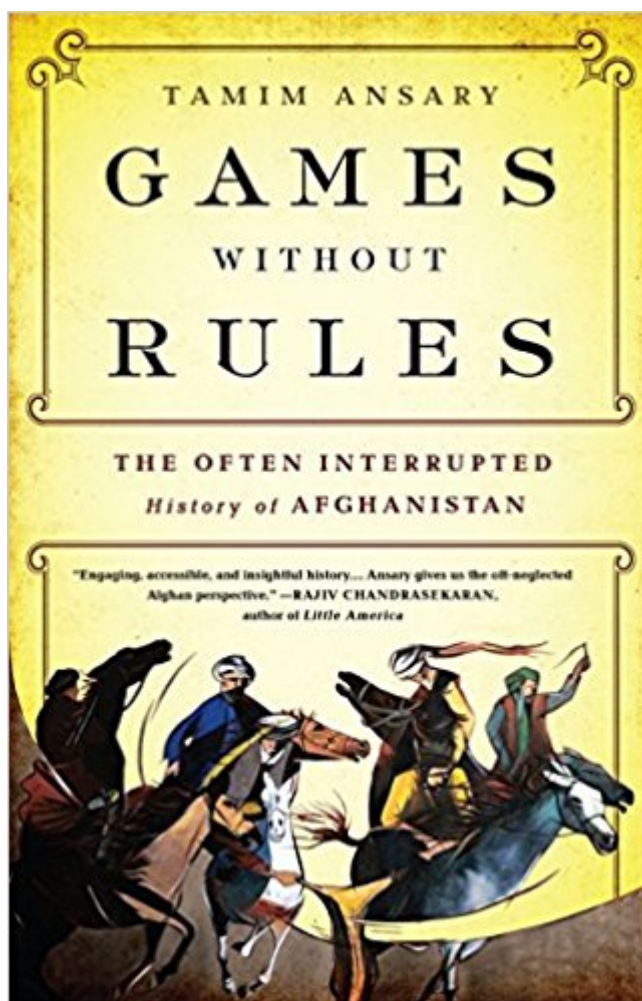


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Games Without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History Of Afghanistan



Synopsis

The history of modern Afghanistan is an epic drama, a thriller, a tragedy, a surreal farce. Every forty years or so, over the last two centuries, some great global power has attempted to take control of Afghanistan, only to slink away wounded and bewildered. *Games without Rules* recounts this strange story, not from the outside looking in, as is usually the case, but from the inside looking out. Here, the interventions and invasions by foreign powers are not the main event. They are interruptions of the main event, for Afghans have a story of their own, quite apart from all the invasions (a story often interrupted by invasions!) Drawing on his Afghan background, Muslim roots, and Western and Afghan sources, Tamim Ansary weaves an epic story that moves from a universe of village republics the old Afghanistan through a tumultuous drama of tribes, factions, and forces, to the current struggle. The drama involves a dazzling array of colorful characters such as the towering warrior-poet Ahmad Shah, who founded the country; the wily spider-king Dost Mohammed the Great, who told the British I am like a wooden spoon; you can toss me about, but I will not be broken; and the late nineteenth-century Iron Amir, who said a telescope would interest him only if it could shoot bullets, since what use had he for the moon? A compelling narrative told in an accessible, conversational style, *Games without Rules* offers revelatory insight into a country long at the center of international debate, but never fully understood by the outside world."

Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: PublicAffairs; First Edition edition (March 4, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1610393198

ISBN-13: 978-1610393195

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 68 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #262,468 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #86 in [Books > History > Asia > Central Asia](#) #91 in [Books > History > Middle East > Turkey](#) #503 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern](#)

Customer Reviews

Afghan American writer Ansary (*West of Kabul, East of New York*, 2002) tells the history of modern Afghanistan with a master storyteller's confidence and a disarmingly casual tone.

“Wow!” he remarks, reacting to Afghan president Sardar Daoud’s willingness to implement a new constitution that would limit his own power. “When has something like this ever happened?” But don’t be fooled: this is a nuanced, sophisticated historical narrative that strives to tell Afghan history from an Afghan perspective, as “the story of a zigzag journey toward some end point despite regular interruptions by foreign interventions, including the strategic military adventures of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. It’s an open question, of course, what that end point may be; Afghanistan is still a country in conflict, and the present is a moving target. Yet, as Ansary points out, “There was always a here here, and though the great powers have changed through history, “The land-in-between never disappeared. Throughout this selection, the author’s love for his native land and his optimism for its future shine through.

