

Reading Group Guide
The Places in Between
Rory Stewart

Praise for this Book

“A striding, glorious book. But it’s more than great journalism. It’s a great travel narrative. Learned but gentle, tough but humane. . . . A flat-out masterpiece. . . . *The Places in Between* is, in very nearly every sense, too good to be true.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Stupendous. . . . An instant travel classic.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Sets a new standard for cool nerve and hot determination. . . . Sublimely written.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“A splendid tale that is by turns wryly humorous, intensely observant, and humanely unsentimental.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Stunning. . . . [Adds] greatly not only to our reading pleasure, but to our understanding of Afghanistan.”

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

Questions for Discussion

1. There are two characters in *The Places in Between* named Babur. Who are they? Why does each matter to the author? How does each help him? What does Rory Stewart seek out—and find—in each of them?

2. How is Ismail Khan depicted here? Who respects him, and who doesn’t? Which people take him seriously, and which don’t? How does Stewart regard him?

3. After reading this book, talk about why and how, if at all, your understanding of the nation building taking place in Afghanistan has changed.

4. Early on, a fellow writer in Afghanistan, on hearing about Stewart’s plan to cross the country entirely by foot, asks him, “Have you read *Into the*

Wild? . . . It's a great piece of journalism." What points are being made here, about both adventure seeking and adventure writing?

5. Where in these pages did you witness the westernization (or "Americanization") of Afghani culture? How did it make you feel? What do you think the impact of this westernization might be on the Afghani people?

6. Abdul Haq is a soldier whom Stewart more or less describes as a bully: a fouled-mouthed guy who likes to scare children with his machine gun and threaten his comrades with rape, and who is stubborn, thuggish, and bossy by routine. Why, then, does Stewart take a liking to him? Discuss the rapport these men develop.

7. "The Buddha meditated by walking," Stewart writes, "and Wordsworth composed sonnets while striding beside the lakes." Explore the links this book makes between walking and thinking, and how Stewart's occasional connections between the two recall the writings of Thoreau and Frost. What does walking mean to Stewart? Why does it preoccupy him? How does it relate to his work, his life, and his identity?

8. What and where is Turquoise Mountain? What is happening to it now, and why? And who is responsible?

9. What did reading *The Places in Between* teach you about the similarities or differences between Shia and Sunni Islam? What did it teach you about the Hazara people? The Koran? The geography and climate of Afghanistan itself?

10. In an enthusiastic review, one critic called this book "a kind of tonic to mindless Taliban-hating." Explain why you do, or do not, agree with this assertion. What, if anything, did you learn about the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan by reading this book?

11. Another critic complained, "Sometimes we get the sense [that Stewart] cares more for preserving history than for the people who live in it." Looking back on the book as a whole, do you agree? Explain.

12. Explain why hospitality is such a major theme in Stewart's book. What did you learn from it about the important guest-host relationship that exists throughout the Middle East?

13. In the chapter "Blair and the Koran," Stewart writes, "Perhaps they were more interested in changing Islam than in describing it." Who are the

targets of this chapter's critique? And on what grounds does the author criticize them? What's wrong with how these individuals have thought, talked, and argued about the Koran in the past?

14. Revisit the chapter "@afghangov.org." How would you paraphrase—and respond to—the author's critique of foreign-aid workers, diplomats, democracy advocates, policy makers, urban planners, and other outsiders who are now working in, or on, Afghanistan with the aim of improving it? Can Stewart's informed remarks be applied to other actions or missions happening in other parts of the world today?

15. Toward the end of the narrative, and near the end of his journey, the author notes that he "felt the world had been given as a gift uniquely to me and also equally to each person alone." What is Stewart referring to here, exactly? What is the gift in question, and how does he find or obtain it?

16. Why do so few women appear in *The Places in Between*? Is this a shortcoming of the book or is it to be expected? Explain.

17. In the first sentence of the book's preface, Stewart writes, "I'm not good at explaining why I walked across Afghanistan." Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

About the Author

Rory Stewart has written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *Granta*, and the *London Review of Books*, and is the author of *The Prince of the Marshes*. A former infantry officer, diplomat in Indonesia and Yugoslavia, and fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire by the British government for his services in Iraq. He now lives in Kabul, where he has established the Turquoise Mountain Foundation.

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