



# PARVANA

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**Notes written by Dr. Wendy Michaels and adapted for this new edition.**

## A Word from the Author

It's been forty-three years since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. It's been thirty-three years since their departure marked the start of the bloody civil war. It's been twenty-six years since the capture of Kabul by the Taliban army, and twenty-one years since that terrible day in September that unleashed events leading to the Taliban's removal from power.

That's an awful lot of war for a country that's barely the size of Texas.

My involvement with Afghanistan began when the news of the crimes of the Taliban hit the Toronto newspapers back in 1996. Since then, I have been trying to understand what war does to people.

War is made by people living in safety who make the decision to take risks with the lives of others whose opinions on the matter are not even solicited. War is made by those who profit from the manufacturing of weaponry. War is made by people who are too lazy to put the creative work and compassion into coming up with a solution to their problems that does not involve murder.

I've seen the way bombs and bullets shatter human bodies and devastate families. I've learned what happens when the destruction of infrastructure leads to bad water, food shortages and the lack of medical care. And I've learned from refugees about how their lives have been derailed and reduced to Waiting — for food, for shelter, for documents, for peace.

Through all the tales of crime and chaos, there have been heroes — giants of courage — who, in big ways and small, put human decency above all else.

I've met teachers around the world who carve out little niches of safety and childhood for kids in need. I've met librarians who remind us that human beings are capable of creating things noble and sublime. I've met builders and farmers, health workers and home workers who go through incredible difficulties just to make the next day, the next hour, a little bit better for those around them. I've met parents of dead children who take in children of dead parents, raising them with love and care.

And I've met children who cast aside the hatreds of the older generation and work toward building a world of radical kindness and beauty.

In today's warfare, ninety-five percent of the casualties are civilians. This means that when we give our governments permission to go to war, we are giving them permission to kill people who are just like us — who complain about the weather, love their children and wonder what to have for dinner. People who have done us no harm.

Books can help us remember what we have in common as humans.

That's what I try to do with mine.

In this twentieth anniversary edition of *Parvana*, I would like to thank all the readers who have embraced Parvana and her companions, who have followed her journey with compassion as though she were a close friend. I thank all the teachers, librarians and parents who have introduced the book to the readers in their care. And I thank, most deeply, the people of Afghanistan. They deserve, like we all deserve, to live in peace forever.

– Deborah Ellis

## Summary

Based closely on real life, this is an exciting and touching story of Parvana, a young girl growing up in Afghanistan, where the Taliban, members of an extreme religious group, rule most of the country with a heavy hand.

Imagine living in a country where women and girls are not allowed to leave the house without a man. Imagine having to wear clothes that cover every part of your body, including your face, whenever you go out. This is the life of Parvana, a young girl growing up in Afghanistan under the control of an extreme religious military group.

When soldiers burst into her home and drag her father off to prison, Parvana is forced to take responsibility for her whole family, dressing as a boy to make a living in the marketplace of Kabul, risking her life in the dangerous and volatile city.

By turns exciting and touching, *Parvana* is a story of courage in the face of overwhelming fear and repression.

## Introducing the book to your class

This book is extremely topical for Australians. It presents a fictionalised account of life in Afghanistan today in a way that is painfully real. In approaching this book in the classroom, students may need to have considerable background information about the context and setting of the story. It may also be necessary to counter some of the biased and prejudiced impressions that have been generated in this country about Afghanistan and its refugees in recent times.

Students could be encouraged to read the book out of class, or some time might be set aside for silent class reading (or reading aloud) while the introductory activities are undertaken.

## Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

### SETTING

- Show students the maps in the front of the book. Point out the position of Afghanistan in relation to the continent of Eurasia. Point out the land-locked nature of the country. Have students identify the various countries that border on Afghanistan and those beyond these countries. Have them note the nearest sea – Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Oman. Using a relief map from an atlas identify the features of the landscape of Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries.
- Encourage students to discuss how these topographical features might affect the lifestyle and activities of the people who live there.
- Have students in groups use the internet and other sources to research aspects of these countries – e.g. geographical features, social organisation, religion, history. Allow time for presentation of the information that students find and for discussion of issues that are raised by it.

### WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

- Afghanistan is a country that has been wracked by war at several periods throughout its long history and continually since 1978 when the Soviets invaded from the north. The Foreword outlines some of the conflicts and their consequences. Read this with the students and point out that there were many earlier conflicts including a British invasion in the nineteenth century.
- Have students research the British and Soviet invasions of Afghanistan. Encourage them to consider why such a country would be targeted. How were the British repulsed? You might wish to introduce Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" to illustrate some aspects of the British defeat. Under what circumstances did the Soviets leave the country?

