



## The Places in Between by Rory Stewart

I was keen to read this book because of my respect for Rory Stewart, a modern-day polymath whose podcast The Rest is Politics has brought his reasoned analysis of international political issues to millions of people, and because of my interest in discovering more about the people and lives of those in Afghanistan, a country that has been prominent in modern world history events, making it a fascinating and intriguing backdrop for this account of his walk from Herat to Kabul.

Although Rory Stewart's career has since taken him in many different directions including politics, this was published in 2004 and is very much a travel book. Indeed its charm is the detailed accounts of his encounters with local Afghans and his experiences of life among them. As he writes "In more than five hundred village houses, I was indulged, fed, nursed and protected by people poorer, hungrier, sicker and more vulnerable than myself."

Most impressive is the author's ability to immerse himself in everyday life, within families and communities. There is much well-observed detail, meticulously documented that comes together as a compelling picture of life and living. While it is a serious account of his journey, there is a generous sprinkling of wry humour and appreciation of the generosity of spirit shown to him by almost everyone he meets.

The writing enables the reader to be completely absorbed within the world of the many tribes, religions, communities and families encountered. This world is fascinating because it is so different from our own and has such contrasts within it of hospitality to strangers and animosity to people from places regarded as enemies. Rory Stewart's survival relies heavily of letters of recommendations from respected people of authority and on his Scottish heritage.

No review of this book would be complete without mentioning Babur, a dog that Rory Stewart rescues from one of the villages. They then travel together across Afghanistan. Babur is described being "as immobile as a Trafalgar Square lion" but he makes for an endearing companion often being dragged to his destination. It is a love story within the bigger love affair that Rory Stewart has with the country.

Finally there is a chapter written some years afterwards that reflects on what has happened to Afghanistan since his walk. While valuable and clearly benefiting from the author's wider experiences and perspectives, it feels very different from the intimacy of the preceding chapters.

The final sentence sums up my feelings about the book as a whole, "a chronicle of an experience which found its deepest meaning when it was at its most local and most personal." I would recommend the book to anyone who is curious about how people from a very different country live and what they deem important. It is for those who like to go beyond the big commercial cities and tourist spots to meet people living their lives in local communities. There is a lasting feeling of having glimpsed the real Afghanistan with its many charms and challenges both domestically and for outsiders.