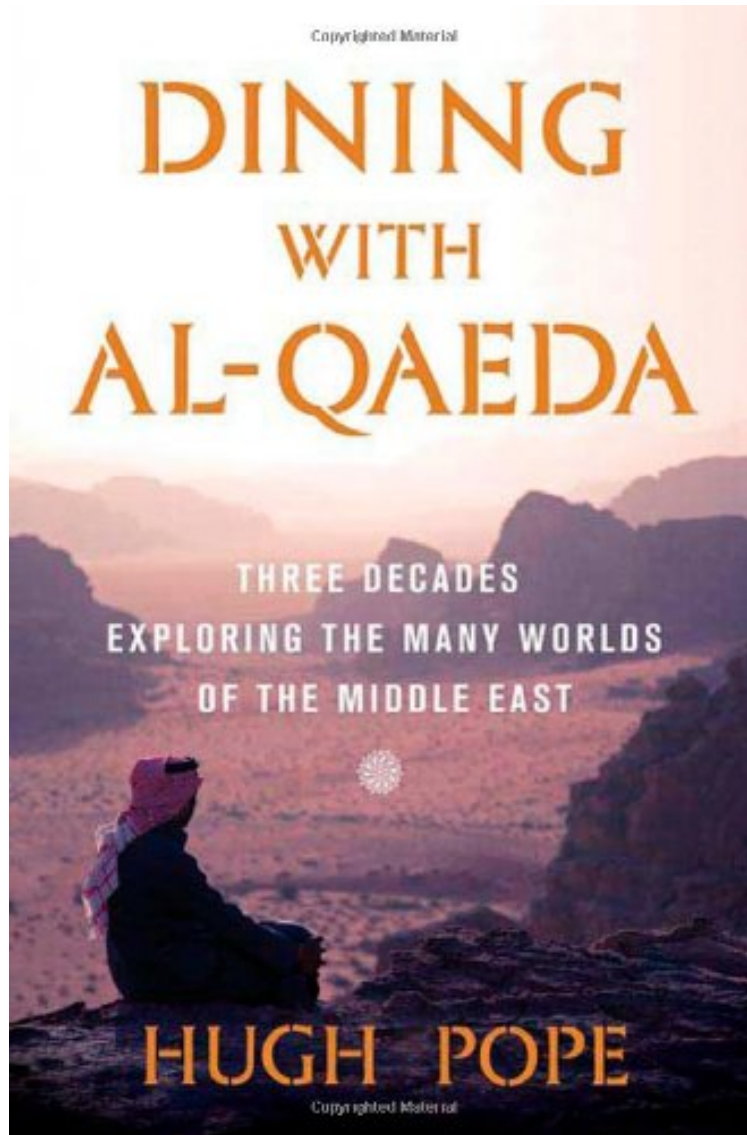


Dining with al-Qaeda: Three Decades Exploring the Many Worlds of the Middle East

Hugh Pope

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Hugh Pope : Dining with al-Qaeda: Three Decades Exploring the Many Worlds of the Middle East before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dining with al-Qaeda: Three Decades Exploring the Many Worlds of the Middle East:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Tasty Food For Thought By David Schlosberg Who is our neighbor and who is our enemy? I guess this depends on where you live. North America is surrounded by water to the left and

