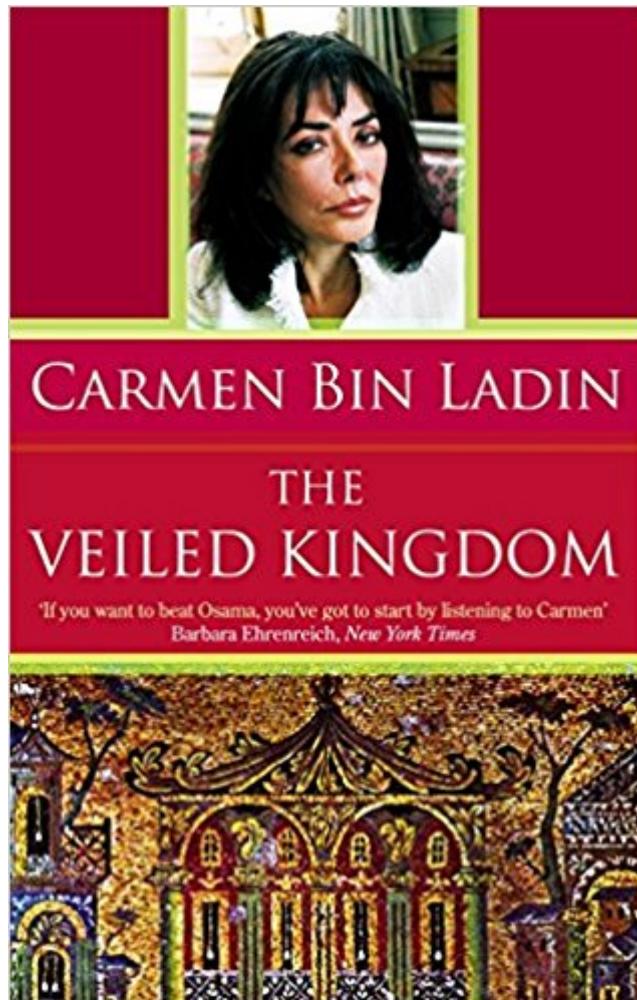


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The Veiled Kingdom



Synopsis

On September 11th 2001, Carmen Bin Laden heard the news on the radio that the Twin Towers had been struck. She instinctively knew that her brother-in-law was involved in these horrifying acts of terrorism, and her heart went out to America. She also knew that her life and the lives of her family would never be the same again. In 1974 Carmen, half Swiss and half Persian, married into the Bin Laden family and found herself inside a complex and vast clan, part of a society that at that point she neither knew nor understood. Determined to protect her daughters from the inevitable restrictions within a society riddled with hypocrisy and contradiction, in 1985 Carmen moved back to her home country, Switzerland. Carmen's story takes us inside one of the most powerful, secretive and repressive kingdoms in the world and the Bin Laden family's role within it, and she is one of the few women to have acquired, through her husband, intimate knowledge of the inner workings of this society. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'If you want to beat Osama, you've got to start by listening to Carmen' - Barbara Ehrenreich, New York Times 'A searing indictment of a society and a family perverted by fanaticism ... a terrifying insight into the psychology of Al-Qaeda.' - Times --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Carmen Bin Laden lives in Switzerland with her three daughters. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I really enjoyed her first book, whose title I can't now recall as it was a library book, and had high hopes for this book, but it appears to be a copy of the first book, under a different title. That being said, if you did not read the first book, this one is fascinating in its description of her life in Saudi Arabia. It gives detailed insights into the life and customs of that country, and the Muslim world.

An insight into the mysterious Saudi kingdom, which tourists cannot visit without a written invitation. Carmen bin Laden married the brother of Osama (one of some 20 or so siblings) and found to her dismay that she became a virtual prisoner there, completely at the mercy of her husband's family. Born and raised in Switzerland and a completely western woman, the shocking discovery of her new status occurred upon her arrival in Saudi Arabia for her wedding. Her battle to remain a free woman and raise her daughters in the western way, her story is riveting.

The author lived with her divorced Persian mother in Switzerland. The author met her husband, Yeslam bin Ladin (Laden is the extended family name), who was a younger brother of Osama bin Laden. Her courtship extended between Europe and California, where both went to college. With the extended family wealth, they lived in Saudi Arabia, but took frequent trips to Europe and America. While in S.A., she detailed her experiences while living in wearing the Chador cloak, and the problems of not being able to drive a car, nor could she even walk across the street from her house to her cousin's house alone - she had to have a male companion. She details not being able to visit a cinema, go swimming, no concerts - a restricted, boring 'lassitude' lifestyle for women. She never saw one of her many (40) sisters-in-law read a book. She had a tennis court built so that she could play tennis, but she had to have the tennis rackets imported through diplomatic bags - so that the customs officials could not confiscate them. She learned that both Saudi men and hired male servants would not listen to her commands - she had to find some male relative to give instructions. She noted the time that when a young Saudi female refused to marry a prince, she tried to flee the country, but was captured and shot (p. 107). She met Osama only a couple of times, and talked with him only very briefly - but she saw his hatred towards the 'West.' She did the lesser umra pilgrimage to the Kaaba. As she bore only daughters, her marriage crumbled, he was ignoring her, and she finally caught him 'dating' another woman. She sought a divorce in Europe, but as her husband disputed it - the divorce proceedings barely crawled through the European court system. Not until after the 9/11/2001 New York Twin Towers attack, was the author able to finally convince a European judge to grant her a divorce - from the bin Laden family. She was able to keep her daughters in New York City, rather than allowing her ex entice them to return to Saudi Arabia and

keep her from seeing them. As dancing was forbidden, she took her daughters to Europe to learn social dancing. Maids ironed on the carpet, rather than getting an ironing board. Other families would not allow their maids to sit on the coaches. Carmen discusses Saudi customs, but doesn't explain their tie-ins to the hadith; observances, but no serious religious analysis. Not a deep, detailed study of Saudi life (dolls were faceless, foreigners couldn't buy property, the bin Laden's were the only ones with detailed maps of Mecca, how the Saudi schools taught children to hate Jews), but interesting in learning Carmen's views of living inside the extended bin Laden family.

I really liked this book as it presented a view of Saudi Arabia that I did not know. The nine years I lived there, I had the privileged life of an expat and an honorary gentleman (as a journalist), but I didn't get to meet many of the merchant princes or their families. Many of the memoirs by women married to Saudis tend toward sensationalism. Bin Ladin's did not. I felt the words were genuine. I disliked the way she begins the memoir with a letter to her daughters, but then I remembered how T.S. Eliot once said in a poem that the words were meant for his wife--"in the rose garden that is ours only." Toward the end I wondered what her motives were in publishing the memoir rather than in simply making copies for her daughters. What's so important in a memoir is appearing to be an engaging person, someone you'd like to hang around with. Carmen Bin Ladin seemed to me to be such a person. And it's a page turner. I read it in one evening. One niggle: The image of the front cover seemed not to relate to the content of the book.

I picked this book up in the airport with the expectation of learning more about the Bin Laden family. I had always read that Osama had an enormous extended family but had never known much more. Carmen Bin Ladin focuses on the struggles that Saudi women are faced with while telling her story of life as a Bin Laden in Saudi Arabia in the late 70's. I recommend this autobiography to those who are just beginning to explore the topic of Muslim practices and Saudi Arabia.

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