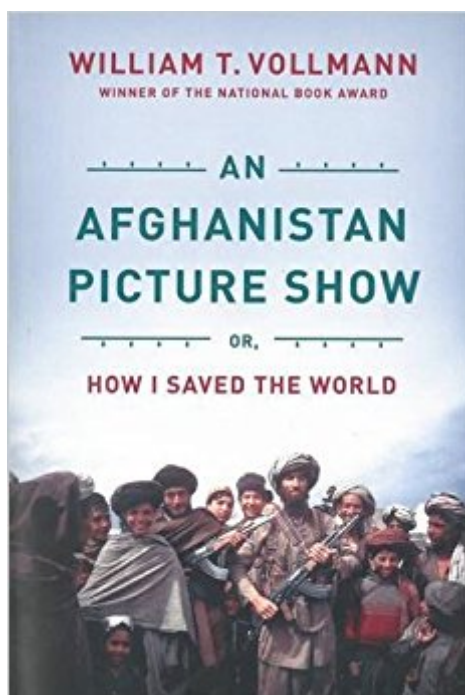


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An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved The World



Synopsis

Never before available in paperback and all but invisible for twenty years, a personal account of the origins of America's longest war. In 1982, the young William Vollmann worked odd jobs, including as a secretary at an insurance company, until he'd saved up enough money to go to Afghanistan, where he wanted to join the mujahedeen to fight the Soviets. The resulting book wasn't published until 1992, and *Library Journal* rated it: "The wrong book written at the wrong time. . . . With the situation in Afghanistan rapidly heading toward resolution . . . libraries may safely skip this." Thirty years later--and with the United States still mired in the longest war of its history--it's time for a reassessment of Vollmann's heartfelt tale of idealism and its terrifying betrayals. An alloy of documentary and autobiographical elements characteristic of Vollmann's later nonfiction, *An Afghanistan Picture Show* is not a work of conventional reportage; instead, it's an account of a subtle and stubborn consciousness grappling with the limits of will and idealism imposed by violence and chaos.

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Customer Reviews

There are no pictures in this picture show but, in the spirit of photography, there are glimpses of a world frozen in time. The prolific young author of five other books is at his most precocious here, recounting his travels in 1982 in Pakistan and Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. Vollman brings to the tangled politics of the Middle East his own very American brand of idealism: "If you had a message for the Americans, what would it be?" he constantly asks. Yet his courting of exiled generals, rebels and politicians--all in an effort to cross the border into the hills of Afghanistan--is informative. We learn

of the great boredom that reigns in the refugee camps, and we see the abject poverty in the streets of Peshawar. What the work lacks is a coherent analysis of local and global politics being fought out. Instead, the reaction is all heart, guts and anti-Soviet sentiment. Though Vollmann who appears almost exclusively in the third person as 'the Young Man' is gently self-mocking and skeptical about American interests in the region, his report adds little to the standard State Department view that Soviet intervention was cruel and unsupported by the people. The book would have had more impact a few years ago, when Afghanistan was caught up in the Cold War. Still, readers following the current realignments in Kabul will recognize some of the rebels who figure in Vollmann's account. There is also a detailed chronology. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In 1982, 23-year-old Vollmann (*You Bright and Risen Angels* , LJ 5/15/87; *Seven Dreams* , Vol. 1: *The Ice Shirt*, LJ 10/1/90) took his camera and tape recorder and headed off to help the Afghans in their war against Soviet invaders. A decade later we have this account of his experiences, which describes in detail how ill-informed he was about Afghani life, conditions in the refugee camps, and his poor physical condition once he was finally able to get into Afghanistan. Alas, this is the wrong book written at the wrong time. How much more interesting it would have been to have Afghani impressions of this native young American whom they had to tolerate since he just might get them some American aid but whom most suspected of being a CIA agent. With the situation in Afghanistan rapidly heading toward resolution and with Vollmann offering few insights into personal development or discovery during times of great emotional and physical stress, libraries may safely skip this.- Donald Clay Johnson, Univ. of Minnesota Lib., Minneapolis Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It was an interesting view on the subject of the Afganistan war, but literally lacks coordination and the third person telling is a bit awkward.-

