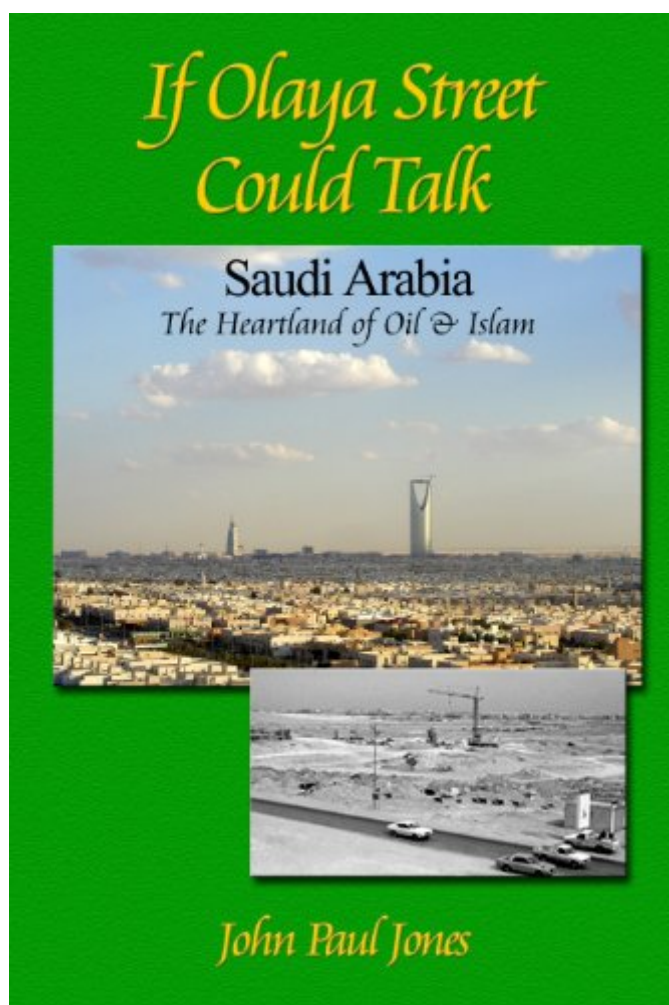


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If Olaya Street Could Talk - Saudi Arabia: The Heartland Of Oil And Islam



Synopsis

Seven years ago the hard-copy version of "If Olaya Street Could Talk" was published. In the interval, there has been a "Gutenberg-style" revolution in the publishing industry. As with the original revolution, "the middle man" suffered a loss of status. The Bible (as well as other works) need no longer be interpreted by a "select" group of individuals. Knowledge became more assessable. With the latest revolution, via electronic publishing, a writer can reach out directly to the reader, without the intermediaries of the traditional publishing industry. The cost benefits of the process, to both parties, have been significantly enhanced. The essential criteria remains: Does the author have something beneficial to convey to the reader? And with the latest revolution, the words of an author can be readily supplemented in "thousand word increments," as the old cliché has it, by pictures. In this version of "If Olaya Street Could Talk," designed for distribution exclusively via Kindle, the text is identical to the original 2007 version, but 53 pictures have been included, which will hopefully more strongly convey the author's impressions of what so many called "the Magic Kingdom." Finally, although the intended audience for the original version was educated Westerners, it seems that the book resonated most strongly with the Saudis themselves. Reviews of the 2007 version appeared in Al Hayat and Al Majallah, as well as other Arabic publications. If Olaya Street Could Talk is a portrait of Saudi Arabia and its people, encompassing a 25-year period during the era of its dynamic transformation from being one of the poorer countries in the world to becoming a state with a modern physical and economic infrastructure. It is also a story about the western expatriates who worked and lived in the country--from the "free and easy 70's"--to the period when they became specific targets for execution by certain religious fundamentalists. The book addresses western perceptions of the country and how those perceptions were formed, from TE Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger to NY Times columnists Thomas Friedman, Maureen Dowd and David Brooks. The book's fundamental purpose is to examine the issue which dominates today's headlines: the "Islamic-Western cultural divide" and places this concept within the context of American issues, such as the experience with the black-white cultural divide as well as America's last significant conflict, the Vietnam War. It is in parts a travelogue, a sociological examination, a historical documentary, a love story, health care development and political commentary. The author is one of few Americans to have lived in the country during this period of time who had access to Saudis at all levels of society and freely traveled throughout a large portion of the country. No other book, in English or Arabic, covers this period of Saudi Arabia's transformation to a modern nation, the period from 1978 to 2003. The

motivation for writing the book was to render a realistic image of the people of Saudi Arabia, as well as to examine some of the basis for the American misconceptions of this country and region, in the hope that it will inspire others to take steps towards ending the current policy of war without end.

