

A JOURNALIST MAKES A CHOICE

A Rope and a Prayer: A Kidnapping from Two Sides

Seven years after the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, David Rohde finds himself in a sticky situation: he is kidnapped by the Taliban. Rohde, a Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent for *The New York Times*, is in Afghanistan to try to secure an interview with a prominent Taliban commander. It is the last piece of research he needs for his book—the crème de la crème of interviews.

Rohde has just married his wife, Kristen Mulvihill, two months prior to the kidnapping. Still fresh under the veil of newlywed bliss, they won't get to see each other for another seven months. Throughout arduous ordeals of negotiations (that go nowhere) with fickle Taliban members, Rohde and Mulvihill's relationship—and patience—is tested.

A Rope and a Prayer: A Kidnapping from Two Sides is a no fuss true-life account of an ordinary moment—at least for Rohde in the context of his career—gone sour. It is a quick read partly because of the impossible-but-oh-so-possible story it tells and partly because the chapters fluctuate from Rohde's point of view—the kidnapped husband—to Mulvihill's point of view—the distraught wife. They are thousands of miles away from one other—she in New York, he in Afghanistan and then Pakistan—but both are victims of the same grain.

As one can imagine, this structure heightens the drama of an already terrifying incident and—ultimately—Rohde's escape, leaving moms all across America brimming with tears and paper cuts. The juxtaposition of Rohde and Mulvihill's real-time accounts of the events as they unfold—in different time zones across the world—creates a tension that is difficult to ignore. It is a smart stylistic choice given the content but, regrettably, the authors' goal to invest readers into this ought-to-be-convincing story fails because the writing is so lackluster. Even more troubling, there is hardly a differentiation in tone and I wouldn't be surprised if both sections were actually written by Rohde himself.

It seems like this book doesn't know what it wants to be. Is it a story of 'a kidnapping from two sides' as the front cover suggests? Is it a story of two newlyweds ripped apart and then reunited once again by some miracle? Is it a story of terrorism, war, and America's involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan post-9/11? Or is it a story of misunderstanding amongst factions of people who maybe aren't that different at all? Perhaps all of the above. But voice is the problem: Rohde and Mulvihill only graze the surface of their circumstance as if they are too bored to tell the whole story—you know, the exciting parts.

In a handful of Rohde's chapters, for instance, the prose meanders into territory that invoke Middle Eastern history and America's involvement in the region. This lasts for pages on end and occurs just after Rohde shares details of his mundane kidnapped life of sleeping, eating, and chores—and always on the brink of dying. I'm convinced he is an expert—considering his extensive background in foreign affairs—but the historical information he provides drags on and on. It's as if he aims to explain the 'why' or the 'how-could-this-be' of his kidnapping by

providing loose contextual information in the third-person. Unfortunately, this pulled me out of the narrative and deposited me into boredom.

On the other end of the spectrum, Mulvihill's life in the context of her husband's kidnapping, and the way in which she reacts and reflects, is so superficial. Just as Rohde jarringly fluctuates from storytelling to history-telling so, too, does Mulvihill. Her musings on celebrities, fashion, photo-shoots, and her job at *Cosmopolitan* is strange against the backdrop of her husband's situation. Glamour and glitz aside, her feelings are cliché and devoid of feeling toward an impossible, horrific, and stark circumstance that I would (almost) feel insulted if I were Rohde. Mulvihill manages to turn a touching moment—buying a Christmas tree sans-husband—into one that is banal and vacant—“a close friend comes over and we drown our holiday sorrows in cheese fondue. Just what the doctor ordered.”

A Rope and a Prayer, I would argue, is a story that certainly needed to be told and shared. In its simplest form, the situation Rohde is faced with is daring and frightening, rare and treacherous. But—primarily due to the dull writing, the unnervingly consistent tone, and the evocation of plain-Jane characters—this atypical tale is ultimately ho-hum at best and forgettable at worst.