### ACCOUNTS OF REFUGEES

This book raises issues of concern to the contemporary world and particularly to Australia's response to refugees from Afghanistan. It will be important to guide students' exploration of these issues both in the novel and in the wider context.

- Collect newspaper articles and other information about the refugees in the context of Australia's Border Protection legislation. Examine the incidents associated with the Tampa and other boats that have attempted to land with refugees on Australian soil. Be sure to have a range of viewpoints on the incidents.
- Have students hold a polarised debate on one of the following topics: Australia's response to the Afghan refugees has been inhumane and lacking in compassion. Reporting of the refugee situation has been biased.

### THE LANGUAGE OF THE MEDIA

- Select an editorial or letter to the editor from a broadsheet newspaper that has dealt with the issue of refugees and Australia's response to them and examine the point of view that the writer is expressing. Look closely at the language used to express this viewpoint. Is this a reasoned and balanced viewpoint or is there evidence of bias?
- Encourage students to write an editorial for a daily newspaper, or a letter to the editor expressing their views about the human plight of the refugees.

## **LABELLING REFUGEES**

- Explore the ways in which the media has presented the various stories about refugees. Look closely at the words used to identify the people who are seeking asylum in Australia – “boat people”, “illegal immigrants”, “these kinds of people”, “Muslims”, “Islamic people”, “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “terrorists”, “queue jumpers” and so on. Have students note the source of these labels – e.g. journalist, politician. Encourage students to discuss how the different labels given to these human beings position the reader to judge them.
- Provide students with a copy of the statements made by former Governor General Sir William Deane in his Peace Lecture (9 November 2001) when he warned against using terms such as “queue jumpers” to describe refugees. Sir William said:

*“We need to be on guard against the temptation to use words as labels likely to foster indifference or callousness towards fellow human beings who are entitled to at least appeal to our compassion.”*

- Encourage discussion of the warning that Sir William is giving and why he might have felt the need to do so at that point in time.
- Have students write an analytical essay on the topic: “News stories present the reader with much more than mere facts.”
- Examine this statement in the light of your reading of news reports about the “Refugee Crisis” in Australia in 2001. What do you consider news stories present their readers?

## **THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

The novel also raises important issues about the status and rights of females. Encourage students to discuss women’s status and rights today in Australia and in other Western societies. Encourage them to examine the opportunities that are available to women and girls in relation to such things as education, work, marriage, children, movement in society, economic independence.

- Ask students to speculate as to how they might respond to a world in which women (or any gender) were denied these rights. How would they feel if they were denied the freedom to move around the world unless accompanied by a person of the opposite sex?
- Have students work in small groups and ask them to imagine a world in which one gender was totally controlled by the other. They will need to consider how the dominant group would justify their position and how they would maintain or enforce it. Have them sketch in words and pictures how that world would operate. Allow time for preparation and then have each group present the picture of their world to the rest of the class. Allow time for discussion of these imagined worlds. Would they really like to live in such places?

## **FEMINIST MOVEMENTS**

Explain to students how the First Wave of Feminism in the late nineteenth century (the Suffragette Movement) worked to change the status of Western women, giving them a legal status that allowed them some independence from males.

Explain how the Second Wave of Feminism in the middle of the twentieth century extended this work to include issues such as equal pay for men and women doing the same work.

- Have students research the issues that underpinned these two waves of feminism and allow time for presentation and discussion of these issues:

- Why were these two movements necessary for women? Who were the main people involved in each?
- How did they mobilise support for the movement?
- What has changed for women as a result of these movements?
- Are there aspects that have not changed women's lives?

## ISLAM

Afghanistan is one of many Muslim countries in the world. The religion of Muslims is known as Islam, and is based on the teachings of the prophet Mohammed as they are laid down in the Koran. Central to this religion is the fundamental principle of submission to a unique and personal god called Allah. Just as there are different branches of Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity there are also different branches of Islam. In all religions, some branches tend to take an extreme and literal view of the beliefs as they are recorded in the "holy" text.

- Guide students' research into the central beliefs of the Islamic faith and the more extreme views held by some sections of this faith – for instance, the Taliban militia in Afghanistan who Ellis says, "had very definite ideas about how things should be run" (p.6). Ensure that students make clear distinctions between Islam and the way it is practiced by the Taliban rulers.

