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The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Journalist in Yemen

Jennifer Steil

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"I had no idea how to find my way around this medieval city. It was getting dark. I was tired. I didn't speak Arabic. I was a little frightened. But hadn't I battled scorpions in the wilds of Costa Rica and prevailed? Hadn't I survived fainting in a San José brothel? Hadn't I once arrived in Ireland with only $10 in my pocket and made it last two weeks? Surely I could handle a walk through an unfamiliar town. So I took a breath, tightened the black scarf around my hair, and headed out to take my first solitary steps through Sana'a."-- from The Woman Who Fell From The Sky

In a world fraught with suspicion between the Middle East and the West, it's hard to believe that one of the most influential newspapers in Yemen--the desperately poor, ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden, which has made has made international headlines for being a terrorist breeding ground--would be handed over to an agnostic, Campari-drinking, single woman from Manhattan who had never set foot in the Middle East. Yet this is exactly what happened to journalist, Jennifer Steil.

Restless in her career and her life, Jennifer, a gregarious, liberal New Yorker, initially accepts a short-term opportunity in 2006 to teach a journalism class to the staff of *The Yemen Observer* in Sana'a, the beautiful, ancient, and very conservative capital of Yemen. Seduced by the eager reporters and the challenging prospect of teaching a free speech model of journalism there, she extends her stay to a year as the paper's editor-in-chief. But she is quickly confronted with the realities of Yemen--and their surprising advantages. In teaching the basics of fair and balanced journalism to a staff that included plagiarists and polemicists, she falls in love with her career again. In confronting the blatant mistreatment and strict governance of women by their male counterparts, she learns to appreciate the strength of Arab women in the workplace. And in forging surprisingly deep friendships with women and men whose traditions and beliefs are in total opposition to her own, she learns a cultural appreciation she never could have predicted. What's more, she just so happens to meet the love of her life.

With exuberance and bravery, *The Woman Who Fell from the* Sky offers a rare, intimate, and often surprising look at the role of the media in Muslim culture and a fascinating cultural tour of Yemen, one of the most enigmatic countries in the world.

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