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This is the author's radio script of this article.

A Burqa and a Hard Place: Three Years in the New Afghanistan. Sally Cooper.

Macmillan, 2008.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 27 June 2008.

Sally Cooper is an Australian journalist who spent three years in post-Taliban Afghanistan training locals in the skills needed to develop and produce radio programs in a country where radio, being relatively cheap and available to the illiterate, is the most popular form of media.

Cooper knew little about the country when she arrived, but grew to appreciate the people she got to know, their warmth and honesty: "One of the things I truly loved about the Ghan was the fact that you could get blown up into a million tiny pieces but no-one would ever steal your wallet," she writes. Not that everyone was uniformly welcoming. With her short blond hair and conspicuous lack of a husband, she often found herself at the receiving end of insults and even rocks hurled by Afghan men when she appeared in public, even with headscarf in place. When the security threats against foreigners became too serious to ignore, she got herself a burqa.

Defying, or rather trying to ignore, UN regulations, she stayed at a guest house not on the UN approved list, tried walking the streets of Kabul alone, and had her unit's car painted green instead of the regular white which made UN vehicles conspicuous. Above all, she tried to teach her trainees what makes a good news story, and what makes good radio.

Cooper is no sentimentalist about the Afghans, but she reserves her most cynical remarks for the foreign security guys, every one of them sporting a goatee – the longer the goatee the more cause for alarm. Many she dismisses as thugs, but she

did get to know a couple of US DoD mercenaries who amused her by trying to smuggle their handguns into the UN compound for a visit to the swimming pool. United Nations security was the bane of her existence, constantly sending the expat community into lockdown and insisting on illogical and impractical security measures which she fretted against while realising the constant danger all foreigners faced. ‘I was tired. Tired of being cooped up, tired of having to follow an ever-expanding list of rules that made little sense beyond keeping me within the confines of high walls and air-conditioned cars. Most of all, I was tired of *not* being in Afghanistan. ... Afghans no longer trusted foreigners, foreigners didn’t trust Afghans. Compound walls got higher, Land Cruisers drove faster, goatees proliferated and twenty-five-year-old boys from California went shopping for AK47s at the bazaar.’

A Burqa and a Hard Place is an intelligent, well-written and down-to-earth account of a country lurching into the future with uncertain prospects, of aid programs ranging from the imaginative and helpful to the tokenist and misguided, and of trigger-happy macho Americans, nervous as scalded cats, ratcheting up the tension between the locals and the hordes of well-meaning foreigners trying to help them into the modern world. As Cooper says, ‘The West insists on seeing Afghanistan in black and white, a ‘conservative Muslim’ country at war with itself. Yet the Ghan is so much more, the sum total of the hundreds of tiny nuances that make up its people, its culture, its laws, its history *and* its religion.’