## THE TALIBAN RULERS

Explain to students that while the Taliban purport to be followers of Islam, their interpretation of the faith is a very narrow and intolerant one. Introduce the notion of theocracy or a theocratic society – that is, a society where the government recognises a god or deity as the supreme civil ruler and all laws are interpreted by the ecclesiastical authorities or priests who claim to have a divine commission that cannot be questioned.

Explain to the students that this is the kind of regime that was established in Afghanistan when the Soviets retreated and the Taliban (an extreme group within the Mujaheddin, who had been supported by the Americans against the Soviets) became the rulers of Afghanistan.

- Ask students to contemplate living in a country ruled by a theocracy. You could show Miller's film *The Crucible* or the BBC program *Beneath the Veil* to help students to understand the implications of this kind of social organisation for the individual.

## READING THE NOVEL

### Chapter One

- Chapter One sets the scene and introduces the main character of Parvana within the context of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Read aloud the first chapter and encourage discussion of some of the issues raised in light of the contextual research that students have undertaken.
  - The Taliban militia: "The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live."
  - Restrictions on the movement and education of girls: "The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school."
  - Restrictions on careers for women: "Their mother had been kicked out of her job as a writer for a Kabul radio station."
  - Restrictions on attire for women and girls: "How do women in burquas manage to walk?"
  - War, bombs, injuries, loss of homes, poverty, death: "Bombs had been part of Parvana's whole life."

- Fleeing the country: “Afghans cover the earth like stars cover the sky.”
  - Literacy and dialects: “Most people in Afghanistan could not read or write.”
  - Selling skills and personal belongings for food: “they sold what they could”, “Father used to have a false leg, but he sold it.”
  - History, and the Soviet withdrawal: “They fled back across the border in horror, as fast as their tanks could carry them.”
  - Homes: “living with your whole family in one room.”
  - Destruction of the city of Kabul: “bombed-out buildings”, “Neighbourhoods had turned from homes and businesses into bricks and dust.”
  - Remembering: “the time before the Taliban...”
- Point out to students how the first chapter not only raises these important issues but also sets up the framework for the story – e.g. Parvana’s literacy, her father’s disability, the marketplace and the tea boys etc. Point out that the author has chosen a third-person narrator to tell this story but has used Parvana to focalize the story, so that we see things through her eyes.
  - Ask students to imagine that they are Parvana and write a diary entry after this day in the marketplace. Allow time for sharing their writing and discussing the feelings that Parvana has expressed. Point out that in the real world of Afghanistan, the keeping of a diary would be a dangerous thing to do.

## Chapter Two

This chapter reveals a vignette of family life. Within this vignette we are also given some insight into life before the Taliban. On one hand, there is a sense of normalcy in this family and on the other, there is a sense of an extraordinary situation.

- Have some students work in groups to identify those aspects of family life that are not unlike their own – (e.g. “her superior big-sister smile”, while other students locate references that show the threatening side of their situation – (e.g. “The Taliban encourage neighbour to spy on neighbour”). Encourage students to discuss what this juxtaposition reveals about the family.
- Examine the story of Malali that Parvana’s father tells. Encourage students to talk about this story and the message that the father is giving to the family about their situation. Point out that as the Taliban drag the father from the room he calls Parvana “my Malali”.
- Encourage students to think of other stories where a young person has had the strength and courage to stand up against an enemy – e.g. ‘Jack the Giant Killer’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘David and Goliath’, ‘St Joan of Arc’.
- Have students write their own version of a story where a small person overcomes a bigger foe. Allow time for drafting and revising, and for sharing of the stories.

## Chapter Three

In this chapter we see the courage of Parvana and her mother as they go to the prison in a futile attempt to have the father freed. The photograph is a poignant image in this chapter – particularly in terms of the resonances of ground zero following the September 11 attacks.

- Have students examine the photograph – “photographs were illegal” (p.36) – and the way that the author uses it to highlight the issues in this chapter. How does the image of the photograph help to develop the main issues that the author is raising?



## Chapter Four

In this chapter, the narrator gives us a picture of the mother's depression, juxtaposed with some flashbacks to earlier times and the mother's work. Because the narrator presents this picture through Parvana's eyes, through her dreams, we see her growing awareness of the situation and her growing strength.

- Have students examine the section that describes Parvana's dream and discuss the significance of the dream. Have students imagine the "dreams" that the mother might be having as she lies on the toshak.

