

KIRKUS

REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

THE AFGHANS

Akbar, Nadeem

AuthorHouse (260 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A family scattered by Afghanistan's turmoil struggles to reconnect in Nadeem's affecting debut.

During the chaos following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Kabul, Afghanistan, well-to-do housewife Bibi Gul's government-minister husband is killed, and her two young sons go missing. The novel follows the fragmented clan through 30 years of tumult and wandering. Bibi's oldest son, Saleem, is taken in by a kindly truck driver, while his brother, Bilal, stricken with amnesia, winds up in an orphanage where he is adopted by an abusive Russian official and his doting wife. Meanwhile, Bibi raises her youngest son, Adib, in Peshawar, Pakistan, until he goes off to the United States, where he finds financial success and an American girlfriend—but retains an abiding sense of loneliness. Meanwhile, Bibi and her father, a tribal chieftain and mujahedeen leader, keep trying to reunite the family, which leads to both joyous reunions and awkward readjustments. Akbar's multistranded saga soft-pedals the upheavals of Afghanistan's war and tyranny; there are few scenes of overt violence as the Russian occupation gives way to warlords, Taliban rule and the post-9/11 U.S.-led invasion. Instead, the author paints a quiet, nuanced portrait of the tensions in a failed state where clan and tribal loyalties are the only defense against insecurity. (At one point, a character is declared a traitor by other characters after he blows the whistle on a fellow tribesman's drug-smuggling operation.) The author views Afghan society mainly through the lens of the Pashtun diaspora; much of the action takes place in Pakistan, Moscow and New York, and the story revolves around themes of conflicted identity and cultural estrangement. Bibi's sons never quite feel that they belong in the far-flung locales they live in, yet they find it painful to go home to a land and family that now seems unstable, backward and constricting—especially to the women in their lives. Although Akbar's prose can be a bit stilted at times, she often writes with perceptiveness and pathos about the intimate losses that came out of Afghanistan's troubled history.

A moving story of exile and return.