Taking place in 1982 and published in its original form a decade later, this account of a hapless pilgrim's progress feels doomed from the start. Vollmann finds early in his career his penchant: a self-deprecating but idealistic and erudite narrator based on himself, a smart depiction of this blundering, determined fellow as he encounters far-flung or down-and-out people who while they lack his book-smarts gain in commonsense, endurance, and/or basic coping skills, a fascination with amassing historical facts and transcripts of interviews about his chosen milieu, and a refusal to

organize this material into other than a bricolage of assembled pieces that go on exactly as long as he wants them to, despite the reader's or editor's wish for concision or less running commentary. This is part of Vollmann's presence, always. With Afghanistan having surged back then, when the mujahadeen sought the aid of Reagan-era allies and long before the Taliban came to its own power, let alone the events since, the timeliness of this paperback edition as the U.S. prepares to draw back from another campaign in a difficult geopolitical terrain is enhanced by Vollmann's brief introduction, looking back on the stubborn young man who comes to Pakistan determined to cover the rebellion against the Soviets. His "picture show" of photos (not included) and his prose version as "slides" in short chapters, mostly taking place then, helps the reader visualize (a few drawings are included, and it's noteworthy that these appear to be more finely executed than many maps and self-drawn sketches in his other and later works) the harsh scenes. Amidst these, he draws faces. He comes to admire those he meets, and he puts down his own resilience as he is far outmatched in the heat by the natives. He knows he plays a role, that of the American begged by many to get visas, to write appeals, to hand out money, to be the object of unrelenting attention (that latter irritation is particularly well narrated). He persists in his attempt to try to raise awareness, and later funds, to help, even as he knows the futility of his moral mission. The pace of this, as this sums up its pages, can lag. As he nears the actual contact with the rebels (and this is blurred to protect those involved, and is deliberately smudged, to drain it of some of its impact), the inclusions of lengthy interviews with the dissidents (from two identically named but opposing factions for Islamic Unity, a foreshadowing of what will follow in that nation under warlords and fanaticism, perhaps) do slow the progression down markedly. The Young Man he is tries to uncover more about the situation, but neither The General whom he admires nor the Reliable Source whom he implores can fill him, naive and unimportant as he is, in on much. Vollmann weighs in to judge this as a weaker book. It has not appeared before in paperback so the delay may prove it. Still, for admirers of Vollmann's fiction and non-fiction, this has its moments. The episode of learning to cross the rivers of Alaska with his friend Erica holds power, and shows the sustained interest Vollmann has had in both the icy and the dusty barren landscape. Considered loosely as part of a trilogy that began with his debut novel *You Bright and Risen Angels* and furthered into his study of justifications for violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down* (also reviewed by me), this book addresses congruent themes. When does one fight an unjust system? How far can one go in compromise of integrity to advance policy for practical gain? What cost does the individual suffer as part of a collective effort?

vollmann's afghanistan book is surely his weakest, but it is a useful window on the author's life and

some themes that run through his fiction. it is at times tedious and over-thought (the style is two parts personal history, one part philosophizing). but after all, the book is largely about the inability of a thoughtful young man to apply his high-minded idealism in a practical way, so a little wittgenstein here and there can be appropriate. overall, vollmann's story is sadly poignant, but you have to be able to sympathize with his earnestness and altruism from the get-go. otherwise, you'll probably just get aggravated or bored.

I don't have much to say really, just that this book is rings with bold, naked, and humiliating truth and should be read by every American, especially those who step or even think of stepping off of their own shores. It's ridiculous that it's out of print. For anyone who has ever felt a desire to help another and is even dimly aware of the complex moral swamp "altruism" can be.

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