

JOURNALISM

Reporting Kabul in stilettos and lip gloss

INTERVIEW
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THE FACT that Heidi Kingstone went to Afghanistan at all is proof you can't judge a book by its cover. Especially when that cover is so glossy.

The Canadian-born journalist was the resident beauty of the *Daily Mail's* *Femail* department when we worked there together 30 years ago.

But her new book *Dispatches from the Kabul Café* shows the *Mail's* hard news environment permeated our fluff bubble. Kingstone went to a dangerous place to report on corruption and the plight of women under the Taliban, which also just happened to be where the most covetable jewelry was to be found.

This is not so much a book of derring-do as what one wispish female reviewer called "the kind of stories that female war-zone journalists might whisper to their closest girlfriends," adding, a tad bitchily: "Only Heidi would wander round Kabul in stilettos and lip gloss."

The tone for this unlikely journey for a nice Jewish girl is set by the fact she notes packing a case-load of beauty products to protect her skin from the elements when she first headed for Kabul in 2007, not to mention highly unsuitable shoes for negotiating rudimentary pavements strewn with rocks and boulders.

"My colleagues in Afghanistan did call me Heidi high-heels," confesses the author, who still teeters in stilettos at the top of a long staircase leading to the elegant, split-level Maida Vale flat she once shared with newspaper tycoon David Montgomery.

Kingstone came to London from Toronto in the 1980s by following a man, she admits — "men have always been a big part of my life" — and she first worked for



Heidi away in Basra (above) and home in the UK (below)

Montgomery, when he was an editor, and then married him. Their subsequent divorce propelled her towards the war zones of the Middle East: "I was in the process of looking for work, and got sucked into the whole Iraqi thing when I went to hear someone from the opposition speak at the Foreign Press Association.

"He became a friend and when it all kicked off there in 2003 I felt I had to go — twice to Baghdad and the last time to Basra. Iraq was fascinating, but it was way more difficult than Afghanistan."

Although she never once considered whether Iraq would be any more dangerous for a Jew — "nothing would have stopped me going there in June 2003" — she became more sensitive about her identity after hearing of American journalist Daniel Pearl's execution by Al-Qaeda extremists the previous year. Sitting with her friend from the Iraqi opposition in his house in Baghdad, she froze momentarily when he casually told her visitors she

was Jewish. "I don't speak Arabic but recognised that word 'yahud' and everyone turning to look at me. I minded for several reasons. First, safety — how could that not be a concern after Pearl's killing? Second, that it might make my job more difficult, and, third, it was my own information to disclose or not." As it happened, her host's crowd were keen on establishing relations with Israel and being Jewish did not prove an issue during her visit.

In Afghanistan, she found out she was not the only member of the tribe — she didn't realise that one of her American housemates was Jewish until the woman produced matzah for Pesach.

Kingstone had arrived in the Afghan capital with no idea of what to expect in a land where local garb for many women was a burqa: "Whatever I brought was too short, too transparent or too tight." Even once equipped with more modest clothing and a hijab, there was the harsh winter to contend with: "When I first arrived, it was freezing, mud covered everything and Kabul looked like it had been bombed back to the Stone Age. But then spring came, and it was beautiful; the light was

extraordinary. It was 2007 and they were starting to rebuild," she says, remembering the beauty of lavishly renovated homes with pomegranate orchards for gardens.

There were also attractive, if somewhat dangerous men — lovers as well as friends — and tragic women trapped in lives of subordination from which Heidi could

not extricate them. Kingstone is particularly scathing about the "female empowerment teams" from outside, who would never succeed in empowering women in such an ingrained culture of male dominance. Yet despite all Kabul's problems she found herself being drawn back time and again, revisiting Afghanistan in 2010, 2011 and 2012 after her first foray.

Between the endless parties — in her early days in Kabul, Kingstone and her housemates typically entertained a dozen people to dinner every night — there were shocking reality checks.

