



# Under an Afghan Sky: A Memoir of Captivity

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## **Under an Afghan Sky: A Memoir of Captivity** Melissa Fung

In October 2008, Melissa Fung, a reporter for CBC's *The National*, was leaving a refugee camp outside of Kabul when she was kidnapped by armed men. She was forced to hike for several hours through the mountains until they reached a village; there, the kidnappers pushed her towards a hole in the ground. "No," she said. "I am not going down there."

For more than a month, Fung lived in that hole, which was barely tall enough to stand up in, nursing her injuries, praying and writing in a notebook. *Under an Afghan Sky* is the gripping tale of Fung's days in captivity, surviving on cookies and juice, from the "grab" to her eventual release.

## **Under an Afghan Sky: A Memoir of Captivity Details**

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# From Reader Review Under an Afghan Sky: A Memoir of Captivity for online ebook

## Bookworm says

I read this story after reading Amanda Lindhout's story which unfortunately affected my overall enjoyment. I feel for the author as being captured and held hostage for a month is certainly a traumatic experience. I enjoyed the author's tell it like it is approach. As for plot, the author seemed to fill a lot of pages with her descriptions of living in Canada, her friends and her normal everyday life. I just didn't find those bits very interesting and detracted from the overall story. Although 30 days would feel like forever while in captivity, I just don't think it gives much to write about in a novel format. Perhaps a short story format would have been better.

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## Nancy says

I really didn't like this book. Throughout I just kept saying "waaa, waaa, waaa". Sure it was a traumatic and really harrowing experience to be kidnapped and kept in a hole in the ground with no privacy for 28 days in Afghanistan. The story is worth telling. But the repetition of all the apologizing to others for the stress and heartache they were experiencing in the letters written to family and friends was way over the top in terms of what readers need to get the point.

The verbatim conversations with the kidnappers and the whining day after day after day was so tiring to read. I just got so tired of Melissa's voice.

The prayers and hymns written out in full - too much for me.

What I did appreciate what her resilience and ability to remain thankful for things light daylight on a wall of the hole, the beauty of the landscape appreciated, engagement with her kidnappers and their interests (learning Pashto, teaching English, singing, relationships, etc).

The book could have been a lot shorter and succinct for the reader. I realize however that writing the book was part of her process of healing and appreciate it for that and the fact that all proceeds fund a school for women.

But as a reader, there was just too much personal religion, relationships, and whining for me.

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## Elizabeth Lister says

DNF. I read about half of it and the very end. I couldn't bear the tedium and darkness of being in the 'hole' with her for any longer. I really don't know how she came out of this experience as well as she did. I do admire her strength and, certainly, the narrative is interesting enough for awhile. But then it seemed like she was having the same arguments over and over with her captors, as I'm sure she WAS, but it was very frustrating reading. I also would have liked to read more about how she felt immediately after being freed and reuniting with her boyfriend and parents.

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## **Hildy says**

Under an Afghan Sky – A Memoir of Captivity recounts the traumatic abduction and confinement of Mellissa Fung a journalist who was held captive for 28 days in a dark, rancid hole in a small town on the outskirts of Kabul.

I read this book fairly quickly as the writing style is simple and easy to read but vivid in detail and dialogue. It is a poignant and somewhat riveting recollection of inner and mental strength and the author's belief in God and faith in pray which I found to be ultimately inspiring.

It was interesting to read about the relationship, which I guess was one of friendliness (during most of their interaction) between the author and one of her captors. It just demonstrated that her captors were not bad people, but rather individuals pushed to the edge in a worn torn country, with harrowing poverty and divided by political and religious extremes. Within this set of pre-existing conditions, these individuals were eking out an existence by abducting and ransoming foreigners for a few hundred K. The author however portrayed her captors and the conversations they had with a lot of humanity that you were able to get a sense of who they were and not just a one dimensional stereotype of an Afghani captor.

Another thing I found interesting was that the author was not afraid of dying. There is always that possibility when you go to such war torn places like Afghanistan, but to be that mentally prepared (about the very real possibility) of getting killed was surprising to me.

