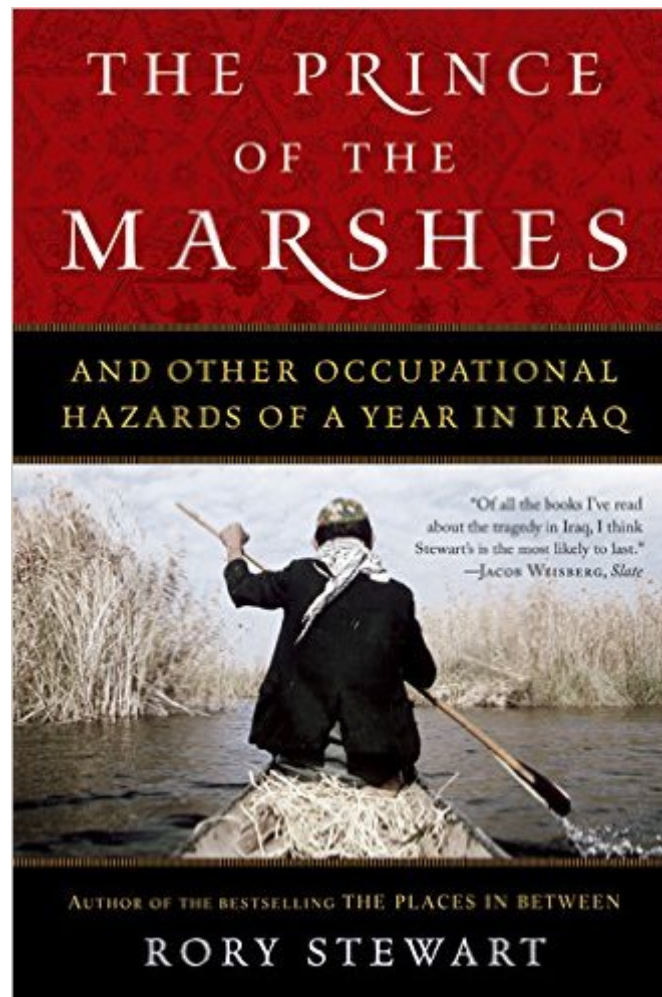


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The Prince Of The Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards Of A Year In Iraq



Synopsis

In August 2003, at the age of thirty, Rory Stewart took a taxi from Jordan to Baghdad. A Farsi-speaking British diplomat who had recently completed an epic walk from Turkey to Bangladesh, he was soon appointed deputy governor of Amarah and then Nasiriyah, provinces in the remote, impoverished marsh regions of southern Iraq. He spent the next eleven months negotiating hostage releases, holding elections, and splicing together some semblance of an infrastructure for a population of millions teetering on the brink of civil war. The Prince of the Marshes tells the story of Stewart's year. As a participant he takes us inside the occupation and beyond the Green Zone, introducing us to a colorful cast of Iraqis and revealing the complexity and fragility of a society we struggle to understand. By turns funny and harrowing, moving and incisive, it amounts to a unique portrait of heroism and the tragedy that intervention inevitably courts in the modern age.

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Customer Reviews

Do you REALLY want to know what it's like in Iraq? Probably not - All the more reason to read this book. Rory or "Seyyed Rory" as he is called throughout most of the book has written a well-penned, deadpan account of his eleven months or so as an administrator: Governor, Deputy Governor etc., with the Brits in the South of Iraq. Early on in the book, he reflects: "I had never believed that mankind, unless overawed by a strong government, would fall inevitably into violent chaos. Societies were orderly, I thought, because human cultures were orderly. Written laws and policy

played only a minor role. But Maysan (the province to which he's assigned) made me reconsider." P.78 Thus, we have the quotes from Machiavelli at the beginning of each section bearing, in some way, on the Byzantine, disorderly, well, mess in which he finds himself in each particular situation, with Sheiks, militias, clerics, and divisions and sub-divisions and sub-sub-divisions of each. Those with axes to grind on either side probably won't fancy this book. It doesn't have the headline grabbing title of "Fiasco" or "The End of Iraq" - Furthermore, he depicts good Brits and bad Brits, good Yanks and bad Yanks, good Iraqis and bad Iraqis, as well as some who are at some times courageous and kind and at others cowardly and corrupt. - In other words, the human condition, not some idealised vision of the (all too many) sides. - All the more reason for those with said axes to drop them and read this book. Yes, I agree that this book does not have the emotional pull of *The Places in Between*, Rory's earlier book. But this lack goes *pari passu* with the situation he is in. He is not on an epic quest with a lovable dog he has adopted.

In August of 2003, Rory Stewart (known to the Arabs of southern Iraq as Seyyd Rory) "took a taxi from Jordan to Baghdad to ask for a job from the Director of Operations". This was four months after the Coalition invasion. Shortly thereafter Stewart wound up as deputy governor and coordinator of Maysan. He became, at age 30, the de-facto governor of a province of 850,000 in southern Iraq, in the immediate aftermath of the war. This is his story. And an almost incredible story it is - engaging, compelling, and ultimately devastating. Stewart refrains from analysis and simply tells it like it was, leaving it up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. I can't escape the word; the result is, well, simply devastating. The author navigates two opposing worlds - on the one hand the intricate web of medieval tribal and religious affiliations in the local populations, on the other, the hapless and naïve bureaucracy of the Coalition Provisional Authority. The following description of the composition of the provisional council that Stewart negotiated into being conveys the flavor of the environment in the province: "I knew these people well. Most had killed others; all had lost close relatives. Some wanted a state modeled on seventh-century Arabia, some wanted something that resembled even older, pre-Islamic tribal systems. Some were funded by the Iranian secret service; others sold oil on the local black market, ran protection rackets, looted government property, and smuggled drugs. Most were linked to construction companies that made immense profits by cheating us. Two were first cousins and six were from a single tribe; some had tried to assassinate each other.

In his story of his 11 months as Governor of an Iraqi province, Rory Stewart has managed to

capture the spirit of the time and place, the many faceted culture of Iraq, and give us a clear and unadorned picture of what it was like to be there - trying to put the pieces of a broken society back together. The tale is told in the first person by a skillful writer who judiciously leavens historical background into his story to aid in our understanding of the events and to put them into a broader perspective without slowing down the narrative or burying us with details of ancient kingdoms. The Sumerian proverb I used as a title is an example of the interesting and appropriate sayings that adorn the beginning of each chapter. From Virgil to Machiavelli to T.E. Lawrence, the author enriches his canvas with a deft touch of the wisdom of the ages. Most of the time, Seyyed Rory (as he was respectfully addressed by the Iraqis - when they weren't shooting at him ;-)) presents his story in an even handed, matter of fact way. He seems to be the epitome of the unflappable British civil servant of a century or two earlier (when most of us would be running around screaming in fear or banging our heads against the wall in frustration - keep a stiff upper lip chaps, what ever happens ;-)) And frustrations are many, from lack of water and electricity, to no staff and no actual cash to meet the varied and almost impossible task of helping to govern after the old system was so completely destroyed.

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