



Books in a Box

Reading Guide

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the best place to begin



whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. There are two characters in *The Places in Between* named Babur. Who are they? Why does each matter to the author? How does each help him? What does Rory Stewart seek out—and find—in each of them?
2. How is Ismail Khan depicted here? Who respects him, and who doesn't? Which people take him seriously, and which don't? How does Stewart regard him?
3. After reading this book talk about why and how, if at all, your understanding of the nation building taking place in Afghanistan has changed.
4. Early on, a fellow writer in Afghanistan, on hearing about Stewart's plan to cross the country entirely by foot, asks him, “Have you read *Into the Wild*? ... It's a great piece of journalism.” What points are being made here, about both adventure seeking and adventure writing?
5. Where in these pages did you witness the westernization (or “Americanization”) of Afghani culture? How did it make you feel? What do you think the impact of this westernization might be on the Afghani people?
6. Abdul Haq is a soldier whom Stewart more or less describes as a bully: a foul-mouthed guy who likes to scare children with his machine gun and threaten his comrades with rape, and who is stubborn, thuggish, and bossy by routine. Why, then, does Stewart take a liking to him? Discuss the rapport these men develop.
7. “The Buddha meditated by walking,” Stewart writes, “and Wordsworth composed sonnets while striding beside the lakes.” Explore the links this book makes between walking and thinking, and how Stewart's occasional connections between the two recall the writings of Thoreau and Frost. What does walking mean to Stewart? Why does it preoccupy him? How does it relate to his work,

his life, and his identity?

8. What and where is Turquoise Mountain? What is happening to it now, and why? And who is responsible?

9. What did reading *The Places in Between* teach you about the similarities or differences between Shia and Sunni Islam? What did it teach you about the Hazara people? The Koran? The geography and climate of Afghanistan itself?

10. In an enthusiastic review, one critic called the book “a kind of tonic to mindless Taliban-hating.” Explain why you do, or do not, agree with this assertion. What, if anything, did you learn about the Taliban’s presence in Afghanistan by reading this book?

11. Another critic complained, “Sometimes we get the sense [that Stewart] cares more for preserving history than for the people who live in it.” Looking back on the book as a whole, do you agree? Explain.

12. Explain why hospitality is such a major theme in Stewart’s book. What did you learn from it about the important guest-host relationship that exists throughout the Middle East?

13. In the chapter “Blair and the Koran,” Stewart writes, “Perhaps they were more interested in changing Islam than in describing it.” Who are the targets of this chapter’s critique? And on what grounds does the author criticize them? What’s wrong with how these individuals have thought, talked, and argued about the Koran in the past?

14. Revisit the chapter “@afghangov.org.” How would you paraphrase—and respond to—the author’s critique of foreign-aid workers, diplomats, democracy advocates, policy makers, urban planners, and other outsiders who are now working in, or on, Afghanistan with the aim of improving it? Can Stewart’s informed remarks be applied to other actions or missions happening in other parts of the world today?

15. Toward the end of the narrative, and near the end of his journey, the author notes that he “felt the world had been given as a gift uniquely to me and also equally to each person alone.” What is Stewart referring to here, exactly? What is the gift in question, and how does he find or obtain it?

16. Why do so few women appear in *The Places in Between*? Is this a shortcoming of the book or is it to be expected? Explain.

17. In the first sentence of the book’s preface, Stewart writes, “I’m not good at explaining why I walked across Afghanistan.” Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

(Questions written by Scott Pitcock for Harcourt Publishers)

Author Bio: Rory Stewart

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*,
Gale, 2007.

Raised in Malaysia by British parents, Rory Stewart gained an early appreciation for Asian cultures.

After being schooled in England and serving for a short time in the British Army, he traveled as a foreign services officer throughout Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. In 2000 Stewart set off on foot across a 6,000-mile stretch of Asia, covering the countries of Nepal, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. When asked by a *Publishers Weekly* contributor about his motivation for such a dangerous undertaking, Stewart responded: "Every time I try to answer that question I come up with these complicated motivational statements about my family, or about the fact that I love walking, or the fact that I grew up in Asian cities and have always been very interested in villages. I think underlying all of this was a strong sense that this would be an adventure."



Stewart focused on his 2001-2002 travels through Afghanistan in *The Places In Between*. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor described the book as a "remarkable text" and a "gripping account of a courageous journey, observed with a scholar's eye and a humanitarian's heart." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* regarded the book as "by turns harrowing and meditative, ... edifying at every step, grounded by his knowledge of local history, politics, and dialects." *New Statesman* reviewer Helena Drysdale wrote of *The Places In Between* as "an unsentimental and revealing portrait of a country that we have always admired and feared, but about which we know too little. ... Stewart's terse prose is well suited to the pared-down deserts and mountain crests. It sometimes rattles like the gunfire that pursues him out of a village."

Following his momentous journey, Stewart took a short respite in his native Scotland, then traveled to Iraq where he was offered a position with the Coalition as deputy governor of the southern province of Maysan. Over an eleven-month span, Stewart worked with other Coalition diplomats and local political and religious leaders in an attempt to create a new government and provide basic services to civilians. He later wrote about the frustrations and dangers of his time in Iraq in his second book, *The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq*.

Reviews

[Publishers Weekly](#)

★ Stewart, Rory. [The Places in Between](#). New York: Harvest, 2006.

We never really find out why Stewart decided to walk across Afghanistan only a few months after the Taliban were deposed, but what emerges from the last leg of his two-year journey across Asia is a lesson in good travel writing. By turns harrowing and meditative, Stewart's trek through Afghanistan in the footsteps of the 15th-century emperor Babur is edifying at every step, grounded by his knowledge of local history, politics and dialects. His prose is lean and unsentimental: whether pushing through chest-high snow in the mountains of Hazarajat or through villages still under de facto Taliban control, his descriptions offer a cool assessment of a landscape and a people eviscerated by war, forgotten by time and isolated by geography. The well-oiled apparatus of his writing mimics a dispassionate camera shutter in its precision. But if we are to accompany someone on such a highly personal quest, we want to know who that person is. Unfortunately, Stewart shares little emotional background; the writer's identity is discerned best by inference. Sometimes we get the sense he cares more for preserving history than for the people who live in it (and for whom historical knowledge would be luxury). But remembering Geraldo Rivera's gunslinging escapades, perhaps we could use less sap and more clarity about this troubled and fascinating country.

"A flat-out masterpiece...In very nearly every sense, too good to be true." (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"Stupendous...an instant travel classic." (*Entertainment Weekly*)

"Sets a new standard for cool nerve and hot determination...Sublimely written." (*Seattle Times*)

"A splendid tale that is by turns wryly humorous, intensely observant, and humanely unsentimental." (*Christian Science Monitor*)

Suggested Readalikes

Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone, by Rajiv Chandrasekaran.

The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban, by Sarah Chayes.

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001, by Steve Coll.

An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan, by Jason Elliot.

Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier, by Joel Hafvenstein.

Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, by Ahmed Rashid.

Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time, by David Oliver Relin.

The Bookseller of Kabul, by Asne Seierstad.

The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq, by Rory Stewart.

The Silenced Cry: One Woman's Diary of a Journey to Afghanistan, by Ana Tortajada.

Web Resources

Author Website: www.rorystewartbooks.com

NYT Book Review: http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/books/review/11cover_bissel.html

CIA World Fact Book on Afghanistan: www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html

U.S. Department of State on Travel in Afghanistan: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_2121.html

Journey of Hope: Report on Central Asia Institute school-building in Afghanistan: <https://www.ikat.org/publications/2008JOH.pdf>