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Customer Reviews

Jones begins IF OLAYA STREET COULD TALK with the lyrics from "If Beale Street Could Talk", which Wikipedia identifies as "a 1916 song by the American composer and lyricist W.C. Handy [that] refers to Beale Street in Memphis, ... a place closely associated with the development of the blues." Handy's lyrics capture a complex world with gaudy wealth amid poverty, honesty amid treachery, and an undertone of violence that somehow retains an emotional hold. The lyrics repeat the line, "I'd rather be there than any place I know." This is an apt beginning for Jones, who developed a complex view of Saudi Arabia in his 20+ years of work at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Riyadh. This view does recognize a rise in religious intolerance and heavy-handed policing, particularly as America responds to 9/11 and then prepares to invade Iraq. Even so, his view is refreshingly nuanced, unlike the stereotypical views of Saudi Arabia that appear in Western media. Interestingly,

Jones uses the backstories of two well-known newspaper columns about Saudi Arabia to show how best-selling American journalists reinforce these stereotypes. In one column, Thomas Friedman says workers at the KFSH were gleeful following 9/11. Backstory: This is a misrepresentation of what Jones, a source for this story, told him. Meanwhile, who can forget Maureen Dowd writing about lingerie in Riyadh? Backstory: In writing this story, she missed a chance to meet with Saudi women and explore their status in depth. In contrast, the book jacket of IOSCT has the comment: "The motivation for writing this book was to render a realistic image of the people of Saudi Arabia, as well as to examine some of the basis for the American misperceptions..." Jones develops several major intertwined narratives in this book. Certainly, the most prominent is a travelogue with Jones, a camper and adventure vacationer, visiting all of Saudi Arabia except Makkah and Madinah. In this mode, Jones offers first-rate travel writing, tying his camping adventures in this surprisingly diverse region to information about its landscape, various tribes, and recent political history. A leitmotif in this writing is Jones's handling of emirs and local police, who seldom see westerners. These often wonder why anyone would want to camp in the desert and assume Westerners are connected to the CIA. But Jones turns this situation to his advantage, since there are no travel visas and his is usually the only tourist group in an area. As a result, the Jones party camps wherever it wants and then enjoys the nighttime sky in a light-free zone. In its second narrative, IOSCT is a memoir of management with Jones, a hospital administrator, showing how bureaucracy in Saudi Arabia is similar to, but different from, bureaucracies everywhere. In telling this story, Jones shows how the KFSH gradually developed bureaucratic checks and balances that restrained megalomania and politics and enabled the hospital to deliver fine health care. Unfortunately, religious fanaticism does eventually enter the hospital, isolating its Western employees. Underlying these two principal narratives are many stories of cross-cultural interaction. Perhaps the most interesting describes Jones's 15-minutes-of-fame appearance on "Tash ma Tash", a satirical show on Saudi TV that he compares to "The Daily Show". In making his appearance, Jones interacts with entertainers in Saudi Arabia that understand and express foibles within the kingdom. In telling this story, he explores the feelings of average Saudis for their country. And, he identifies a normalcy within Saudi society that is otherwise hidden by religious fanaticism, a heavy-handed government, and American stereotyping. Jones is certainly concerned about the Islamic-Western cultural divide. Ominously, he is also concerned that these cultural differences are being hyped by extremists on both sides who consider "war without end" the solution. To explore this theme, Jones devotes two of his 26 chapters in IOSCT to Viet Nam, where he served as a medical corpsman and then returned in the mid-1990s. In these chapters, he points out that what justifies policy in one era quickly dates in the

next. But what does remain is a commitment to unending war, which a cynical portrayal of the Islamic-Western cultural divide perpetuates. IF OLAYA STREET COULD TALK is a skillfully and carefully written book with an excellent glossary and several useful maps. The book is always interesting and entertaining and is highly recommended.

