



All We Leave Behind: A Reporter's Journey Into the Lives of Others

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One of Canada's most respected journalists, *As It Happens*'s Carol Off, relates the gripping story of a family's desperate attempts to escape Afghan warlords, Taliban oppression, and the persecutions of refugee life.

In 2002, Carol Off and a CBC TV crew encountered an Afghan man with a story to tell. Asad Aryubwal became a key figure in their documentary on the terrible power of thuggish warlords who were working arm in arm with Americans and NATO troops. When Asad publicly exposed the deeds of one of the warlords, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, it set off a chain of events from which there was no turning back. Asad, his wife, Mobina, and their five children had to flee their home.

The family faced an uncertain future. But their dilemma compelled a journalist to cross the lines of disinterested reporting and become deeply involved. Together, they navigated the Byzantine international bureaucracy and the decidedly unwelcoming policies of Stephen Harper's government until the family finally found a new home.

Carol Off's powerful account traces not only one family's journey and fraught attempts to immigrate to a safe place, it also illustrates what happens when a journalist becomes irrevocably caught up in the lives of the people in her story and finds herself unable to leave them behind.

All We Leave Behind: A Reporter's Journey Into the Lives of Others Details

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Author : Carol Off

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Emmkay says

On a reporting trip to Afghanistan, Canadian journalist Carol Off was delighted to score an interview with an Afghan man with past experience working for a notorious warlord. Asad seemed unafraid to speak on camera about problems in his country. Off gave little thought to the impact the interview could have on his life, ultimately driving him and his family from Afghanistan and sending them into lengthy and uncomfortable exile. Off chose to cross the journalist/source barrier and try to assist them in emigrating to Canada, out of her sense of responsibility for their fate.

Her book about the experience was eye-opening, especially about the political situation in Afghanistan (she suggests the west has bungled things by throwing its support behind thugs/warlords, and that Afghans' distaste for the rule of such warlords had created fertile ground for the Taliban in the first place) and problems with the refugee system (the slowness and corruption). Off does a good job underscoring the mind-boggling scale of the issues, given that her focus is on a single family, which was relatively advantaged in the process given their education levels and connection to her.

Amir Taleghani says

Great read! Carol Off uses her unique experience, as a journalist who gets personally involved in the refugee crisis in Afghanistan, to provide a critical review of the modern political history of Afghanistan, including Canada's role.

Tamara says

Carol Off provides a comprehensible explanation of politics in Afghanistan and a heart-wrenching retelling of one family's struggle through the refugee and emigration/immigration processes. An eye-opening and insightful read.

Paul Demetre says

Told from a very personal perspective that one rarely gets to hear when listening to a journalist who has been a war correspondent, this is the story of her personal connection to one family in Afghanistan and her attempt to bring them to Canada.

Strong writing, a powerful narrative and heart-stopping suspense makes this a must read for anyone in Canada who is concerned about refugees.

Melissa Cox says

Carol Off is as good a writer as she is an interviewer - and that is high praise. The book deals with complicated subject matter, and she leads the reader through the issues and events with clear and eloquent prose. Her writing voice is like her speaking voice, you can "hear" her telling the story. She brings her personal insights and experiences to draw the reader through political and social events, focusing on one family and her involvement with their lives. An excellent and enjoyable read, even with the complex and sometimes divisive subject matter.

Sara says

Gripping and influential.

Rebecca Wetlaufer says

One of the best, most powerful books I have read in a long time. I could write pages about why everyone should read this, but I will just say that it's informative on many subjects and important to understanding the human aspect of the war in Afghanistan and Canada's refugee system. I believe that Off is brave for writing this.

Eleanor Cowan says

A courageous Afghan discloses the truth to a Canadian journalist. There's a huge price to pay. That's the riveting surface layer of this highly educational tome. Below it, page by page, unsuspecting landmines explode about Canada's complicity in Afghanistan's murder and mayhem, and Canada's hypocritical posturing - reminiscent of our country's grisly betrayal of Lieutenant-General The Honourable Roméo Dallaire in Rwanda, described in 'Shake Hands With The Devil.' I thought of Calgary's Captain Nicola Goddard many times as I read, and wondered how informed she'd been before her sudden death at the hands of the Taliban. My takeaway? Vote judiciously. Write letters when I smell a rat, like Canada's lucrative selling of arms to Saudi Arabia so they can do the dirty work while we hide behind our clean Maple Leaf Flag.

Catherine Milmine says

Everyone should read this book. I learned a lot about what happened in Afghanistan and how people lived and were treated by speaking the truth and then have to flee their country or be killed. To be terrified everyday for 8 years while waiting for refugee status to be approved. I could not believe the bureaucracy by both governments. I am so glad you never gave up on them Carol Off. You have opened my eyes about refugees fleeing all these countries to save their lives. Thank you.

