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Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan

Tamim Ansary

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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.

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