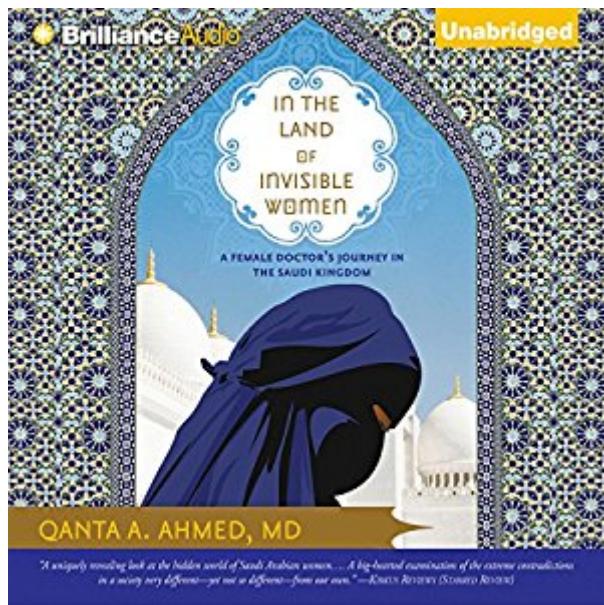


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In The Land Of Invisible Women: A Female Doctor's Journey In The Saudi Kingdom



Synopsis

The decisions that change your life are often the most impulsive ones. Unexpectedly denied a visa to remain in the United States, Qanta Ahmed, a young British Muslim doctor, becomes an outcast in motion. On a whim, she accepts an exciting position in Saudi Arabia. This is not just a new job; this is a chance at adventure in an exotic land she thinks she understands, a place she hopes she will belong. What she discovers is vastly different. The Kingdom is a world apart, a land of unparalleled contrast. She finds rejection and scorn in the places she believed would most embrace her, but also humor, honesty, loyalty, and love. And for Qanta, more than anything, it is a land of opportunity. It is a place where she discovers what it takes for one woman to recreate herself in the land of invisible women.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In Dr. Qanta Ahmed's memoir, the doctor describes the two years she spent practicing medicine at the National Guard Hospital, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Dr. Ahmed relates her experiences while living in the Kingdom. Dr. Qanta Ahmed is British born and educated, of Pakistani Muslim heritage, and was practicing medicine in the USA when her visa was not extended. Dr. Ahmed decided to take a lucrative position offered in Saudi Arabia. Upon landing in the desert Kingdom, Dr. Ahmed felt the first insult to her gender, after her passport was confiscated by her male guide. Dr. Ahmed explains the origins of Wahabiism, a movement founded by Mohammed bin Abdul Wahad, who died in 1792. Dr. Ahmed reiterates throughout the book that Wahabiism,

protected and promoted by the Saudiâ€™s is a distortion of Islam. Dr Qanta is clear and concise in the defense of her religion while denouncing the subjugation of women, anti-Semitism, and terrorism.

This is a book that seems to attempt two things. First, it is a memoir of one female doctor's experience working in Saudi Arabia for two years. Although Muslim, she is Western born and educated which makes Saudi Arabia in many ways a culture shock for her, as it probably would for any Westerner. Secondly, it describes what life is like for women in Saudi Arabia. Each purpose, unfortunately, seems to get in the way of the other. It is not written well enough to be a superior memoir, and because it is a memoir, it offers less information that one would wish for from a nonfiction study about an unfamiliar country. In fairness to this author, however, she is a medical doctor licensed in four specialties: internal medicine, pulmonary disease, critical care, and sleep disorders. It would be a miracle if she also were a wonderful writer. Don't get me wrong--she does not write badly, but has a frustrating tendency of overusing adjectives and stretching out a story until it snaps. Less is more sometimes and an editor should have helped her trim out some of the fat here. In short, read this book for its content, not for the writing (although you might find yourself wishing for more of the former than the book actually delivers). Capitalizing on a key tension in the book, the author does a good job of presenting her love of Islam and her dislike of many aspects of the Islamic STATE. She loves the people, the food, and so on. It was hard at times, however, to square her intense love of some elements of this society with her intense loathing of others. Not everyone could compartmentalize things as much as she is able to do, which makes her perspective compelling. One can learn some fascinating things about Saudi Arabia here; it's odd, for instance, that a country can be so advanced in some ways but so primitive in others. The author does a good job of highlighting its contrasts in many areas of life. Less fascinating, and somewhat disappointing, is a plot line that the author draws out (and this is a memoir, so I don't use the word plot to mean fiction, here) and that ends up being kind of a tease. It is elongated and seems as if it is headed in a particular direction but ends up falling flat, which I found to be a complete letdown. If she intended to string the reader along, then she succeeded. A long series of chapters about the Hajj may or may not appeal to some readers, but this section for me seemed way too long. Essentially, what interested me most about "In the Land of Invisible Women" was the information about Saudis and Saudi life rather than this one doctor's personal experiences in Saudi Arabia.

It's definitely an interesting book told from an interesting perspective: that of a Westerner for all intents and purposes, living in the Middle East with limited understanding of the culture. Dr. Ahmed's fears and bewilderments as she encounters this new world are eye opening to any woman from the western culture. I was in horror as I read about an incident where she and some friends feared for their lives as they were pursued by young Saudi men in another car after a party. Dr. Ahmed does a great job conveying the situation and the fear they must have felt. Other people she met were gracious and lovely helping her to learn her way in a strict Muslim setting. The only thing that I found off-putting about the book was her focus on material *things* and brand-names. From what she drove in New York City (her beloved Mercedes-Benz) to what wealthy Saudi women were wearing (Gucci, etc.). I am still unsure as to why she needed to be so heavily focused on this, and it made me wonder about her own priorities. It's a good book club book, as there is a lot that can be discussed.

It is interesting subject matter, and fun to see the culture from the authors perspective, but the author is a terrible writer. She is not going to get an award for exemplary writing anytime soon, but her experience was worth sharing. It is a quick read, and worth it.

In the Land of Invisible Woman offers a window into a world I will never experience, so I'm glad that I read it. But a more interventionist editor could have made this a much better book. So often in this book we find out that when a woman removed her full-body veil that she was stunningly beautiful and fashionable. This is either a cliche or an insight into social class, and probably both. The author lacked the self-awareness to make her observations more than special pleading. Whether the frequent recourse to designer goods to establish an individual's worth is the author's superficiality or a deeper social pathology resulting from the veiling of the human body remains a mystery to me. Still, one learns much about Saudi Arabia, and this is satisfying. Hearing the author's religious testimony about her visit to Mecca gives the book a great deal of value. But, this very personal dimension is the book's shortcoming. The immediate testimony of the individual is valuable, but lacks broader points of view to give the personal testimony broader insight. In fact, the lack of broader perspectives makes the author's comments about gender sound more like gossip than insight. By analogy, the point of view in this book reminds me of being inside the head of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, only instead of being inside Elizabeth's head, I was trapped inside Mrs. Bennet's.

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