Mohammed Zaman
An Afghan warlord who helps the Americans search for bin Laden; he is Stack’s best source until he makes sexual advances towards her and she rejects him.

Raheem
Stack’s translator in Iraq, who had been in exile under Saddam Hussein’s regime. Supports the US invasion of Iraq, even after his son is killed by US soldiers.

Atwar Bahjat
A courageous and popular Iraqi journalist who is murdered while covering a bombing in the city of Samarra. Stack sees her as a symbol of hope for Iraq, and the death shocks her.

Ahmed
A young Shiite man whom Stack sees as an ‘emblem’ for a troubled Iraq. After several covert meetings with Stack, Ahmed disappears; Stack never knows his fate.

Nora
Stack’s translator in Jordan; a young woman educated in New York. A supporter of America, she is appalled by the US abuses at Abu Ghraib.
Every Man in This Village Is a Liar

OVERVIEW

About the author

Megan Stack was born in Glastonbury, Connecticut, in 1975. She is a Pulitzer Prize–nominated journalist who writes for the Los Angeles Times. Formerly the newspaper’s Houston bureau chief, Stack was catapulted into life as a foreign correspondent following the September 11 attacks. When the hijacked aircraft hit the World Trade Center towers, she was visiting her sister in Paris. Unlike her colleagues, who were grounded by the closure of US airspace, she was free to travel. Within weeks she was in Afghanistan, where her great adventure, and the education in war that it brought, began.

Over the next six years, as the war on terror took shape and widened in scope, Stack chased its outbreaks and reverberations across more than twenty countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. She reported from theocracies (countries ruled by religious leaders) and dictatorships (countries ruled by one person who has absolute power), their people frightened into conformity or terrorised into passivity. She encountered nations seething with rebellion, and others deadened by indifference; she witnessed countries in chaos, and societies in freefall.

Over time, the accumulation of horrors took its toll on Stack, and she looked for a posting away from the war zone. In 2007, she accepted a post as Los Angeles Times bureau chief in Moscow. Free from the daily round of battle, bombing and trauma, Stack found the critical distance to begin looking back through her notebooks, organising the memories and reflections that became Every Man in This Village Is a Liar. Published in 2010, the book, her first, was a non-fiction finalist in that year’s US National Book Awards. In the same year, Stack took up a new role as chief of the Los Angeles Times’ Beijing bureau. She is married to fellow foreign correspondent Tom Lasseter.
Every Man in This Village Is a Liar deals with real people and events. Stack recounts her experience of reporting on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks, and on the invasion of Iraq, with the virtual civil war this unleashes. She also describes reporting on the conflict between Israel and its enemies up to the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 2006, a rigged election in Egypt, insurgency in Yemen, the threat of terror in Saudi Arabia, life under dictatorship in Libya, and more.

In one sense this is a deeply personal book. It traces Stack’s journey as a correspondent – from fresh-faced ingenue to embittered old hand – as she comes to better understand the reasons for and effects of US intervention in the region, while chronicling the emotional and psychological damage that she experiences along the way. At the same time it is a highly political book, engaged with some of the major political questions of the day. How does one establish and maintain security? When is the use of force appropriate, and what principles should dictate its employment? How can one retain humanity in an inhuman environment?

It is difficult to give a synopsis for the book that doesn’t just read as a list of the places from which Stack reports. What gives the narrative its impetus and carries the reader from chapter to chapter is its themes, particularly surrounding the war on terror: the war’s agents, its victims, and its effects on the people of the region and on the United States. We accompany Stack as she travels through those countries directly under assault from the United States (Afghanistan and Iraq), those affected by the new political realities created by the war on terror (Israel and Lebanon), those threatened by the new order the war has inaugurated (Yemen and Saudi Arabia) and those that have profited from this (Egypt and Libya). These journeys regularly bring Stack back to the region’s newest political and military quagmire, Iraq, and the site of its oldest and most intractable struggle, Israel’s conflict with its neighbours. In both of these places she demonstrates
that whatever America’s rhetoric about remaking the Middle East, whatever its delusions of a new dawn for democracy and a new age of peace, its ambitions will be thwarted – bloodily.

In the prologue, Stack reaches back to a memory from her childhood: she tells us of a male relative who, as a member of the US Marines, had survived Islamic militant group Hezbollah’s 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut that killed around 250 men, but had taken his life some years later, after returning to the United States. The message that Stack extracts from this bleak event provides a key focus for her own experience of war, and an insight into the broader damage that is done to societies and their people by violence:

the first thing I knew about war was also the truest, and maybe it’s as true for nations as for individuals: You can survive and not survive, both at the same time. (p.4)

The book is, in one respect, a study of how societies that deploy deadly force and those caught in its path deal with the experience of invasion or assault, and what this process does to them. It considers how people subject to tyranny, oppression or terror adapt themselves to these conditions: how they live with the routine violation of their basic rights and the constant fear of arrest, torture or death; what, in the process, they are able to preserve of their identities, and what they lose. Centrally, Stack contemplates her own survival – what covering these wars has done to her as a person; what she has lost and gained; and where these experiences have left her.

