

# NOVEL AIMS TO SHOW 'OTHER SIDE' OF WAR-TORN LAND

# BEYOND BULLETS & BURKAS

Taliban killed her 'son' but author still says Afghanistan is a special place

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**B**URKAS, Taliban and a war which most people feel cannot be won sums up how most of us view Afghanistan.

But to Scots author Mary Smith, the Afghanistan in which she lived, worked and raised her son for seven years is a very different place.

To Mary, what many believe to be one of the most inhospitable countries on Earth will always be a warm, welcoming place.

Not that she is ignorant of the darker side of life in the country. Mary remembers bullets flying above an outpatient clinic where she worked and men who didn't dare leave home without their AK-47s.

And she will never forget a young Afghan paramedic called Hussain who called her mum. An orphan, Mary took him under her wing when he was just 15.

He was killed 10 years later by the Taliban soon after Mary returned to Scotland.

Mary, 56, said: "We always called him our adopted son and I was always mum."

"He phoned me to tell me he had escaped to Pakistan and I told him to go to Karachi as friends would help him get a job."

"But he phoned again to tell me he would have to go back to Afghanistan to do something



**LOOKING BACK:** Mary with son David in Afghanistan

for the clinic. I tried to persuade him not to go.

"We know the Taliban stopped him on the road and shot him but we don't know much more than that."

"It was so sad and one of the worst things that could have happened, but there is so much more to Afghanistan than the violence and the Taliban."

"There is this idea that all women are living these cowed existences there. While I know there are some terrible things going on in some parts, there are many women living happy, normal lives."

"I used to have such fun

**'Not all Afghan women are cowed. Life there is simply not that clear cut'**

sitting with the women and just talking."

"They were special times."

In her first book, *Before The Taliban: Living With War, Hoping For Peace*, Mary documented her experiences in rural Afghanistan in a bid to counter negative perceptions of Afghan culture in the West.

Her latest book, *No More Mulberries*, is named partly in tribute to her adopted son - Mary and Hussain often feasted on mulberries together.

She said: "I wouldn't entirely debunk the image people have, but it is always important to stress how enormous a country it is and that there are so many

stories about Afghanistan, so by the time my contract was up in Pakistan it just seemed natural for me to go there."

While in Karachi, Mary had met her husband-to-be Jon. They wed in 1990, and with him she helped set up leprosy centres in central Afghanistan.

Incredibly Mary would often hitchhike around the region travelling from clinic to clinic.

She said: "I had an Afghan guide with me but I never generally felt threatened then."

"On saying that, there was one night when bullets whizzed across the top of the building."

Mary had never heard about the Taliban until one occasion she went home on leave.

By the time she returned to Afghanistan two months later they had captured and executed the leader of the main political party.

She said: "The Taliban hadn't got to the regions where our clinics were so things did seem okay, but I do remember when they captured a nearby city we started to hear stories about women not being allowed out, people being hanged from cranes and video equipment being smashed."

"I remember talking to my Afghan women friends who were understandably worried and upset, but like anywhere else daily life has to go on."

By this point Mary was a mum to her young son David, now 20. She said: "It was a bit scary to start with but David had been born in Pakistan and knew no different."

Mary, from Castle Douglas Kirkcudbrightshire, decided to return to Scotland in 1996.

The mum believed he needed more solid roots but by then the Taliban were at the gates of Kabul and she was also worried about their safety.

She said: "It was definitely getting quite risky."

"Being at home and watching it all unfold on TV was just awful. They took the area where we lived and massacred about 80,000 people."

For more, go to: [www.marysmith.co.uk](http://www.marysmith.co.uk).



**SPECIAL:** Tragic Hussain with David, left. Above and below, everyday scenes in Afghanistan



**SPECIAL TIMES:** Mary and her books on Afghanistan

NO MORE MULBERRIES  
MARY SMITH

BEFORE THE TALIBAN  
MARY SMITH