The only thing I really did not like in the book was some of the background information and anecdotes from the author's life which I thought were unnecessary and boring. However that is just my opinion, and does not take anything away from the fact that this is a poignant and gripping read.

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## **Patrick says**

Whine, whine, whine... Nothing insightful in this book, with nothing much to say. Maybe that's why half of it is reprinting emails from her boyfriend. I made the mistake of reading this book after finishing "A House In The Sky" by Amanda Lindhout, another journalist held hostage by Islamic fundamentalists, but for a much longer length of time. Fung's book pales by comparison.

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## **Shonna Froebel says**

Before her kidnapping and captivity in Afghanistan, Mellissa Fung had an active life, with her career in journalism advancing nicely. She was in a relatively new relationship and looking forward to upcoming changes in both her work and personal life.

Her kidnapping memoir shows this and how knowing her support system of family and friends was out there got her through her ordeal. She tries to create relationships with her kidnappers, asking about them and their

families and their life goals. She writes letters to friends and family in her notebook, hoping that someday she will be able to give them in person. She prays and finds her rosary a comfort.

Her portrayal of the young men who kidnap her and the world she finds herself in is written in the present tense and comes across as raw and real. I know from media coverage that she found writing this book difficult, but something she needed to do. It gives us a window into her experience and into life in this difficult country. Well worth the read.

Shortlisted for the 2012 OLA Evergreen Award

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## Krista says

I was recently reading *A House in the Sky*, Amanda Lindhout's account of her fifteen month captivity at the hands of Somali kidnappers, and came across this passage early on:

Melissa Fung, the CBC television correspondent who looked so purposeful and confident, couldn't know that sixteen months later, on a return trip to Afghanistan, she would get kidnapped outside of Kabul and spend twenty-eight days as a hostage, kept half-starved in an underground room in the mountains.

I immediately felt deflated because I thought that I *was* reading about the Canadian journalist who had been held in a hole in the ground, so it was just by happenstance that I had picked up the wrong memoir. I went on to quite enjoy Lindhout's book, and although comparisons between the two might not be fair, I can't help but compare them now, and as a result, *Under an Afghan Sky* falls short.

Of course, I'm not comparing the two women's actual experiences -- whether for one month or fifteen, being held against your will by armed young extremists must be a hopeless and terrifying experience, and both Lindhout and Fung held up much better than I suspect I would in their stead. The real comparison is in the reporting of their experiences, and my biggest complaint about Fung's book is that it came off as a bit dry and clinical, curiously lacking in heart, yet -- and here's where I get to look like a hypocrite -- I had initially been put off Lindhout's book because she collaborated with another writer, someone who added flair and drama that I initially felt built up a barrier between me and the plain truth. *Under an Afghan Sky* seems to demonstrate what happens when a straight-up journalist goes solo with her material: the story lacked in storytelling. I was teary throughout much of Lindhout's account, full out crying when she reunited with her family, but totally dry-eyed (though not completely unaffected by the details) throughout Fung's.

Melissa Fung was (until very recently) a CBC correspondent and so many of her attitudes displayed in *Under an Afghan Sky* demonstrate why I resent my tax dollars funding the public television station, or at least its news division anyway. Most annoying was her voicing the Canadian left's reflexive anti-Americanism in statements like: *I thought that by trying to make Zahir see that there was a difference between Canada and the United States, I could make him realize his captive wasn't a sworn enemy of the Taliban the same way an American might be.* I thought that after 9/11 we were "all American" and that Canada was actually leading the efforts in Afghanistan -- a maple leaf on her backpack wasn't going to get Fung out of this jam. Also: *"I agree, I think George Bush is a very bad man," I said. This wasn't completely untrue, and I figured it was time we agreed on something.* I understand trying to find common ground with her captor, and also appreciate that many people didn't find Bush too bright, but "a very bad man"? Later, Fung made this statement: *It was Wednesday, November 5, and the night after the US presidential election. I*

wondered what had happened, and hoped that America had made the right decision. The right decision, electing Obama. What hubris coming from a Canadian journalist, and totally inappropriate coming from someone who reports for Canada's national broadcaster.

