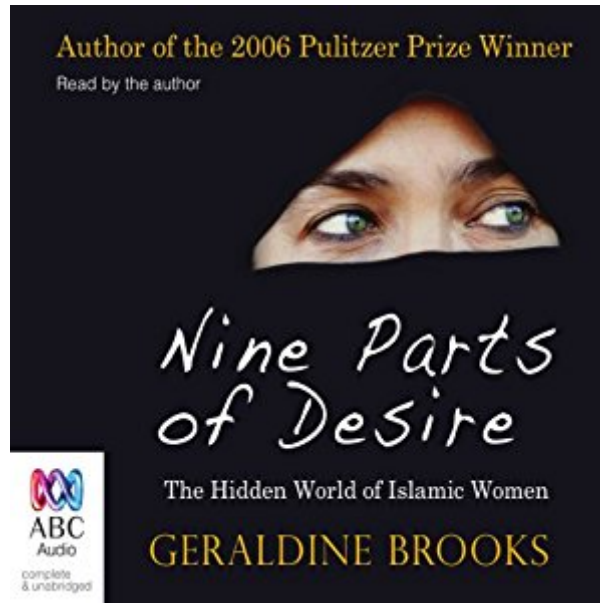


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Nine Parts Of Desire: The Hidden World Of Islamic Women



Synopsis

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women is the story of Brooks' intrepid journey toward an understanding of the women behind the veils, and of the often contradictory political, religious, and cultural forces that shape their lives. In fundamentalist Iran, Brooks finagles an invitation to tea with the ayatollah's widow-and discovers that Mrs. Khomeini dyes her hair. In Saudi Arabia, she eludes the severe segregation of the sexes and attends a bacchanal, laying bare the hypocrisy of this austere, male-dominated society. In war-torn Ethiopia, she watches as a female gynecologist repairs women who have undergone genital mutilation justified by a distorted interpretation of Islam. In villages and capitals throughout the Middle East, she finds that a feminism of sorts has flowered under the forbidding shroud of the chador as she makes other startling discoveries that defy our stereotypes about the Muslim world. Nine Parts of Desire is much more than a captivating work of firsthand reportage; it is also an acute analysis of the world's fastest-growing religion, deftly illustrating how Islam's holiest texts have been misused to justify the repression of women. It was, after all, the Shiite leader Ali who proclaimed that "God created sexual desire in ten parts, then gave nine parts to women."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Books on Islam generate a lot of controversy these days, especially after 9/11. Having read several I found this one fairly balanced. Brooks is a reporter by trade, which at times leads to a bit of superficiality in the treatment of complex topics but on the whole makes this a relatively

dispassionate treatment of women and Islam. Of course Brooks brings a Western point of view to her subject, and is intensely critical of a system where women are subject to male family members with few personal rights. She is careful to point out that Islamic law does provide for inheritance by women and allows a type of pre-marriage contract that can protect them from the husband's polygamy, give them the right of divorce, establish that their education will be allowed to continue, etc. But one suspects that these privileges are available only to the wealthy as a practical matter. Brooks is careful to distinguish various Muslim societies from one another, just as one sees huge differences among Christian countries. She along with most authors I've read has little good to say about Saudi Arabia. But interestingly, she identifies Iran as a more progressive society in which women are permitted to work and participate in politics. And Egypt is described as having a lively, sensual culture that she believes will never be snuffed out by fundamentalists. One of the more disturbing chapters of the book deals with education. The number of women in school is unacceptably low, education often ceases as women are wed at a very early age, and much schooling is focused on the study of Islam. Even more disturbing is the increasing control fundamentalists exert over educational institutions, which results in a student body much more conservative than the faculty who were educated in more open-minded times.

This is an exquisitely written book. Brooks has great talent for pulling the reader into the mind of the people she tells about, and especially, I found as a man, pulling you into the minds and lives of women. I found myself empathizing with the women in ways that only real life can provide. It is amazing what Brooks has experienced, but it is far more amazing what the women she tells of have experienced. Brooks writes honestly and directly about the good and bad of Islam, and how it influences women. She doesn't pull any punches, but also is not writing to denigrate, as she finds aspects of official and folk Islam that both hurt and assist women. She speaks of the positive attitude Islam has towards sexuality, being largely uncorrupted by the Greek dualism that invaded later Christianity, so that, within marriage, Muslims are encouraged to celebrate the gift of God in sex. Indeed, this provides the title of the book, as Ali, the 4th Khalifa, speaks of how sexual desire is 1/10th the man's, and 9/10ths the woman's. Of course, this provides later motive to sequester women, put them in hijab, and restrict them, so that the "ever-devouring vagina", as later Islamic jurists speak of, does not overcome the men around them. Since Brooks relies primarily on her experiences, with what she's seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears, she is hard to argue with. This is the plight of many women in the Muslim world. But lest we think these are limited experiences of one Western woman talking with a few Arab and Persian women scattered in a few

countries, Brooks has also done extensive research to intersperse between her stories- relying on the Qur'an, Hadith, Ijtihad, and Muslim history.

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