the right so the question becomes even more complex when thinking about people from Europe, Eurabia and the Middle East. *Dining With Al Qaeda* is a surprisingly delightful and slightly dreadful read about the various peoples of the Middle East. Being born in England and having spent decades living in the Middle East as a reporter for various outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, the author brings a unique perspective that offers insight and wise perspective (from decades of first hand experience) into the Middle East. The book also provides some interesting observations about the American perspective as well - both strengths and weaknesses. In some ways the author is like a new Lawrence of Arabia because though an outsider to the Middle East it becomes a part of him and it shows. Upon returning from a trip to the Middle East, a cousin of mine once remarked that the place "kinda gets into your blood" and I think this phenomenon has proven true for the author. The book provides somewhat surprising commentary on the perhaps lesser known aspects of social and sensual values in the Middle East, culture, politics and that sad extension of politics - on warfare. Through a variety of entertaining (and sometimes harrowing) experiences the author does an excellent job of walking the reader through the complexity of viewpoints in the Middle East pretty much country by country. The differences between Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Israel are fascinating. Moreover, if you are wine lover like me, you may find the commentary on Shiraz, Iran to be insightful. I don't think many wine lovers are aware of that grape's history and connection to Iran. I'd say the book's weak spots are the subtle yet biased comments against Israel which are ironic because Israel champions the "western" values that it seems the author subscribes to, better than any other country in the Middle East with its diverse population, religious freedoms and significant cultural output. On the other hand, the author's transparency of thought throughout the book, though fascinating, perhaps unintentionally, chronicles how a western "thinker" living in Arabic environments eventually adopts some of the same stereotypical Arab biases that fuel the long running conflict. Although this ability to get into the Arab mind, in all its complexity, enables the author to get an inside look into a range of mindsets from "the Enemy" (which almost costs his life) and to our Arab neighbors, who are friendly and open to the western lifestyle. Deciphering exactly who that is, is the tasty food for thought that *Dining With Al Qaeda* delivers.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This is an amazing book for someone who wants a more in depth ... By Josiah Gulick This is an amazing book for someone who wants a more in depth and personal view of the Middle East than what is currently portrayed in the media. While the author does have a clear pro-Arab bias, it does not impact his portrayal of historical events.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful. An intriguing look behind the scenes at covering the Middle East

By S. McGee Hugh Pope's new book is a different kettle of fish from the stellar but straightforward *Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World*, which was a great (and highly recommended) look at the world inhabited by the Turks today, from Turkey itself to the southern reaches of Russia and all the way to western China. That was a straightforward book of journalistic reportage; this is more of a hybrid, a book that focuses as much on Pope's experiences living and working in the Middle East over the last three decades as on the regions that he has lived in and traveled through. Unlike Robert Fisk's massive *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, which is a similar kind of book in focus but far more ambitious in both scope and message, Pope's survey has no single compelling theme that sets current events in a historical context. That's a strength in some ways -- certainly, reality is hard to shove into a nice, neat little analytical framework, particularly in this region. On the other hand, it doesn't give the reader -- particularly one who is new to reading about the Middle East and with a familiarity with the issues gleaned only from cursory glances at newspapers and CNN -- much to hold onto as they follow Pope as he skips back and forward in both time and place, moving from his early adventures living atop a brothel in Aleppo, Syria, to his efforts to avoid frontline combat reporting in Iraqi Kurdistan during the American-led invasion of 2003. But then, Pope, unlike Fisk, doesn't make himself the hero of his own narrative (indeed, Pope's early discussion of Fisk's own recasting of reality in his book are eye-opening), although they start from a similar philosophical viewpoint: that over the last half-century or more, Europe and North America have tended to oversimplify the complexities of the Middle East and have remained dangerously unaware of the consequences of their often-clumsy political manoeuvrings in the region. Many of the observations, anecdotes and arguments put forward by Pope are at once fascinating and eye-opening. There are some "oh my god" moments, as when he has to bargain for his life with a Saudi recruiter with Al-Qaeda, and some sobering moments when the reader gets a glimpse of the reality behind the 'glamorous' life of a foreign correspondent, as when he spends six weeks or so trapped in a besieged town in southern Sudan after he decides to hitch a ride out the next day only to find that rebels have declared a 'no fly' zone. Pope tries to shed light on the Persian/Iranian character by probing into the writings of a long-dead poet, Hafez; and writes about the irony of Saudis destroying their own Muslim heritage when they level historic buildings in Mecca in order to build McDonalds franchises and glass office buildings and malls. When Pope is weaving stories like this, I was caught up in the moment, and felt I was gaining more insight into a region that I've traveled through, at least insofar as I've been able to as a woman and a North American who prefers to travel on her own. (In other words, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Turkey -- yes; Yemen and Saudi Arabia or Iran, nope.) His language skills (Arabic and Persian) give him an edge in reporting; the reader can have confidence that what Pope writes is what he has actually heard people say, rather than having it filtered through an interpreter who may have a separate agenda. That said, Pope has his own agenda: that Americans are too narrow-minded about the Middle East, and that may, unfortunately limit the audience for this