Marian Bron says

Carol Off writes in *All We Leave Behind*, “If a journalist asks good questions she might win an award. If someone answers good questions it might get him killed.” This is the true story of a man, and his family, who answered good questions and had to flee for his life because of them.

Elegantly written *All We Leave Behind* holds the reader from beginning to end. Off does not pussy-foot. She tells it like it is. She puts seven very real faces on the mess that is modern-day Afghanistan, the seven members of the Aryubwal family. She made me cringe and shake my head at the bureaucracy that forced them to stay as refugees in a hostile city and the self-serving governments that left them fearing for their lives for eight long years.

All We Leave Behind is a must read.

Bessie Sullivan says

This is an incredible book on a number of levels. The biggest message for me was that sometimes you can't just walk away.

Joanne says

There aren't enough stars to give for this book. Maybe 50? It is simply one of the most memorable books I'll ever read.

Carol Off is a Canadian journalist who spent 20+ years in the field covering wars, refugee crises and other catastrophic events, primarily for the CBC. It was in Afghanistan that she met Asad Aryubwal in 2002, after she arrived in Kabul to cover the post-9/11 state of affairs. Over time, she grew unusually close to Asad and his family, becoming much more than just a reporter.

As Afghanistan careened from one crisis to another throughout the next 13 years, Asad and his family were forced into exile in Pakistan, where it took almost 8 years to wend their way through the crushingly onerous refugee process before finally arriving in Canada in 2015.

This is a book that told me more about the political history of Afghanistan than anything I've ever read before. Off starts the book with a clear, concise but detailed account of the shifting powers that ruled the country from the 1970s onward: the Soviet invasion, the warlords, the mujaheddin, the Taliban, the USA's war of revenge after 9/11, the role of the Canadian Armed Forces in Helmand. It was laid out so clearly that I finally understand why there is so much chaos and still no end in sight.

The book is also a huge indictment of the glacial refugee process, from the woefully understaffed and often locally corrupt UNHCR to the almost universal callousness of right wing western governments who see a terrorist under every

bed. I was well aware of the shameful behaviour of the Canadian government during Stephen Harper's time in office, behaviour that is even more magnified by the current American regime. To these politicians, refugees aren't real people, they're just human detritus, and it's utterly disgusting.

The Aryubwal family finally got to Canada in 2015. I cried through the description of their arrival in

Toronto, when Asad collapsed into Carol's arms and sobbed like a baby, relieved at last of the fear and pain of all those years in exile in Pakistan.

We've all seen the pictures of the camps full of hopelessness and I know we can't help everyone, but it breaks my heart to know how much human potential is wasting away every day, as people at all levels turn away and say "It's not my problem, I can't fix it." Those people need to read this book and understand that it's a roll of the dice for all of us. There but for the grace of God.....

Krista says

I have no expectation that telling someone's story will fix anything because if I did, I would have an agenda and the truth would run the risk of being lost. I didn't return to Asad's side as a journalist; I did so as a human being. It was simply the right thing to do, a choice made in good faith. I appreciate that in my profession it's easy to become tangled in a cause and cross the line into advocacy. I understand why we have codes of conduct both in journalism and in society. But life is complicated. We do what we can and what we must.

I chose to lead with the above quote advisedly because it captures what I believe to be the primary caveat about *All We Leave Behind*: I won't contradict that author Carol Off is "one of Canada's most respected journalists" (as states the book's blurb), but this is not a work of journalism – it's a highly personal and opinionated narrative of a time that Off's actions did cross into advocacy. As she relates the story of how her own quest for a scoop led an Afghan man to put himself (and his family) in danger, I am absolutely convinced that Off did the right and moral thing when she then spent years trying to expedite their refugee claim and bring them to Canada – as a *personal* effort to redress unwitting errors. Everything about this story is informative and highly pertinent to our times, but it's not a cold-eyed work of journalism (and to be fair, it never claims to be), and every time Off uses the term "holy war" to describe both Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's entrees into Afghanistan, every time she accuses the Harper government of xenophobia and fear-mongering, I was reminded that she has spent her career working for the left-biased CBC; was probably relieved to drop any pretense of impartiality in her reportage here. And that's not to say that this isn't an important and interesting book to read – I just think it's key to keep in mind that this is a story that puts Off at its center, not merely a dispassionate reporting of the facts.

