

Reading Group Guide

Lipstick in Afghanistan

Roberta Gately

Elsa Murphy is a serious, sweet Boston girl whose tough childhood made her want nothing more than to truly help people. After working tirelessly to finish nursing school and sweating through long hours in the ER, she decides to volunteer with *Aide Du Monde*, a world relief organization. Elsa feels it's the best way to put her nursing skills to use, and secretly, she longs to leave Boston and add some color to her life. But she has no idea what to expect when she is posted to a rural clinic in Afghanistan, just after 9/11.

From the moment she sets foot in Bamiyan, Elsa knows her life will forever be changed by what she sees, and who she befriends. There's spirited Parween, a young mother who's been forced to silently accept the horrors the Taliban inflicted on her family and friends, but who longs to throw off her veil and fight back. And there's Mike, a handsome engineer in the U.S. Special Forces who teaches Elsa what it truly means to love. But when an innocent venture to a nearby town puts them in grave danger from a Taliban guerilla unit, Elsa and her friends must fight for their lives—and Elsa discovers the real power that comes from friendship, and the strength she never knew she had.

Discussion Questions

- 1.) Throughout the novel, Elsa is somewhat naïve in her motivations and expectations. Do you see this as a positive or negative quality? Do you think that her naivety is what really allowed her to embrace Bamiyan and be less of an “outsider,” or do you think it blinded her to the constant danger of her situation, making her reckless when she ought to have been careful?
- 2.) Elsa says to Mike, “If you're still coming to dinner tonight—and I hope you are—you'll see *my* Afghanistan—good friends and gentle people.” Do you agree that even under such volatile circumstances, there can be such a dichotomy of views? That a soldier could never look at the place and people around him the same way a nurse or aid worker could, and that even though they're physically in the same location, their experiences are vastly different?
- 3.) The story is narrated in third-person limited; that is, we see through the experiences of Elsa, and at times, through the experiences of Parween. Why do you think the author chose to write it this way? Was there another character that you wished to see at the center of the narration?
- 4.) What did you think about Elsa's relationship with Mike? Do you think it would have progressed so quickly had they met under different circumstances? Do you think that being in Bamiyan gave Elsa a kind of courage that the Boston Elsa would never have had? Do you think the fact that they both sought familiarity in a foreign land (and found it in each other) made for a deeper relationship, or is that a superficial (albeit passionate) connection that might not last in a place like Boston?
- 5.) Before the encounter with the Taliban guerillas, Elsa tells Mike of her plans to go “to Rwanda, or well...anywhere they need us” (286). Do you think she will follow through on that plan after all that has happened, perhaps by joining the UN? Do you think she feels like she owes it to

Parween to continue to help people? Do you feel *Aide du Monde's* decision to have her replaced was warranted?

- 6.) *Lipstick in Afghanistan* has many strong female characters. Think about all the different women who impact Elsa's life: Margaret, Maureen, Parween, Amina, Rahima, and Laila. What does Elsa learn from each of these women at various points of the novel? What do you think they learn from her? Think about the women who play a significant role in your life. What can you learn from them?
- 7.) To a great extent, the male characters in the novel are quite clearly good (Uncle Abdullah, Mike, Hamid, Raziq) or evil (Mariam's husband, the members of the Taliban, Noor Mohammed). How did you feel about the portrayal of men? Did you find it accurate, or too simple? What about the fact that men were shown as both victims and perpetrators of crimes, while women were almost solely victims?
- 8.) When Elsa tells Parween that she is angry at Mike for saying that he'd shoot Hamid if he had to, Parween's reaction surprises her. Parween says, "Things are not always as complicated as you make them, Elsa. You are like a tree—strong, yes—but rigid, too rigid...when you see Mike, and you will, ask him if he'd save Hamid. That is the only question you should ask." (256). Do you agree with Parween and Mike's point of view? Or do you feel that Elsa is right to try and see the complexity of the situation—to want to always judge people on an individual basis, as impossible as it may be?
- 9.) Parween willingly risks everything when she jumps from the tree and attempts to surprise the Taliban members from behind. What do you think of her decision? Do you think it was selfish—that she should have considered her mother and her daughters and the life they'd have without her before risking her life? Or do you think it was selfless—that her risk was a way to try and ensure a better future for her daughters, and for all women?
- 10.) The story of the lady rebel is very significant throughout the novel. What do you think the legend symbolizes? What did you think about the fact that Parween, through her death, becomes the embodiment of the legend? How else does the idea of rebellion manifest through the book?
- 11.) Do you think karma and/or fate play significant roles in the story? Support your answer with examples from the text.
- 12.) Were you left with a sense of hope at the end of the novel—that things would be better for the women in Bamiyan (and also Elsa), or was there a lingering feeling of futility? Do the themes in this fictional account relate at all to your real world perspectives on war and change?
- 13.) The title of the book is *Lipstick in Afghanistan*. Discuss the significance of lipstick to the women in the novel. What does it mean to Elsa? To Parween and Mariam? If you had to pick one overarching idea or theme for it to symbolize, what would it be?

Enhance your Bookclub

- 1.) Do you have an item that is to you what lipstick is for Elsa? Something you could never travel to a foreign country without? Have each member bring their “lipstick” to the bookclub and discuss!
- 2.) The Hazaras are a real tribe in Afghanistan. Do some research on their culture and way of life, and have each member present an interesting fact.
- 3.) Visit the International Rescue Committee’s website at www.theirc.org to see how you can help the people of Afghanistan or the millions of other refugees around the world.