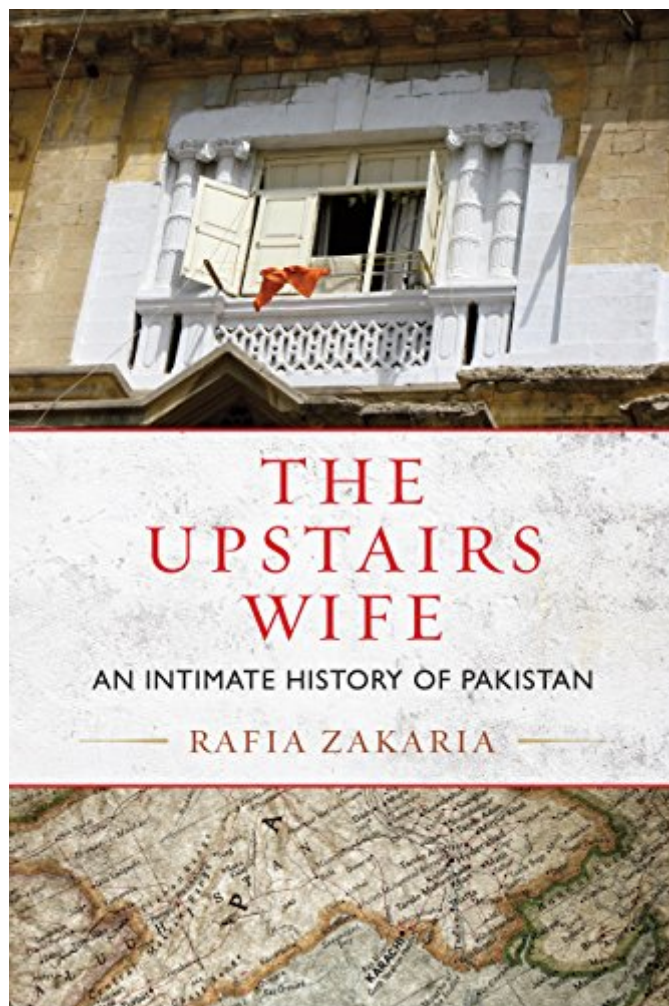


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The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History Of Pakistan



Synopsis

A memoir of Karachi through the eyes of its women An Indies Introduce Debut Authors Selection

For a brief moment on December 27, 2007, life came to a standstill in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto, the country's former prime minister and the first woman ever to lead a Muslim country, had been assassinated at a political rally just outside Islamabad. Back in Karachi—Bhutto's birthplace and Pakistan's other great metropolis—Rafia Zakaria's family was suffering through a crisis of its own: her Uncle Sohail, the man who had brought shame upon the family, was near death. In that moment these twin catastrophes—one political and public, the other secret and intensely personal—briefly converged.

Zakaria uses that moment to begin her intimate exploration of the country of her birth. Her Muslim-Indian family immigrated to Pakistan from Bombay in 1962, escaping the precarious state in which the Muslim population in India found itself following the Partition. For them, Pakistan represented enormous promise. And for some time, Zakaria's family prospered and the city prospered. But in the 1980s, Pakistan's military dictators began an Islamization campaign designed to legitimate their rule—a campaign that particularly affected women's freedom and safety. The political became personal when her aunt Amina's husband, Sohail, did the unthinkable and took a second wife, a humiliating and painful betrayal of kin and custom that shook the foundation of Zakaria's family but was permitted under the country's new laws. The young Rafia grows up in the shadow of Amina's shame and fury, while the world outside her home turns ever more chaotic and violent as the opportunities available to post-Partition immigrants are dramatically curtailed and terrorism sows its seeds in Karachi.

Telling the parallel stories of Amina's polygamous marriage and Pakistan's hopes and betrayals, *The Upstairs Wife* is an intimate exploration of the disjunction between exalted dreams and complicated realities.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed reading the book, however at the same time; I was saddened by the developments that occurred in Pakistan, specially Karachi, ever since the 1980s Afghan War. While I was growing up in Karachi, it was a peaceful and fun place. I left before the war started, but I have been back many times since then, and I have seen the deterioration of the city only from the fringes. The book gave me a real insight into the events that transformed the city for the worse. As the book described, the great influx of people from the north to Karachi caused ethnic, economical social and security stresses upon the city. The corrupt politicians and military are to blame equally for the mess. The city grew haphazardly with pockets of ethnicity and total lack of proper infrastructure. This book in some ways reminded me of another book written years ago, "Maximum City" written by Suketu Mehta. The parallel story in the book about author's Aunt Amina was depressing and heartening, whereby Uncle Sohail and his two wives lived in two separate stories of the same house for twenty years. There was not only a great animosity between the two wives to the extent that had not seen each other until the very end of the book. From personal experience, I can tell you that this is highly unusual situation. While I was growing up in Pakistan, I knew of only one family with two wives to a man. I did not know all the details of their relationships; of course, but it was certainly not anything like that the trio in the book. Zakaria's book is written very well. Once I started the book, I had a hard time in putting it down. As far as I know, "The Upstairs Wife" is Zakaria's first book. I look forward to reading her future creations. I would highly recommend this book to anyone wanting to read a well written story detailing the poignant history of Karachi. Adil Ashary

I really enjoyed this book. The interweaving of the history of the "upstairs wife" and the history of

Pakistan is, for the most part, admirably done. Some passages are a bit melodramatic; but, overall, those are rarities in this well-written and informative book. It is a great introduction to a fascinating culture. However, if you are seeking a pure macro level history of Pakistan I recommend looking elsewhere.

Recent history of Pakistan told alongside and in contrast and comparison with the recent "herstory" of a devout Muslim plural wife. The writer has a light hand and achieves a deft balance of fact with story, multiple plots and character. The story is permeated by the writer's love of and sympathy for her country and also, earnestly strives for objectivity in the telling of its tale.

A fascinating and wrenching view of Pakistani history seen through the lens of one woman's/one family's personal history. It is well written and flows easily, but is not "easy to read," especially if you're a woman or like women.

Very interesting profile of Pakistan. Well written.

A good read even if a bit sad.

interesting and easy read.

An excellent look into current life in Pakistan and also some historical background. The author weaves together her family experience into the history of the country.

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