book. My only reservations come with this book as journalistic memoir. Pope goes back, over and over again, to his difficulties getting his stories on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, and the compromises he has to make to make them work for his editors and readers. Eventually, these endless variations on a single theme became wearing, even for me (and I spent years running the same gauntlet, albeit not from the Middle East, and was fascinated by his look at a process I know all too well and the personalities involved, whom I also knew.) For anyone outside the rather incestuous world of journalism, I would imagine these would become either wearing, or feed into theories that the media is deliberately withholding "the truth" about the world. (In fact, in my experience, the Journal's page one editor are simply in search of counterintuitive "man bites dog" stories, and too many of the stories about which Pope felt strongly just didn't meet that threshold.) There's a case to be made that that is too narrow an approach to take, particularly when it comes to covering such an important region, but it really isn't about bias, and if that's the story Pope wants to tell, it would probably work better in a separate book. The two themes in this story -- what has happened in the Middle East over the last 30 years and Pope's frustrations with his editors and publishers as he tries to write about those events -- don't always coexist easily, and make it a less fluid and focused book. Still, Pope pulls no punches and that's refreshing, as is his point of view. He has witnessed enough tragedy on a massive scale that this book deserves a wide and open-minded audience of readers willing to think about his observations. As he notes in his brief conclusion, there are no uplifting endings -- but then, that's the reality of the world we inhabit and our yearning for a happy ending, for a pat resolution, can actually undermine our geopolitical efforts. Pope's ultimate and idealistic plea is for a kind of pragmatism that is all too thin on the ground. Perhaps it's appropriate that Pope has left journalism to work for the International Crisis Group, an independent body that does remarkable work in trying to identify the causes of some of the conflicts he has chronicled and find a way to defuse them before it's too late. This is a solid and well-written book that tells uncomfortable truths, without cloaking them in dramatic feats of derring-do by the author or splashy revelations about foreign policymaking. Anyone with any interest in the Middle East should read this, as it brings a stubbornly independent perspective and an eclectic set of memories and experiences to the mix. It's not as compelling or streamlined a narrative as Fisk's book, but in some ways may be both more raw and more honest. But it's probably not a good introductory book on the Middle East, simply because of the way it jumps from one region and time period to another, and because of the frequent diversions into the art of reporting. A solid 4-stars.

Following in the footsteps of Sir Richard Burton and Lawrence of Arabia, Hugh Pope presents his modern-day explorations, mined from more than three decades, of the politics, religion, and aspirations of Muslim peoples to show how the Middle East is much more than a monolithic "Islamic World."

From Publishers Weekly The 30 years Pope (Sons of the Conquerors) has spent living and traveling in the Middle East, from a 1980 visit as an Oxford student through a decade-long stint as a correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, color this reflection on the region's recent history. Moving back and forth through time in vignettes set in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, this fascinating memoir of his career tackles subjects as varied as the sexual attitudes of Middle Eastern men, the murder of Daniel Pearl, the Iraq-Iran War, and the poetry of the mystic Persian poet Hafez. The text has a loose episodic structure that sometimes feels desultory, though it does end with a series of chapters that focus on Iraq in the years before and after the American invasion. The author's writing is journalistic but imbued with the author's personality and long involvement in the region he decries uncritical American support for Israel and the West's tendency to treat Islam and Muslim cultures monolithically. Pope's exquisite photographs accompany his vivid panorama of the region. (Mar.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist Pope, formerly the Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, here recounts a careers worth of regional reportage that began in the early 1980s, an arc that follows his pursuit of interesting stories and interviews, as with an Islamic militant who debates with Pope about whether to kill him. Danger is often present in Popes stories, and his daring stories reflect his determination to break out from templates in which Middle East news, in his view, is presented in America. Perceptions that radicals represent the whole of Islam is one that Pope seeks to dispel, an intention realized in his journey to Shiraz, Iran (associated with a fourteenth-century Persian poet) that indeed textures a variegated Islam, while his drive to find a new angle also characterizes the many wars he has been compelled to cover, such as the Lebanese civil war and the American-led invasion of Iraq. His criticisms of the invasion and of Israel may grate some readers, but those interested in the interpersonal rather than the international will enjoy Popes bold curiosity in meeting people all over the Middle East. --Gilbert Taylor Pope shares deeply engaged dispatches from the Middle East hot spots he visited during his long career. The author is a charming writer [and] offers intimate glimpses inside the Arab world.... An enjoyable chronicle of a rich life's work. Kirkus s