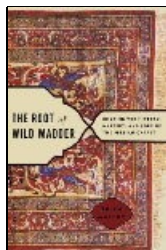


*** WE ARE CLOSED. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE. ***



Book Review

The Root of Wild Madder

Chasing the History, Mystery, and Lore of the Persian Carpet
by [Brian Murphy](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: April 24, 2006

Like many of the best travel books, *The Root of Wild Madder* is a book about a quest — but in this case the quest is not as easily defined as climbing Mount Everest or finding the source of the Nile. Brian Murphy's

quest is for understanding.

Fascinated by the subtle colors and intricate patterns of Persian carpets, Murphy seeks to understand their language and their inner meaning. Naturally enough, a quest like this is harder to describe than a mountain-climbing expedition, and one of the most impressive things about this book is the way the author shapes his journey into a satisfying narrative.

The root of the wild madder plant was once ground into dye to produce the characteristic reds of the traditional Persian carpet. Like other natural dyes, it has been supplanted by chemicals, just as handweaving has been replaced by machine looms. In the course of many trips to Afghanistan and Iran (Brian Murphy is a foreign correspondent), the author learns how to tell original and well-crafted carpets from hackwork and develops the patience to bargain for the pieces he wants. The best carpet merchants, he finds, don't try to sell the carpet at all — they simply present the right carpet to the right customer and wait for the customer to fall in love with it.

Murphy's fascination with Persian carpets develops alongside a fascination with the verse of the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez, whose verses about wine and taverns and the beauty of women carry spiritual meanings as well. Carpets and religion come together when he sees the photo of an extraordinary piece, perhaps the work of a Sufi weaver, where demons and half-human creatures cluster around a white tree. To see the carpet for himself, one of the high points of this book, Murphy must travel not to Tehran or Shiraz but to 57th Street in New York City.

Murphy is an experienced enough traveler to know the importance of taking his time and savoring the experience. In Shiraz, the home of Hafez, he stops at a cafe:

There was no breeze. The smoke from the water pipes wafted in lazy, crab-shaped clouds.... I ordered a delicious local sweet called *faloudeh*, a chilled dessert made of shredded starch bathed in rose water syrup or lemon juice. Someone was playing a dulcimer. A man was carving a small box from pear wood. The curled shavings piled up on the toe of his boot.

My wife sometimes talks about being wise enough to recognize a perfect moment when it comes along. I only regretted I couldn't share this one with her.

The Root of Wild Madder gives an intimate view of Iran that is very different from the paranoid images that fill the news media these days. For all the cries of "Death to America!", Murphy says, there are few Muslim countries with as many die-hard fans of the U.S. as Iran. The country's culture, too, has liberalized to the point where women walk in public with loose scarves rather than floor-length hijab. It would be tragic to make enemies of a people as proud and cultured and humane as this book shows them to be.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

Advertisement



99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa
—A literary tour of the best books from every country in Africa

A new book by Geoff Wisner

posted by: [Geoff](#) | [more from this member](#)

[Print Article](#) 

0 Comments

[[Add Your Comment](#)]