

THE LOVERS ROD NORDLAND

READ BY PETER GANIM

Zakia and Ali grew up as close friends on adjoining potato farms in the remote mountain province of Bamiyan. Separated when they reached puberty, Zakia, a beautiful and fiercely opinionated young woman, and Ali, a sensitive, handsome young man, fell in love and courted, remotely at first and then in Zakia's garden. Defying her family, Afghan custom, and Islamic law, Zakia left home to be with Ali and ended up in a women's shelter. The shelter saved her life, but she was unable to see Ali there so the two lovers decided to elope and went into hiding, pursued by Zakia's family. The author wrote about them in the *New York Times*, and having exposed them, felt obligated to help them to safety. After months of living in caves or staying trapped in small Kabul apartments, they finally, with Rod's help and donations from abroad, made a disastrous attempt to flee to Tajikistan. Forced to return to Kabul, they were closely tracked by Zakia's family—who briefly captured Ali—before they went back into hiding in the countryside.

Despite a decade of American good intentions, women in Afghanistan are still subjected to some of the worst human rights violations in the world. *The Lovers* is Rod Nordland's compelling tale about his inability, even as a Westerner with money and will, to protect these young lovers' basic human rights. Recounting the stories of similar, though less fortunate, couples from his decades of experience in the region, Rod illustrates how common misogynistic cultural practices such as stoning, child marriage, and legalized rape are deeply ingrained in traditional Afghan culture. The United States has spent more than a billion dollars on efforts to train and improve the Afghan judiciary system, with a particular emphasis on women's rights and gender equality. As a result, Afghan law now technically outlaws many horrendous customary practices. But they remain prevalent nonetheless and give cover for people like Zakia's father and brothers, who still want to capture and kill her.

Zakia and Ali still hope, against enormous odds, to flee the country. *The Lovers* is the story of their unshakable self-determination and the irrepressibility of human feeling in the face of a shockingly repressive culture.

ROD NORDLAND is currently a correspondent-at-large for the *New York Times*, working throughout the Middle East and South Asia, but he spent more than three years as the paper's bureau chief in Kabul. He shared a Pulitzer Prize for reporting in the United States, was a Pulitzer finalist for international reporting, studied as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, and has received many honors including two George Polk awards and half a dozen Overseas Press Club awards. Nordland has worked for three decades as a foreign correspondent in over 150 countries.

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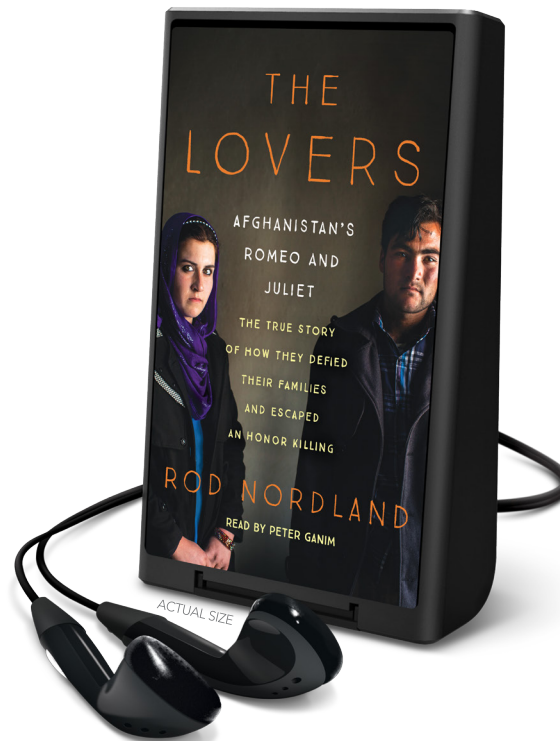
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