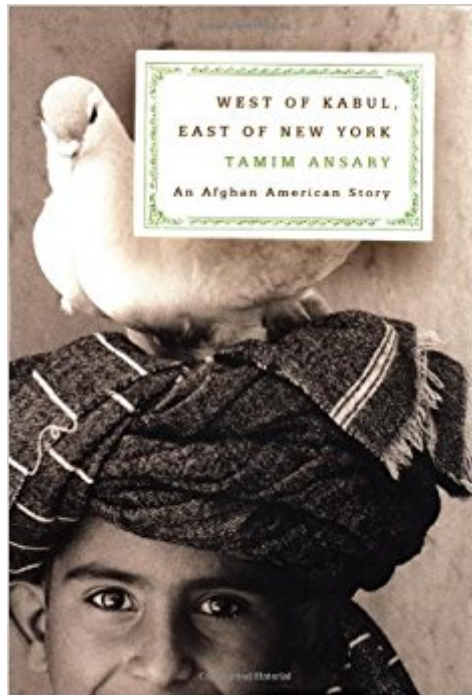


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# West Of Kabul, East Of New York: An Afghan American Story



## Synopsis

A passionate personal journey through two cultures in conflict Shortly after militant Islamic terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center, Tamim Ansary of San Francisco sent an e-mail to twenty friends, telling how the threatened U.S. reprisals against Afghanistan looked to him as an Afghan American. The message spread, and in a few days it had reached, and affected, millions of people-Afghans and Americans, soldiers and pacifists, conservative Christians and talk-show hosts; for the message, written in twenty minutes, was one Ansary had been writing all his life. West of Kabul, East of New York is an urgent communiqué by an American with "an Afghan soul still inside me," who has lived in the very different worlds of Islam and the secular West. The son of an Afghan man and the first American woman to live as an Afghan, Ansary grew up in the intimate world of Afghan family life, one never seen by outsiders. No sooner had he emigrated to San Francisco than he was drawn into the community of Afghan expatriates sustained by the dream of returning to their country -and then drawn back to the Islamic world himself to discover the nascent phenomenon of militant religious fundamentalism. Tamim Ansary has emerged as one of the most eloquent voices on the conflict between Islam and the West. His book is a deeply personal account of the struggle to reconcile two great civilizations and to find some point in the imagination where they might meet.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Any carping about this being an instant book should be quelled when readers actually encounter Ansary's considered prose prose he himself contrasts to the e-mailed commentary he fired off on

September 12 that found its way to millions of readers around the world (including FSG editorial). The e-mail, printed here in an appendix, included such comments as "When you think `Taliban,' think `Nazis.' When you think `Bin Laden,' think `Hitler.' And when you think `the people of Afghanistan,' think `the Jews in the concentration camps.' " Ansary, the son of a Pashtun Afghan father and Finnish-American mother, lived as a Muslim outside of Kabul until the early '60s, when he left on scholarship to attend an American high school, eventually going on to college and becoming an educational writer ("if you have children, they have probably read or used some product I have edited or written") with a family of his own in San Francisco. This book chronicles, with calm insight and honesty, Ansary's feelings at all points: his childhood spent within his "clan" ("our group self was just as real as our individual selves, perhaps more so"), a narrative of his often fascinating 1980 trip ("Looking for Islam") throughout the Muslim world that makes up the bulk of the book, and dissections of the differing paths taken by his sister, brother and himself. While Ansary's political insights can be detached or perhaps purposefully aloof his descriptions of having lived in and identified alternately with the West and the Islamic world are utterly compelling.

Some books are timely by accident, some through a prescience that conveys mystique upon their authors; either makes a writer's reputation. This book is a consequence of specific events last September, intended and only understandable within that recent, collective, and perhaps forever unfixable knowledge. Stripped of that context, this would be an insightful but somewhat plodding autobiography. Ansary, who was raised in pre-Russian-client Afghanistan, the son of an exemplar of that nation's civil elite and of an American his father met while studying abroad, moved to the United States in time to live out college and urban cool in the Sixties and Seventies. But this Afghan American, writing in response to one awful day and in fact extending to book-length some of the notions he posited in a widely read e-mail on September 12, 2001, tells truths about dislocation, heritage, home, family, and religion that both affirm life and profoundly sadden. Ansary's account of how his brother chose to stay "east of New York," of his travels through Muslim communities at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, and of his personal collision with conspiracy theory are particularly unsettling and worth any reader's time. Recommended for high school, public, and academic libraries of all stripes. Scott H. Silverman, Bryn Mawr Coll. Lib., PA Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