**Character summaries**

Stack is the key character in the text. She comes into contact with a number of individuals, none of whom, with the exception of Raheem, appear in more than one chapter. Stack uses these figures to embody particular places, views or experiences; they are as much symbols or representations of certain attitudes and beliefs as they are characters.
Megan Stack
Stack is the one constant presence in the narrative. This is the story of her education in war. A youthful reporter when the book opens, her ‘education’ is less about the mechanics of war than it is about war’s effects, her country and herself. (Indeed, for a book about ‘war’, it is notable how little actual fighting there is.) Her experiences take her from an innocent idealism about America’s place and purpose in the world to a disillusioned realism about how it conducts itself and what effects this has. The twin narratives of personal journey and political analysis closely shadow each other: Stack’s political insights are often arrived at through personal experience, while her analysis of a given situation averts our gaze from its effects on her. Though she is often guarded about how particular incidents have impacted upon her, by the closing chapters she is struggling to function, and at the book’s conclusion she suffers a form of breakdown.

Mohammed Zaman
Zaman is an Afghan warlord newly returned to Afghanistan from exile after the years of Taliban rule. Zaman provides fighters in the search for Osama bin Laden; in return, he seeks arms and money from the Americans that he will use to claim a position of power in the new order emerging in the country. His past is shrouded in mystery: he is rumoured to be a heroin trafficker and a legendary fighter who killed his enemies with his bare hands. He is a wily, hardened survivor whose alliances are built on convenience, not principle. Stack relies on him for access to information on the hunt for bin Laden but later breaks with him.

Raheem
Stack’s translator in Iraq, Raheem is a former teacher who spent many years in exile from Saddam Hussein’s regime. Quiet, sober and dignified, he is a consummate professional, deeply committed to his job and the responsibilities it entails. He is a believer in the American intervention and the freedom it has brought to Iraq. Though his son
is later shot and killed by American soldiers – a random victim of a careless military – Raheem retains a cautious but steadfast commitment to the possibilities of the new Iraq.

**Nora**

A young Jordanian woman educated in the United States, Nora accidentally becomes Stack’s translator during her time in Amman. For girlish and privileged Nora, the demonstrations in Jordan subsequent to the US invasion of Iraq lend a frisson of participation in a greater cause without any of the inconveniences of sacrifice or significant danger. A believer in the idea of America, she is appalled by the photographs of American abuse at Abu Ghraib prison and articulates a broader dismay at America’s failure to live up to its espoused ideals.

**Atwar Bahjat**

An Iraqi journalist, Bahjat was a television newsreader under Saddam’s regime, later working as a war correspondent for news organisations Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. A fearless witness to her country’s descent into chaos, she did not identify with either of the main religious sects, Sunni or Shiite, but saw herself merely as an Iraqi. Embodying the ‘mad hope’ (p.195) for a better Iraq, her fate suggests just how delusional this hope was: she is murdered while covering the bombing of the Al-Askari mosque, one of the Shiites’ holiest shrines, in Samarra.

**Ahmed**

Looking for a way to tell the story of a city (Baghdad) and a country (Iraq) descending into chaos, Stack seeks out a representative subject and finds Ahmed. A young Shiite, Ahmed lives on the margins, his perfect English wasted in a menial job, his physical frustrations expressed through his obsessive running. His involvement with Stack possibly leads him to a grisly end – we never know, and neither does she. Though Stack intends for Ahmed to be a symbol of thwarted Iraqi hope, he ends up embodying the costs of careless US involvement in Iraq.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The events in the text take place in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States and in the emerging political context of the war on terror.

September 11

On 11 September 2001, four US passenger aircraft were hijacked after taking off from airports on the country’s east coast. Two of the planes were deliberately piloted into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The ensuing explosions and fires brought both buildings to the ground. Another plane headed to Washington, where it hit the Pentagon, the symbolic heart of American military power, while a fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania when its passengers fought to overpower the hijackers.

These were the deadliest terrorist attacks on US soil in the nation’s history: around 3000 people lost their lives, including the nineteen hijackers, most of whom were Saudi Arabian nationals. It soon became clear that the hijackers – or, more accurately, suicide bombers – were supporters of Al Qaeda, the international terrorist group led by Saudi recluse Osama bin Laden, and that the attacks had been organised and planned in Afghanistan, where bin Laden enjoyed the protection of the fundamentalist Taliban government. US President George W. Bush described the attacks as an act of war, and promised that those responsible for them would be hunted down and brought to justice in an ongoing ‘war on terror’ (a term Bush first used in a televised address on 20 September 2001). The attacks had a profound psychological impact on the United States, which suddenly felt itself vulnerable to assault.