A visiting woman doctor whom Kingstone befriended was executed on a trek back from delivering

medical assistance in the dangerous north. And, in 2014, safely back in London, Kingstone heard that the owner of her favourite restaurant had been shot dead by the Taliban along with 21 customers and staff.

"At first, it's the shock that hits you. Then there's the sadness, then the regrets that you never really said goodbye, and the realisation that you will never see this old friend again."

Kingstone's interview subjects in the Middle East have included Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom she may have been up close but can hardly testify to an encounter that was personal: "He couldn't have been less interested in talking to me," she admits of her 1997 interview with the Israeli PM for the *Johannesburg Saturday Star*.

"He was waiting to talk to Madeleine Albright, and I was not reporting for any of the big networks. He could not wait to finish the interview, and I did not like him at all."

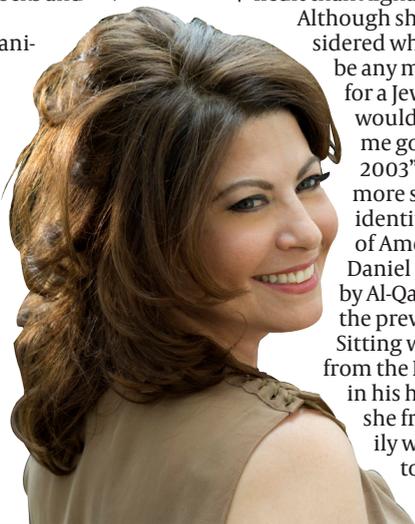
She visited Ramallah and Gaza, a trip which honed her taste for reporting from conflict zones.

Conflict of a different kind followed her when she discovered her phone had been hacked for conversations with her friend Kimberley Quinn, whose affair with MP David Blunkett caused a furore.

Kingstone met the current man in her life after consulting his law firm for advice after the police contacted her about the hacking. So for the moment she is content in London, where she is working on the draft of a play based on her book and the regrets it has provoked over what she calls "the future that never was" in a land doomed to never-ending conflict and chaos.

But you feel it would take only a large enough adrenaline surge to lure her off somewhere dangerous again — this time packing a flak jacket alongside the heels and make-up.

Heidi Kingstone will be speaking at Liverpool's Lee Park Golf Club on February 28, at JW3 on March 1 and at Bournemouth Library on March 7 as part of Jewish Book Week. *'Dispatches from the Kabul Café'* is published by Advance Editions.



'I could never speak in my own voice.'

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the community has been so supportive; it has been hard living in a world set up for straight couples

"Both professionally and personally, I have organised my life around the straight 'family with kids' world," he says. "As a teacher and as a shul-goer, that's my world and I don't begrudge that at all. But there have been times where I have looked around and thought: what have I got out of this? The Jewish community is a hard place to be when you're single and don't have kids."

Alter is currently living with his brother and sister-in-law in Brook-

lyn and has 12 weeks paid time off (a mixture of paternity leave and accrued holiday) — during which he will decide on the next steps, beginning with childcare.

His immediate focus right now is on his daughters, who will be converted in infancy. He is planning a special communal ceremony next month.

"They will be Jewish girls," he says. "And I will bring them to a mikveh."

He knows that some may worry about the girls not having a mother, but says: "I am not anxious about saying — 'this too is a family. This too works.' It's not half a family."

"Being Mom and Dad both will be hugely challenging in all sorts of ways, but it'll also be my — and their — normal," he adds. "I'll lean on female friends and male friends and my commu-

Ready for sleepless nights



nity, and I'll learn how to navigate raising children, daughters, without their having a mother."

In the meantime, he's just enjoying the moment.

"It's incredibly sweet to embrace these little babies, my babies," he says. "I've wanted this for so long and here I am, saying the words 'my daughters' in conversation as if it's the most natural thing in the world."

And, as his new life begins, he adds that he would still "very much like to meet someone". Although he's not holding his breath: "I am quite sceptical that I will have time to brush my own teeth," he admits, with a laugh.