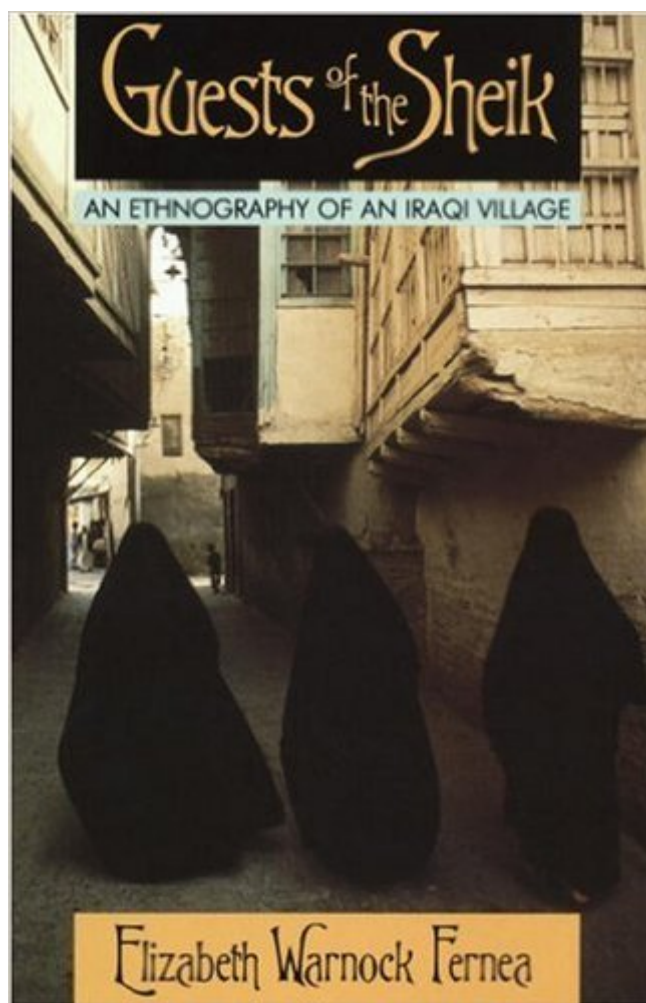


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Guests Of The Sheik: An Ethnography Of An Iraqi Village



Synopsis

A delightful, well-written, and vastly informative ethnographic study, this is an account of Fernea's two-year stay in a tiny rural village in Iraq, where she assumed the dress and sheltered life of a harem woman.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book, suggested to me by a professor, was absolutely engrossing. "BJ" Fernea is newly married and accompanying her anthropologist husband Bob from Chicago to the conservative shiite muslim village of El Nahra, where she spends about 1.5 years in the late 50's living, as the native women do, in purdah, veiled from head to foot and almost completely segregated from men. While her husband conducts his studies, BJ, to help her husband's work, involves herself in the daily lives of the women of El Nahra. There are lavish festivals, rampant poverty, marriages, illness, holy celebrations of mourning, enmities created and friendships formed while BJ finds her way through the minefield of social propriety, familial obligation and hard work that composes the lives of these women. Educated as a journalist, Fernea describes her sojourn both eloquently and honestly. These people become absolutely real in your mind, and I must admit that I felt a lump rise in my throat at the end as her friends in the village ululated unseen their good wishes and mourning at her while leaving the town. This is, despite the title, almost exclusively about the women of El Nahra, a very small town in the 50's near Diwaniya in southern Iraq. She sees, and therefore reports, little of the activities of men. This is not a general overview, but for what it is it remains a landmark.

Given the attention on the Middle East, and Iraq in particular, this book should be considered a 'must read.' I still find myself wondering what ended up becoming of the village that showed Elizabeth and Robert such hospitality and acceptance before Iraq became a dirty word to Americans. This book inspired me to locate more books written by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and I anticipate equally enthusiastic reviews of her other open and honest accounts of life in Arab countries. She has had the opportunity to experience Middle Eastern society in a way so few of us could ever hope. I especially appreciate her objectivity and her ability to respect the way of life that so many people in the West automatically view as inferior. This book is truly a treasure for those open-minded enough to want to learn more about life in the Middle East.

I recently read *Guests of the Sheik* for one of my classes. Not only did I find the book informative, but I was also so enthralled by it that I found myself neglecting other work. Many of the other books that I have read for my class I find to be cluttered with the author's prejudices. When Fernea to Iraq with her husband she was not a social anthropologist, like her husband. She did not have the base of over-analyzation that many "orientalists" write from. Her book is entirely observation without judgement. If you want to read about women's life in a veiled society, this is perfect. You'll be surprised at what you discover about this culture, which is so often portrayed as oppressive and backwards.

I was introduced to the works of Fernea while I was taking a course on the Middle East in university in 1986. The book was an absolute delight to read and took me away to another time and place. A place that is seldom seen by Westerners, let alone, females. The book takes you into the lives of females and their roles within the Arab culture. It is written with such feeling and detail that one feels that you are present among the women. The story is captivating and I found myself reading till the early morning hours waiting in anticipation as to what her next encounter would be. It provides insight and opens your eyes to a world that is hidden from most people. I currently live in Saudi Arabia and know how difficult it is to penetrate into the circle of Arab females. I have read the book several times and thoroughly enjoy every page. Fernea's other books are also a pleasure to read and would definitely recommend her books to anyone interested in learning more about Arab women and their culture. She has travelled throughout the Middle East and has experienced the changes the area has gone through both politically and socially over the past 35 years. Her books document this progress and also capture the rich traditions that still exist.

I really loved this book. She travelled as a new bride with her anthropologist husband to Iraq in the 1950's or '60's, I believe. She had so much to learn and go through adapting to a new culture. It's great that she's there because her husband would never have been allowed to talk to the women. They were very segregated, so Ms. Fernea learned all about the half of the society that male anthropologists usually can't even learn about due to lack of access. She made friends, had to relearn how to cook rice (different water amount), and you really get a personal look at the culture. She kept in touch with many of her friends from that time. I can't wait to read her other books.

I picked up this book as a result of a Cultural Anthropology class, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Fernea never claims to be a trained anthropologist at the time she traveled to Iraq, she merely recounts her experiences as they happened. She was traveling with her anthropologist husband. For those who say she was a tourist who suddenly claimed to be an expert, I think they should have read her comments more closely. Perhaps they are among those who skip to chapter 1 without reading the foreward??? Let me stress again, Fernea was only recording her experiences as an American woman in a remote Iraqi village. Upon returning to the US she continued to study the region, and went on to teach Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas at Austin. I would hardly say she took a little vacation and immediately claimed to be an expert! Obviously, her life in the village of El Nahra impacted her life greatly. This book was great, and very readable. I would recommend it to anyone curious about women's life in remote Iraqi society.

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