--Brendan Driscoll --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of "Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan" In "Games Without Rules," Tamim Ansary has written the most engaging, accessible and insightful history of Afghanistan. With gifted prose and revealing details, Ansary gives us the oft-neglected Afghan perspective of the wars, foreign meddling and palace intrigue that has defined the past few centuries between the Indus and Oxus. This brilliant book should be required reading for anyone involved in the current war there -- and anyone who wants to understand why Afghanistan will not be at peace anytime soon." "Kirkus" A breezy, accessible overview of centuries of messy Afghan history, including the present military quagmire.... As a native of Kabul, Ansary lends precious insight into the makeup of the typical Afghan village, with its tidy, self-sufficient, patriarchal hierarchy and need to keep the nomads at bay... Lively instruction on how Afghanistan has coped, and continues to cope, with being a strategic flash point." "Christian Science Monitor" "Games without Rules" explains longstanding problems and internal difficulties encountered in efforts toward nation-building in Afghanistan and shows how great power politics (and invasion) have been stalling the process for the past two centuries." "San Jose Mercury News" "Despite extensive reporting on the war in Afghanistan, San Francisco journalist and author Ansary thinks there's still a great deal of misunderstanding about the reasons for the conflict. In this history, he focuses on key developments that shaped current events." "Middle East Journal" "Ansary ... sheds light on over two centuries of Afghan history, giving an account of the historical struggles undertaken by a fractious people across a landscape of rugged steppes and unforgiving deserts.... [He] argues that the fatal error of ... unsuccessful modern invaders lies in their inability to recognize the internal struggles of those

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Ansary is well placed to present the Western reader with a penetrating view of his complex and often baffling native land. With the 2014 draw-down of NATO combat forces from Afghanistan approaching a better-late-than-never understanding of how the country works and its history is crucial if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past. *New Statesman* (Ansary's) is an authentically Afghan voice, offering not an authoritative account of the ebb and flow of foreign entanglement in Afghanistan but a personal account of how an intelligent Afghan observer sees the course of events from the outside. *Irish Times* Ansary has that rare gift of being able to blend an academic's knowledge with the skill of a natural storyteller. He is Afghanistan-born, and although he left when he was just 16, in 1964, he has clearly spent a lifetime collecting stories, which he has edited masterfully, knowing exactly when to move away from the major events and focus on the tiny details that give you a sense of what life must have been like for the country's many poor villagers, who often had no idea what was happening in their capital city. Refreshingly he keeps his focus on Afghans, with the foreigners appearing for brief periods, usually offering little and understanding less. I was gripped as I read the first 200 pages of *GAMES WITHOUT RULES*. The author brilliantly describes the personalities of these men and the conflict, conceit or foreign intervention that brought them to power. "

Review *Games without Rules: The often interrupted History of Afghanistan* by Tamin Ansary is 1) a history of the last three hundred years in Afghanistan, 2) an attempt to place Afghanistan in world history - at which it succeeds 3) a cultural analysis of Afghanistan looking at both the rural conservative Islamic side and the long chain of modernizing elites who variously attempted to rule Afghanistan and 4) a look at the many other countries who have tried to conquer or control Afghanistan in the last 200 years and 5) the personal memoir of a man, Tamin himself, who was born in Afghanistan near Kabul, who went to high school in Kabul and then to college in the United States on a "scholarship." He is now an American Citizen who has traveled back to Afghanistan several times, who lectures and speaks and writes about Afghanistan. Tamin tells stories of how his family survived various cataclysms and radical changes of governments. Tamin describes the changes he has seen in the Afghanistan culture. Tamin picks up the story in the time of Ahmad Khan Baba just before 1740. The Persians under Nadir Afshar fought their way from Iran across Afghanistan into India. Nadir was assassinated by his own generals in 1747. Tamin describes the cultural milieu of that Afghanistan at that time giving us a picture of a tribal culture strong on family ties, ancient feuds, strong loyalties and fierce warriors, restriction of women to the back