## Chapter Five

This chapter introduces the key character of Mrs Weera, who was a former "physical education teacher before the Taliban made her leave her job" (p.60) and who had been in the "Afghan Women's Union" (p.59) with Parvana's mother.

- Have students examine the way that Mrs Weera takes charge of the situation. Point out her use of phrases such as "Do your bit for the team," and "That's no way to keep up team spirit". What issues are highlighted through this language?

## Chapter Six

In this chapter Parvana is persuaded to disguise herself as a "boy" to help the family of women who are now isolated and vulnerable without a man. She becomes her dead brother Hossain and this causes pain for her mother.

- Have students imagine that they are Parvana after the first day disguised as Hossain and write a diary entry that reflects on the experience and her feelings and hopes for the future.

## Chapter Seven

This chapter highlights a key issue through the character of the Taliban militia who asks Parvana to read his letter.

- Have students examine the incident (p.74–78) and discuss why this incident was so "confusing" for Parvana.
- Have students write about what they think Ellis is suggesting about the Taliban militia.

## Chapter Eight

This chapter shows the effects of Mrs Weera on the family and the new regime that she manages to establish.

- Have students read through the chapter and make a list of the differences that Mrs Weera has brought to their daily lives. What issues are highlighted in this chapter?

## Chapter Nine

In this chapter Parvana discovers that she is not alone – "there were other girls like her in Kabul" and the "Window Woman" continues to communicate secretly with her.

- Have students discuss why the women engage in these dangerous activities in this theocratic society. What is Ellis suggesting through these actions?

## Chapter Ten

This chapter introduces a macabre situation – but it does so with delicate humour.

- Have students discuss the notion of digging up bones to sell. What would make people willing and able to do this?
- Have them examine Parvana's statement:

*"When things get better and we grow up, we have to remember that there was a day when we were kids when we stood in a graveyard and dug up bones to sell so that our families could eat." (p.113)*

- Have students look closely at the humour that the children use to help them come to terms with the terrible situation – eg "Aren't you glad, Mr Skull?" (p.110). What does this suggest about the children's sense of hope for the future?

## Chapter Eleven

This chapter highlights the "unusual times" that "call for ordinary people to do unusual things, just to get by". Parvana and Shauzia certainly see something of the "unusual times" in their visit to the soccer stadium.

- Have students discuss the Taliban's savage punishments. Point out that the author has introduced a "kind voice" to comment on these events – "There will be time enough when you are old to see such things", and "Go home and remember better things."
- Encourage them to discuss the effect that this comment has on the reader's view of the events and the Taliban.

## Chapter Twelve

In this chapter, we see more of the oppressive and brutal Taliban regime and come to understand why Shauzia wants to escape it.

- Have students discuss Parvana's comments – "I just want to be an ordinary kid again", and "This was normal and Parvana was tired of it."
- Parvana's mood is juxtaposed with the image of summer. Have students discuss the description of summer in Kabul (p.132) and how this seems to lift the mood for a moment.

## Chapter Thirteen

Parvana's rebellion in the context of Nooria's marriage is the central focus of this chapter.

- Have students discuss Nooria's explanation of why she is prepared to marry someone she hardly knows in another city. Ask them to speculate as to how they would respond in this situation.
- Have students examine Parvana's rebellion. Examine her mother's explanation of why she is not to be taken to Mazar for the wedding.

## Chapter Fourteen

In this chapter, Parvana rescues Homa and takes her home in the dark after curfew. She summons up her courage by reminding herself of the story her father had told her – "I'm Malali, leading the troops through enemy territory". But Homa's story of the Taliban's invasion of Mazar fills Parvana with dread and fear for her mother – "she moved through her days as though she were moving through an awful nightmare".

- Have students imagine that they are Parvana. Write a diary entry in which Parvana looks back over her activities in the marketplace and the effects of the Taliban on her life and family. Allow time for the sharing of these writings.



## Chapter Fifteen

This chapter highlights the sense of hope that still flickers amongst some of the Afghan people. It also raises the key question as to whether one should stay and hope that the oppression will end, or seek to flee from the country to try and make a new start.

