

KIRKUS

REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

SORAYA

The Other Princess

Saber Azam

XlibrisUS (538 pp.)

\$33.85 hardcover, \$23.99 paperback, \$3.99 e-book

ISBN: 978-1-984563-47-7; November 12, 2018

BOOK REVIEW

A fictionalized biography focuses on a woman who shaped Afghanistan's place in the 20th century.

In this debut novel, Azam tells the life story of his friend Soraya Ludin in the voice of an unnamed narrator—a colleague of the title character—who makes occasional appearances in the tale. Soraya Suri, the narrative's protagonist, is born in 1945 in Kabul to an educated family. Her childhood is divided between stints in Afghanistan, the United States, and Europe, while her father serves in a variety of diplomatic posts as the balance of power shifts in Kabul. Soraya herself is well-educated and is awarded a number of United Nations and Afghan government positions before the internal battles of the nation's dysfunctional monarchy lead her to flee the country with her husband and children in 1981. She settles in Vienna, where she remains active in the expatriate community, working toward a sustainable Afghan government that protects the rights of women and minorities as the Soviet Union, religious extremists, and America invade the country in turns. Although things look bleak for Afghanistan after 2001, Soraya retains a hopeful attitude, and the book's overall tone is one of clear-eyed optimism. Soraya is a captivating protagonist, offering a dynamic perspective on international relations and governance, although the narrator's unswerving devotion to her means the novel's tone often approaches hagiography. The writing is often nonstandard English ("Soraya did not apprehend her lingo and was scanning in her mind every word pronounced and gesture accomplished"; "Soraya was interrogative why her society was so disgraceful of her ambitions"), though on the whole, it is comprehensible. Azam's tendency to share the minutiae of every coup and palace conflict drags out the volume's pacing at some points, but also ensures that readers with no knowledge of Afghan history will have no problem keeping track of the players and understanding how Soraya's personal story fits into the broader narrative. (An extensive, helpful glossary also identifies the major figures and defines specialized terms.) Although its length is excessive (over 500 pages), the work provides an intriguing and thought-provoking depiction of a minor but important public figure.

An account that deftly captures key elements of recent Afghan history.