Off begins with an informative history lesson. As the Berlin Wall fell and Moscow retreated from Afghanistan, the country was left in a power vacuum; and in horrific condition:

For the previous ten years, billions of US dollars and USSR rubles had poured into Afghanistan to fund destruction but little else. By the end of the 1980s, half of all refugees in the world were Afghans, mostly exiled to Iran or Pakistan. A million and a half civilians had died because of war, while countless others were maimed and wounded; the International Red Cross estimated it would take 4,300 years to remove all the landmines that the contending armies had buried in the countryside. Afghanistan ranked third from the bottom in development of all countries of the world. Its children were severely malnourished. The place was swamped with Kalashnikovs, Stinger missiles, rocket launchers, armoured vehicles, bullets, bombs and angry disillusioned men.

Off describes the ensuing years of conflict between the Taliban and the far-flung warlords who resisted ceding power, and after the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, Western journalists began flooding into the country (she has no kind words for celebrity newscasters like Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw whose presence distracted American viewers from the real news), and in pursuit of her own story on the rising power of the warlords as the Taliban fled the country, Off met and interviewed Asad Aryubwal. Asad had been forced into one such warlord's militia in the north of the country during the years since the USSR left (Asad had been given the rank of General, but insists he had been an unwilling conscript and had no combat role), and he was eager to be part of a news story that might warn the West that they would be foolish to partner with his former boss, Rashid Dostum. Asad led Off and her documentary crew to the site where Dostum's men had massacred Taliban POWs in the weeks following the Coalition's invasion, at great personal risk, and when the interview was over, Off went on to receive an award for her piece and Asad went back to living his life.

Usually, Off gets her story and doesn't look back – understanding that subjects who seek her out for interviews are aware of the risks they are taking and have their own motivation for speaking with a foreign journalist – but she kept in touch with Asad's family; exchanging email greetings and giving heartfelt advice. Off, however, had no idea that Asad was experiencing mounting threats until, for the third time in his life, Asad packed up his family and fled to Pakistan. With Rashid Dostum now the Vice President of Afghanistan, and with no support from his own clan back home, Asad knew he could never return to Kabul; and as the Pakistan around him grew ever wearier of supporting an ever-growing mass of fleeing Afghans, Asad knew that he and his family couldn't remain where they were indefinitely. With Off's support, they applied to the UNHCR as refugees, and as she arranged sponsors for them here in Canada, the Aryubwal family faced down unending years of looming danger and maddening bureaucracy.

The first half of *All We Leave Behind* is about everything leading up to Off's initial interview with Asad, and the second half is about dealing with the UN agency responsible for refugees; in this way, it feels like two different books. I appreciate the frustration and impotence that Off must have experienced as the refugee application process stretched out indefinitely for people that she had come to love and feel responsible for, but with persistent errors and corruption within the UNHCR's office in Peshawar, and the refugee crisis growing in Syria (and other areas where people were desperate to get to any safe country), I can almost understand why a seven person family with members working and going to school and stably renting an apartment weren't the highest on the list of those needing safe passage; even with a sponsor.

The CBC – where Off worked in television journalism before switching to a more domestic-based role on the radio – may be funded by us Canadian taxpayers to the tune of a billion dollars a year, but that doesn't make it a branch of the government; Off's actions on their behalf were not a proxy for my own. So, the outrage that a person feels in reading about the Canadian government's inaction on Asad's case would likely be proportionate to the degree in which a person agrees with the following statement:

Asad had risked his life when he spoke to the Canadian public broadcaster in an effort to warn our government that Canadians were unwittingly getting involved with the wrong people. I couldn't conceive of a better argument – Canada had an obligation to help.

I don't think that I do agree with that statement, but again, I 100% empathise and agree with Off's decision to have made it her personal obligation to see Asad and his family make it to safety. As her personal story of this journey, *All We Leave Behind* is a fine and informative read.

Laura O'Connor says

This book takes you through the recent history of Afghanistan via the lives of a single family, which adds context and makes the seemingly dense, complicated political history actually understandable. Carol Off does a great job of making that history readable; what could have been a long, dry list of names of the players in Afghanistan and Pakistan became a colourful cast of characters. The latter third of the book becomes a bit tedious, but as this is the section cataloguing the Aryubwals' years of navigating the refugee system, it actually helps drive home the feeling of frustration they all must have had through that time. Off's own struggle with her professional and ethical role through the whole ordeal is a sub-plot in itself and is described poignantly.

Magdelanye says

It is drummed in to all students entering the professions, the necessity of professional detachment at work, especially when that work involves emotionally vulnerable people in crises. CO crosses that dividing line when she realized the impact of her involvement with one of the subjects featured in her award winning documentary for the CBC. What sets her apart from most journalists is that she took responsibility for the negative repercussions that threatened the lives her subject and his family in Afghanistan. This book is her account of the years it took to bring Asadullah Aryubwal and his family to safety in Canada.

There is also a comprehensive history of the wars that have plagued Afghanistan and short biographies of key players on the many sides who seek to control it. Canada's position is revealed as sketchy, and this book should be required reading for all of us