- Have students discuss this moral issue – is it wrong to flee? Have students consider why so many Afghans have fled from their own country in dangerous situations including leaking boats across perilous seas. Why does Shauzia decide to go as a shepherd to Pakistan? What would they do if they were in this situation?
- Have students examine the image of the flowers that Parvana plants to say goodbye to the Window Woman. Point out that it is an old man who points the moral of this moment – “We have seen so much ugliness, we sometimes forget how wonderful a thing like a flower is.” (p.166) Why do they think the author has chosen a man to make this comment?
- Have students examine the arrival of the magazine that “has helped to let the world know what is happening in Afghanistan”. Why do they think it is so important for the rest of the world to know about this situation?
- Point out the agreement that the two girls make at the end of the novel – “We’ll meet again on the first day of spring, twenty years from now.” Have students work in small groups and map out the events in the lives of these two girls in the next twenty years. Then they should collaborate to write an account of the meeting between Parvana and Shauzia on the “top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris”. They might choose to write the account as a dialogue, or as a film script or as a short story. Allow time for drafting and revising their work and for sharing the completed accounts with the rest of the class. Encourage discussion of the different accounts.

## WRAPPING UP THE STUDY OF THE NOVEL

This novel has presented a realistic story of life in Afghanistan under the brutal repressive regime of the Taliban. Yet it is a story filled with hope. Encourage students to reflect on the story and the compassionate ways in which the author has told of the terrible events.

- Point out the dedication in the book – “To the children of war.” Encourage students to speculate as to why the author, Deborah Ellis, might have chosen to use such a dedication for a book set in Afghanistan. Encourage them to talk about the implications of the phrase “children of war”. What effects has the war had on the children?
- Have students work with a partner. One person should take on the role of the author and the other the presenter for a books and writing radio magazine show. Have students improvise an interview for this show. The students should work out the kinds of questions that they want to ask and consider whether some parts of the book might also be read aloud. They could also speculate as to how the author might answer the questions. Then each pair should tape their interview. Allow time for the whole class to listen to the tapes and discuss the issues raised.

## Historical Note

Afghanistan is a small country that acts as a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. It has been invaded by Alexander the Great, the Mongol Empire, the British and the Soviet Union.

The Soviets invaded in 1979 when American – backed fighters rose up against the Soviet-supported government. The invasion kicked off a decade of brutality. Many of the military groups who opposed the Soviets were backed by the United States and other Western nations, even though these groups were not at all interested in achieving basic human rights for the Afghan people. The fighting was fierce, cruel and prolonged.

After the Soviets were defeated in 1989, a civil war erupted, as the many armed groups fought for control of the country. Millions of Afghans became refugees, moving into huge, impoverished refugee camps in Pakistan, Iran and Russia. Many Afghans were killed, maimed, blinded or orphaned. Many lost their minds from grief and terror.

The Taliban militia, one of the groups that the US and Pakistan once funded, trained and armed, took control of the capital city of Kabul in September 1996. They imposed extremely restrictive laws, especially on girls and women. Schools for girls were closed down, women were no longer allowed to work outside the home, and strict dress codes were enforced. Books were burned, televisions smashed and music was forbidden.

In the fall of 2001, al-Qaeda, a terrorist group that trained in Afghanistan (although largely made up of men from other countries), launched attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York City. In response, the United States led a coalition of nations into bombing Afghanistan and drove the Taliban from power. Over the next years, thousands of troops from many countries lost their lives in Afghanistan, fighting the Taliban. Thousands of Afghan civilians were also

killed, injured and driven from their homes by the fighting.

National elections were held and a new constitution was written. Schools for girls and boys reopened, arts and sports flourished, and women rejoined the workforce in a wide variety of professions.

But the country was never at peace. Every right had to be struggled for. Every advancement in civil society happened in the midst of missile strikes and fighting. The terrible poverty created by decades of war made everything difficult.

Bit by bit, the Taliban retook sections of the country. In August of 2021, they regained power in Kabul. Women were told to stay home, ordered to cover up and not allowed in school beyond the junior grades. Economic sanctions put in place by countries who do not want to prop up the Taliban regime have made a bad economic situation worse, and many Afghans go to bed hungry.

The retaking of Afghanistan by the Taliban has reminded us that progress does not always move in a straight line. It would be lovely if humanity only got wiser as it got older, but it doesn't always work that way, just as we individuals don't always get wiser with age. Too often we fall back on old patterns, old fears, because they are easier than being brave and reaching out to something new. It is disheartening when rights that have been hard won disappear again. It can make us lose hope that we can make things better.

Yet, all over Afghanistan, there are people who get out of bed each morning and continue to fight for justice in any way they can. Their everyday kindness takes tremendous courage. We can join them by supporting organizations that support them, and by striving to create a world where we live together without war.

– Deborah Ellis