My wife bought this book for two reasons. First, we lived in Saudi Arabia for 8 1/2 years and are very familiar with Olaya Street. Second, we are very good personal friends of the author! While much of what is in the book brings back memories, he delves into the politics of the Kingdom such that this is not a book of light reading and has more appeal to those who have lived there than would be the case with the general public.

As we know, most sandwiches have large pieces of bread on either end, with a few slices of meat in the middle. The bread is there to fill you up, while the meat provides the protein. In *If Olaya Street Could Talk*, John Paul Jones serves up a reverse of the traditional sandwich recipe. The few slices of tantalizing red meat are on either end, while the vast middle is layered with mounds of yummy Middle Eastern bread. Unfortunately for me, the meat used in this sandwich would have been better served thirty years ago. To wit, he uses the opening pages of his book to trash the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War. He makes it very clear that he was an unwilling "conscript" for thirteen months during the hot and heavy days of 1968-69, as the U.S., first, under the lead of JFK, and then Lyndon Johnson, bullied its way into Southeast Asia to pick on a bunch of peace-loving communists who were simply minding their own business (just as they were in Laos, Cambodia, North Korea, China, The Soviet Union, all of Eastern Europe, several Central American countries, Cuba, Angola, Grenada, Mongolia, Mozambique, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, The PR of The Congo, and Benin, during the surrounding decades.) We should have done the same! Everybody join in: "All we are saying, is give PEACE a chance!" And then again at the very end of his book he makes it clear to all Americans, as well as the enemies of America, that he is opposed to our involvement in this current conflict, the so-called "War on Terror" (Also known as "The War Against the Great Satan", or "The War Against the Infidels" by the Islamofascists.) Like Vietnam, GWOT has become another unjust engagement on our part. However, unlike the great Kennedy and Johnson, this war was being honchoed by the "insufferable" Donald Rumsfeld. Those are the two meatiest and shortest parts of this book. The rest of the pita in the middle is truly enjoyable to read (most of the time - see below) The overwhelming majority of this volume is a cathartic and somewhat melancholic look back at the twenty five years Jones spent living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; the friendships

forged, the cultural annoyances experienced, the lessons learned, and the many good times shared. He takes us on a guided tour of his life, starting as a young cultural trailblazer, right up to his more lofty status as an older and wiser repatriated American. While his wife and kids are mentioned only occasionally, his love for them comes through loud and clear. No doubt their lives are all the richer for tagging along with this guy! Still, even in the "memoir" sections of his book, he can't help but jab his finger in the eye of any authority figure he disagrees with - be they Saudi, American, or otherwise. I'm not calling him a "conspiracy theorist", but the fact that he finds a way to squeeze in over a dozen references to the CIA - in his own life story - makes me wonder about his fascination with skullduggery (And he sees it everywhere the U.S. operates.) Jones must believe in the admonition of a certain insufferable man who once said, "There are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns." It seems that Mr. Jones knows all of the "unknown unknowns", and they have something to do with the CIA! One more criticism I can't pass up; one that I believe summarizes his world view, he wrote, "Underwater, as in geopolitics, if you leave dangerous things alone, more often than not, they will leave you alone." Really? By this line of reasoning, the physical "instigator" always "had it coming". Did we provoke Japan into attacking us, and thus drawing us into WWII, as some argue, or did they provoke us? Same for the "War on Terror"? Who provoked whom? (Don't answer if you're an American Leftist, a Euro-socialist, or a Jew-hating Muslim. Your answer is a "known known".) Furthermore, he doesn't spell out exactly what makes the other "dangerous". For example, is building nuclear weapons while repeatedly vowing to wipe another nearby country off the map dangerous, or provocative? Or, is taking out that nation's ability to "wipe you off the map" the first provocation? He doesn't tell us how far down the line of "perceived provocations" we can go to determine who really "had it coming". Nor does he explain what happens underwater, as in geopolitics, when you are weak. Despite my political differences with John Paul Jones, I really did enjoy this book. He clearly has plenty of insights into a part of the world that few in this country do. As someone who has spent a good portion of my life living overseas as well, I can identify with his experiences; sometimes bluntly, other times, warmly, or even humorously, but always wonderfully retold. I would describe his writing style as "Bill Bryson meets Bill Press". If you want to learn, and laugh, and disagree, and empathize - buy this book!

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