

THE FINE PRINT

‘Wanted Women,’ ‘Night Swim’ ‘The Vineyard at the End of the World’

By Katie Tuttle | JANUARY 15, 2012

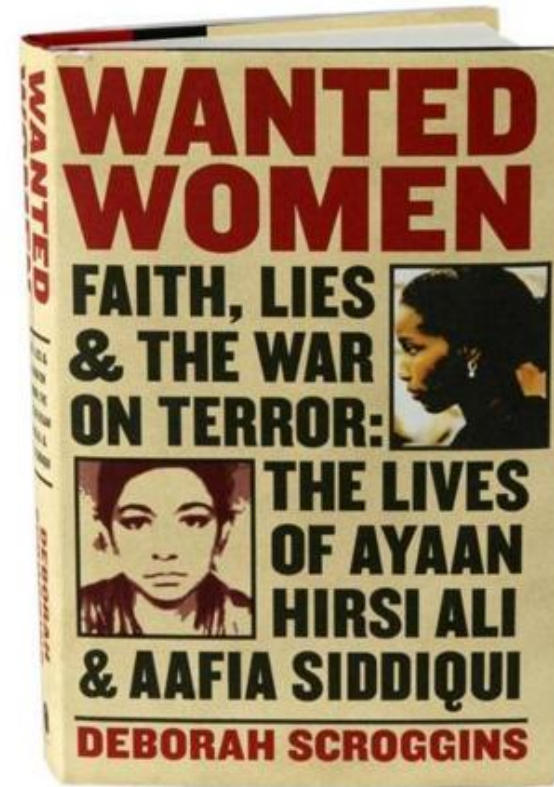
WANTED WOMEN:

Faith, Lies and the War on Terror: The Lives of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Aafia Siddiqui

By Deborah Scroggins

Harper, 539 pp., illustrated, \$27.99

This dual biography follows two Muslim women, both brilliant and restless, whose lives led them toward radically different places. For author Deborah Scroggins, Somali-born Dutch writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Pakistani-born, US-educated Aafia Siddiqui are “opposites, yet related.” Each gained fame (or infamy) for how she forged an identity and purpose in the heated conflicts between Islam and the West: one a celebrity activist, the other a FBI most-wanted terror suspect. Both, Scroggins says, were rebels, “though Ayaan rebelled against Islam while Aafia said she rebelled to serve Islam more



completely.” While the parallels are fascinating, the book’s strength is in its clear-eyed yet sympathetic storytelling. Somehow Scroggins manages to convert a mountain of research into a fast-paced, truly gripping pair of stories.

Both women were born into families marked by political and religious activism, but their early lives differed remarkably. Aafia grew up in a secure family, a carefully raised daughter whose powerhouse mother encouraged her academic ambitions. While in college at MIT and graduate school at Brandeis, she was seen by fellow students and faculty as smart, driven, pleasant (though her insistence on inserting tenets of fundamentalist Islam into scientific papers put off some instructors, and one Jewish professor said she repeatedly tried to convert him). Off-campus, she was an organizer and speaker for radical Islamist groups, activities that frightened her first husband, a Pakistani medical student with no interest in jihad. By contrast, Ayaan’s chaotic childhood left her, she later said, a teenager who was “angry at everyone and everything.” Arriving in the West as a refugee, she embraced life in her adopted Netherlands. Her work as a Somali-Dutch translator thrust her into the burgeoning debate over Muslim immigration, where Ayaan’s willingness to criticize Islam - especially for its treatment of women - made her a darling, especially among American neoconservatives. While Ayaan tended to “wrap her calls for the liberation of Muslims in the banner of the Enlightenment,” critics complained that this line of rhetoric, particularly when it called for the closing of Muslim schools, for instance, “seemed to be turning the language of feminism and the Enlightenment inside out.”

NIGHT SWIM

By Jessica Keener

Fiction Studio, 284 pp., paperback, \$13.95

Sarah Kunitz, growing up in an unnamed Boston suburb, has difficult parents. Her father, a preening English professor, drinks too much, yells at his sons, and lectures Sarah on the lessons she should take from “King Lear.” Her mother, whose arthritis crippled her musical ambitions and led to a painkiller addiction, floats through the household, a loving yet ineffectual presence. The only sanity at home is provided by a succession of

black live-in housekeepers, whose horrible treatment by her father makes Sarah cringe. In this lovely, well-observed debut novel of family disintegration and teenaged resilience, Sarah's mother's death - a long-deferred, passive kind of suicide - leaves Sarah and her three brothers untethered and unprotected.

Keener's observations perfectly capture a certain kind of 1970s adolescence: the adults who tried too hard, the sudden appearance of a joint when in the presence of older cousins, the way a grownup party could spin from fun to disturbing in a blink. Most exhilaratingly, she taps into the thrilling moments when a girl of 16 can see her future, whether in music or books or a boy's smile. Sarah watches her mother's rose garden after her death. Like her children, some "bloomed haphazardly while some wilted," a living symbol of what goes on, no matter what.

THE VINEYARD AT THE END OF THE WORLD:

Maverick Winemakers and the Rebirth of Malbec

By Ian Mount

Norton, 350 pp., \$26.95

Like the iPhone or Suri Cruise, Argentina's Malbec wine seems to have come out of nowhere to become ubiquitous. Yet the grape's newfound popularity belies its thorny history and the seismic change in worldwide wine culture that it reflects. Wall Street Journal wine writer Ian Mount gracefully interweaves history and geography with the harder sciences of agriculture, geography, and chemistry to tell a fascinating story about how Malbec rose from near-extinction, and brought the entire Argentine wine industry with it.

Among the first plants Spanish settlers grew in the Americas were wine grapes - Columbus brought vine cuttings with him on his second New World voyage. In Argentina, the western Mendoza province, dry but tempered by irrigation engineered by the indigenous Huarpe people, proved to be perfect for wine cultivation. When the Spanish authorities tried to shut down the industry because it was undercutting imports from the old country, Argentina rebelled. But the country's growers and vintners (many of them Italian immigrants)

developed bad habits and a lousy product; with no export industry, Argentina made “abundant, cheap wine for [its] thirsty, indiscriminating” people. Mount chronicles an epic turnaround, sparked in part by the influence of Napa Valley winemakers, whose generosity and enthusiasm were a mirror image of the European industry’s opacity and coldness. In this savvy, sassy book, Mount argues for the importance of this revival, both for its reclamation of an old grape and for its place in the worldwide democratization of the wine world. It’s no surprise that American drinkers love Malbec, which Mount calls “a beginner’s wine for a country of new oenophiles, a straightforward, fruity beverage that could be enjoyed without pretension.”

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