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Books Are Us

Anne K. Robichaux

University of South Carolina, awkr7721@sc-online.net

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Column Editor's Note: This column covers fictitious accounts of people in our industry — librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc. — people like us. All contributions, comments, suggestions are welcomed. — AR

Many fictional accounts of librarians contain unflattering stereotypes, so it was refreshing to read a true story about a librarian who valued her library's irreplaceable collection above "mountains of gold," who risked personal safety to preserve historical manuscripts, and who was a true hero in every sense of the word. Thanks again to **Ramune Kubilius** (Collection Development/Special Projects Librarian, Galter Health Sciences Library, Northwestern University) who alerted me to a children's book written and beautifully illustrated by **Jeanette Winter**. *The Librarian of Basra, A True Story from Iraq* (Harcourt, 2005, ISBN 0-15-205445-6), is the story of the courageous chief librarian of Basra's Central Library, **Alia Muhammad Baker**.

The library had been a meeting place for those who love books, but when rumors of war began, it filled up with the offices of government officials, who considered it to be a safer location. Soldiers patrolled on the roof. **Alia** worries that the fires of war will destroy the collection, including a seven hundred year old biography of **Muhammad**. She requests permission from the governor to move the collection to a safe place, but her request is denied. Since other libraries had been looted and burned elsewhere in Iraq, the daring librarian, concerned more for the safety of the collection than for her own, began to secretly slip books out of the library each evening. After British forces entered the city, the officials fled. **Alia** remained to save as much of the collection as she could, calling on friends, neighbors and shopkeepers to help carry books out of the unprotected library to safekeeping in a nearby restaurant. Nine days after 70% of the collection had been removed, a mysterious fire destroyed the library. When the sol-

diers moved out of the area, **Alia** hired a truck to relocate all 30,000 books from the restaurant to hers and her friends' houses. The collection was safe, "with the librarian of Basra," until a new library could be built.

This story was first told in the *New York Times* by reporter **Shaila K. Dewan**: "After the War: The Librarian; Books Spirited to Safety Before Iraq Library Fire." (*NYT* July 27, 2003). The courage and commitment of this one librarian who managed to save most of a priceless book collection inspired two stories on heroism: "The Librarian of Basra" and "Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq," by **Mark Alan Stamaty**. **Eden Ross Lipson** describes both titles in another *Times* article, "Iraqi Librarian Becomes Cultural Hero in Two Children's Books," (*NYT* March 17, 2005).

Coalition forces have already rebuilt the library and **Baker** has been reinstalled as head librarian (<http://usinfo.state.gov/mena/Archive/2005/Mar/25-768814.html>). **Harcourt** is also donating a portion of the proceeds from **Winter's** book sales to a fund administered by **ALA** to help rebuild the collection that was lost.

Winter writes in her synopsis of the book (www.harcourtbooks.com, and from the book's cover): "In a war-stricken country where civilians — especially women — have little power, this true story about a librarian's struggle to save her community's priceless collection of books reminds us all how, throughout the world, the love of literature and the respect for knowledge know no boundaries." And that one person can indeed make a difference.

Moving from one war torn country to another, **Ihsan Taylor**, author and reviewer for *Paperback Row*, *New York Times*, mentioned *The Bookseller of Kabul* in the December 12, 2004 issue. Written by Norwegian journalist and war correspondent, **Åsne Seierstad**, translated by **Ingrid Christophersen** (Little, Brown, 2003, ISBN 0-316-73450-0), this book is an intimate

account of the author's four-month stay with the bookseller, "Sultan Khan" (**Shah Mohammad Rais**). **Seierstad** had been covering the American-led campaign against the Taliban, and decided to document a different side of Afghanistan. She portrays the bookseller as a liberal intellectual in public — dedicated to the preservation of Afghan literary culture — but in private as a tyrannical patriarch. The repressed condition of Afghan women is well documented in her account.

Rais is an educated, English-speaking engineer who has been involved in the book trade since the early 1970's. Over the years, many books were banned for any number of incredible reasons, and "Sultan Kahn" hid away thousands of historic and/or controversial volumes in various attics with plans to eventually make donations to various libraries. An avid reader, in particular of Afghan history and culture, he is devoted to preserving the literary heritage of his country, and is an advocate of education. He survived three jailings by a Communist government as well as the looting and burning of his books by subsequent regimes. His collections had been decimated and his shops destroyed. He persevered, rebuilt his collections, and is once again reprinting, buying and selling books. He should be considered an enlightened intellectual in his country, and praised for all he has endured to preserve Afghan culture. But he is also portrayed in this account as very autocratic in his family life, very traditional and, in his words, as a "domestic tyrant."

While **Seierstad** has received critical acclaim for her book, both in Norway and in the western world, **Rais** has undertaken legal action against the author for what he describes as defamations of himself, his family, and his country (see <http://www.kabulguide.net/kbl-bookseller.htm>). Various articles found on the Web are an interesting follow-up to a provocative account. **Rais** indicates that he has fought all his life against fundamentalism, tyranny and illiteracy, and while this is depicted to some degree in the book, it does not appear to be the book's primary focus. With the resulting controversy, at the very least *The Bookseller of Kabul* has raised public awareness of post-Taliban Afghanistan. This book is a complex portrayal of one journalist's account of life in Afghanistan, and of a man devoted to books and to sharing his devotion with others. 