Despite her no-atheists-in-foxholes-constant-rosary-recitation, Fung also takes swipes at Christian fundamentalists (equating a devout Muslim's prayer cycles to that of a "Deep South" Christian and saying, "God knows there are enough problems with Christian fundamentalists in Western society...") and also demeans her own Canadian citizenship: *Just like I wouldn't say I'm a devout Catholic, I wouldn't call myself an unduly patriotic Canadian...But everywhere I went, I was pretty proud to be a Canadian, proud of everything Canada stood for internationally in the tradition of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau.* In the tradition of Pearson and Trudeau is really important there -- the peacekeepers-not-policemen foreign policy that certain proper-thinking people think should be Canada's only role internationally -- you know *Pearson and Trudeau*, the Prime Minister who charged into Korea and the one who chummed with Castro soon after the Bay of Pigs.

Her *politics* aside, I was also surprised that Fung seemed to empathise with her kidnappers, blaming a generation of domestic war for their criminal activities. While I could see why Lindhout understood her captors' motivations (the young men who held her wanted the ransom to fund their education and marriages) I was dismayed that Fung could also see logic in *her* captors seeking ransom to buy Kalashnikovs and materials to make the IEDs that were all too often blowing up the Canadian Forces that she was embedded with.

And one last comparison -- Lindhout's book included information about what her family and the Canadian Government were doing to secure her release, including information about how the ransom negotiations were going; information I found very interesting and compelling. Fung's book didn't share any of this, despite including letters from her "special friend" Peter, a man who began writing letters to her while she was being held because "I wanted you to have a record of what went on". These letters, while loving, don't actually include any information about "what went on".

I have much empathy for Mellissa Fung and am heartened to see that writing this book has helped her to deal with her horrific experience, but fair or not, I have recently seen the format done better, and as a result, this memoir is ultimately disappointing.

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## **Kat Hodgins says**

As others have said, I really, really wanted to like this book ... but I didn't. I wanted to feel real empathy for Mellissa; I wanted to understand her experience; I wanted to get inside the head of her captors, get a feel for the realities. I didn't get any of that. I got a dis-jointed and repetitive narration that left me completely unsatisfied.

Mellissa Fung indicates in the afterword that she felt the need to write this book, and thought it would be therapeutic; in interviews since she says she did not experience any healing from it. I do feel for her, and hope she finds peace.

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## **Jennifer says**

What an amazing tale of capture, confinement and release. You feel you are in the cave with her and you hope, every time she hopes, for release.

Months later, I can still picture the dirt floor, the cramped conditions. Fung's faith is apparent.

As an interesting footnote, the 10th anniversary edition of *The Walrus* has a follow up piece by Fung that is a must read regarding what the whole presence of Canada in Afghanistan has meant from her perspective.

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## **Jean Oram says**

Canadian journalist is captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan and held in a hole for a month while her kidnappers try to negotiate a lot of money for her return. However, she is an employee of a public broadcasting corp and there isn't a lot of money...

A memoir of how she kept her spirits up, connected with her captors, and subsisted on juice and cookies for a month. No showers. A dusty hole the size of most washrooms.

My husband really enjoyed the aspect of how Fung connected with her captors and understood why they were doing what they were. Personally, I wanted more 'on the back end.' In other words, after her release the book ended. I was curious about how she felt back home. Whether she really did form that cavity. How her reunion was with her boyfriend, etc.

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## **Heather Clitheroe says**

While Fung's story is compelling, the book reads like a script from a news segment: choppy and short. I wanted to like the story better because I felt so much sympathy for the author - her ordeal was, without a doubt, horrible. And though I did read on, it felt a bit like I was reading because of the sheer spectacle...which was disturbing to me. There's little understanding to be gained from the book. Her kidnappers are, she says, petty thieves. There's some discussion about the state of the police force in Afghanistan, and repeated mention that ransom was not paid, and some talk about the kind of work she was doing. But most of the book talks about her time in captivity which was, by her account, filled with moments of terror and long, long hours of boredom.