The author writes in a very straightforward style. I can't decide whether this is an asset. Very good for high schoolers or those just starting college. Not quite so much so for adults. Basically shortly

after the memoir begins, we see the author as a hippie college student-- a young adult living in San Francisco. His life is proliferated. Afghan Father, American Mother, upper class in Afghanistan, schooled in English as well as other languages, growing into his teen years in Afghanistan in a semi-cloistered environment. Then, he comes to live in America at age sixteen! Because he has one foot in Afghanistan and one in America, he feels conflicted, although he desperately wants to be an American kid. Factor in the 1960s ethos, the exaggerated hippie lifestyle in San Francisco at his time, the excellent but "do it yourself" college he attended. Then add his close extended family here and abroad and combine this with outside muslim pressures. The above is a recipe for his search to "find" himself. The book is about this journey-- rejecting extreme religiosity which is fomenting abroad, willingly losing his Afghan family (and roots) and coming to terms with this while achieving happiness, success and constructing a new family here as he matures. Some of the best parts of Ansary's story detail the complete honesty of his feelings toward his very close original family particularly his Father, who stayed in Afghanistan. He is unapologetic about his rejection of his place of birth, the obvious all-consuming religion and culture of worship. He ultimately embraces his American life wholeheartedly. This is powerful, simple in some ways, a quick read that reminds us that people are individuals first.

I enjoyed reading this book, which I chose for an English project in high school. Ansary provides an interesting and insightful look into what Afghani life was like before the country was modernized. This biography takes you through the stages in which some in the Islamic world became radicalized and exactly why it happened. This information provides some good insight about how the current conflicts of today began and what has been attempted to prevent them. Reading the path of his life was an engaging experience, making you sometimes laugh or feel really sorry for him as he goes through his life blindly in a way. Looking back he provides insight about whether he thought his choices were good or bad, but he has had a very interesting life relevant to today's society.

An enjoyable and yet poignant account of growing up Afghan and American. Mr. Ansary's descriptions of living as a child within the US-sponsored Helmand Valley Authority capture the ambiguities of America's desire to help and remake the world, while the account of his adult travels in search of his Islamic heritage reveal how difficult (impossible?) it is to truly connect with a world that existed 1400 years ago. (Think about those individuals who believe we can somehow return to the "original" meanings of the Constitution.) I'm writing this from Afghanistan, where I regularly ask my Afghan friends about the correct way to pray, particularly the requirement (described in the

book) to extend the little finger while the rest are closed. This question is always good for some laughs, and has led to the following observation from them: Look, life is tough in Afghanistan, and the individual may be a practicing Muslim who doesn't like Americans, but the reality is survival: no one cares about ideology or religion, it's whatever we have to do to live. That explained my question about the secret policemen who had entered service under the communists, supported the Russians, worked for the Taliban, and now served the Karzai regime. Afghanistan will somehow survive, not as an American clone but as itself. This book is a good introduction to comprehending this world. My only question (piqued by a recent article in the Washington Post) is whether (or how) he remained friends with his siblings: an older sister who embraced America and a younger brother who sought meaning in a fundamentalist version of Islam.

An interesting insight into the life of an afghan native who is now a United States Citizen. This will give one a feeling of what life in the East is like versus life in the west aka; a Christian perspective versus an Islamic upbringing. Very enlightening. This is not a proselytizing work, but helps one to understand what life in the East and growing up as a Muslim was and is like. This does help one to understand that All Muslims are not Bad and out to destroy anyone who disagrees with their beliefs..

This is a great book that I highly recommend to anyone with an open mind and curious spirit. I read it for my AP History class and despite all of the notes I had to take and papers I had to write, I thoroughly enjoyed it (I actually enjoyed exploring some subjects he wrote about in several of my papers)!

Published in 2002 but still in 2013 remains engrossing and highly informative about recent and contemporary Afghanistan and about author Tamim Ansary's childhood life there and his subsequent ongoing interaction with the land of his birth (Afghanistan) from the land of his birthright citizenship (United States). Ansary is a gifted writer. The journey through the book goes quickly. Be prepared for this account to seize you and not let go until the last page.

This should be required reading for every high school student, as this portrays the true and noble spirit of the afghan people, very much in contrast to that provided by western media. I am grateful to read this very touching story of their culture and history.

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