rooms of the homes, and a whole different world view than anyone else. From that time on both internal and external attempts at control and manipulation have swung back and forth. At times the ultraconservative rural tribes ruled - foremost among whom were the Pushtoons - and at times the modernist and elites of the cities ruled at least the cities. The Pushtoons have a strong sense of ethical behavior called Pushtoonwali. This worked well for ancient tribal society. This more or less conforms with conservative Islam teachings, but has many traits of its own. Successive individuals within the Afghan tribes tried modernization, bringing education, liberation of women, attempts at forms of governance of various types from dictatorships to democracies, businesses, factories, banks, modern finance and taxation etc. These elitists, modernists had often seen the outside world and wanted to bring their country into the modern world. The book describes in detail the personalities and battles that raged over this long history. At times the ultraconservatives were in control and destroyed all the modernist had built. At times the modernist were in control and tried to wrest their country into some version of the modern world. At times the warlords (power brokers) controlled the area for their own profit and pleasure. But Tamin claims the ultraconservatives were always in the background, providing a continuity, interrupted by history both internal and external. Tamin describes how Afghanistan has both the fortune and the misfortune to sit at the crossroads of both the ancient world, the old Silk Road ran through Afghanistan, and the modern world being caught in the crossfire between the Russians trying to gain a port on the Indian Ocean, and the British protecting their huge interests in India (The Great Game). In the modern era, the Russians, having failed to conquer and find their Indian Ocean Port, carpet bombed leaving the country devastated, crop lands and ancient orchards destroyed and laced with mines, and with huge populations of both internally displaced and internationally displaced persons. Thus arose the students, the Taliban, from the refugee camps where 80% plus were children and teenagers. The boys found release in the schools (Madrassa) which taught a form of ancient Islamism, but bereft of the old tribal and clan relationships and mores. Opium became the currency. With the external pressures from the Soviets, the United States, the Pakistan, Iran, and now China, a new modern Afghanistan is arising, but there are still the old ultraconservatives and the Taliban hanging around violently. The elites are doing business, and getting very wealthy, based on the Pushtoonwali code of ethics, but which is corruption and nepotism by any other standard. The newly recognized mineral wealth is enormous and attracting attention from many nations, especially China. TV sets have penetrated the rural villages and are setting a new tone there. The US is maintaining a status quo, but is leaving soon. Hamid Kazai is stepping down after years of enriching himself and his family. Here Tamin leaves us, in 2013, with some hope, but no clear view of the future. The tone of the book

is breezy and informal and reads like a light novel. The viewpoint is obviously Tamin Ansary's personal viewpoint. The story is fascinating and well told. The book is heavily annotated.

How tragic and irresponsible that when the United States blundered into Afghanistan, it did so (as with Vietnam) without understanding the country and its history. As Tamim points out in his insightful analysis, Afghanistan is easy to conquer, but difficult to rule. Read Games Without Rules if you wish to understand how, once again, the United States has jumped into a quagmire.

Ansary not only relays historical facts and stories, but guides the reader inside the Afghan psyche. I love his writing style, with its light touch of humor and transparent even-handedness in discussing controversial aspects of Afghan history. After reading this book I understand why people supported the communist government in the 80's and why others fought against them. I now understand the same thing about the current war. Games without Rules reads like a novel but is well documented and authoritative. The bits of Ansary's personal and family history make it more real. As always, I find Ansary's comments on the current Afghan situation right on target, and his analysis prescient. I look forward to more books by this insightful author.

Very good history of Afghanistan

Very good book on Afghanistan's history. It gives a reader a great appreciation and perspective on the various tribes and history from 18th century to present. Highly recommend this for those looking to get a good survey on this complex country and region.

I'm not a historian so I can't vouch for the rigor of this history, though it seems very well researched and documented. What I liked about the book is that it's written almost informally, as if coming from a wise elder talking about history he really knows. Mr. Ansary's understanding of and sympathy for the culture helped me let go of some of the misunderstanding and judgment I carried about recent Afghan history. I got exactly what I wanted from this book: a sense of appreciation for the Afghan people and their incredible struggles along with some measure of hope that they may find a way out of the misery they've been in for so long.

The author provides the relevant history and sociology, going back a couple of hundred years. The basic problem is that Afghanistan is more complicated than any sound-bite can handle. Once you

understand the issues, which are hundreds of years old, you understand that this will not be a simple solution. The author writes well and the book is a fairly easy read. Again, I think anybody who wants to have a chance to understand this country - needs to read this book.

Afghanistan cannot be subdued. It only will rise when it's people are allowed to fashion a future that makes sense to them. Read this book. It will change your life.

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