I feel conflicted saying that I didn't enjoy it much. I had hoped there would be more about her reintegration into her old life after her negotiated release, I think. Instead, a lot of remarks about the cookies her kidnappers ate. It's still a compelling story, but I felt a bit guilty for having read it at all.

It felt like the literary equivalent of watching while something really bad happened to somebody...and watching just for the sheer entertainment of it. Fung has recently said, in an interview, that she thought the experience of writing the book would be cathartic, but that it wasn't...and that if she had to do it again, she would not have written it. I think that sense runs through the book - that the expected release of emotions isn't there, for the author, and can't be found by the reader.

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## **Mariola says**

Classic example of Stockholm syndrome where "hostage express empathy and sympathy and have positive feelings toward his captors. Convinces herself that lack of abuse is an ack of their kindness."

Besides that, very repetitive and boring. With sentences like : " I didn't know there was a gun market there"..... seriously now, this country was/is being torn by war for 3 decades now.

This war journalist is naive and clueless beyond believe.

PS. " I am canadian but I prefer the american national anthem" ....Im not even going to comment on that one.

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## **Mikey B. says**

What a page turner this is! It is an engrossing true story of a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) journalist who is kidnapped in Afghanistan. She is hidden by her Taliban captors (or a variation of them) in a hole in the ground for about thirty days. During this time she is aware that negotiations for her release are in some stage of vicarious progress.

The great strength of this account is the conversations that she has with her captors. We get a vivid inside portrayal of these Afghan men and their society. It is a very limited world view indeed, constrained by a fundamentalist view of Islam. They are from a poor and shattered country; like Mellissa we often feel a total disconnect with their thought processes.

We learn from the author's description of her experience in refugee camps and the subjugation of women expressed in the conversations with her captors that this country has a long journey to go before it can attain anything resembling social stability.

Perhaps it is trivial, but I also came away with the impression that her captors were a physically tough people (i.e. formidable adversaries). Towards the end of her captivity they took her on a trek in the mountains and were able to sleep comfortably during the night with only a blanket on the rocky mountain escarpments and continued the walk the next morning with very little nourishment. When we do something similar in western countries we carry loads of expensive high tech paraphernalia (tents, backpacks, specialized foods, cooking equipment...) and stay at a pre-arranged campsite. These Afghans simply tossed a blanket on the rocks and fell asleep.

This is a passionate narrative of a woman who had her life taken away from her for a month. Although she is helpless, she maintains her strength and dignity. We feel her endurance throughout the arduous ordeal. It is an absorbing story and gives an inner view of Afghanistan.

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## **J. E. Hewitt says**

This was an gripping account of this journalist's ordeal being held hostage in Afghanistan. I've read other such stories and, even though more happened in them, I found them less compelling. That's not a great thing to say, I know ... gee, your story of being kidnapped is not as good as hers ... but in this case it's a journalist telling the story so inevitably it is well written and well paced. Although much of the story is about how she passed many intolerably horrid hours, it's never boring because it's quite a study in human nature. It's pretty amazing how she keeps up her hope in such a situation and does not become swamped by fear and despair. I am certain that I would not be as patient and forgiving as Ms. Fung! I read this book because it is up for the Evergreen award and I'm trying to read a few of those as I do every year.

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## **Kim says**

It was interesting to read Amanda Lindhout's story about her experiences living in captivity in Somalia for over a year, then this book. Fung's story is not nearly as dire since she was treated comparatively well and released after only 28 days (even though she was held in an underground bunker for most of it!). Her advantage was having the CBC on her side whereas Lindhout was freelance (and green to boot). The most interesting part of this book was her focus on contrasting her religion (Christianity) with fundamentalist Islam, though she certainly could have dealt with this more deeply. The letters between her love (Paul Workman) and herself did not really add anything - rather repetitious and not very insightful.

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