Scandinavia

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Blasphemy

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front lines

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by WALTER GIBBS pictures by PER MORTEN ABRAHAMSEN

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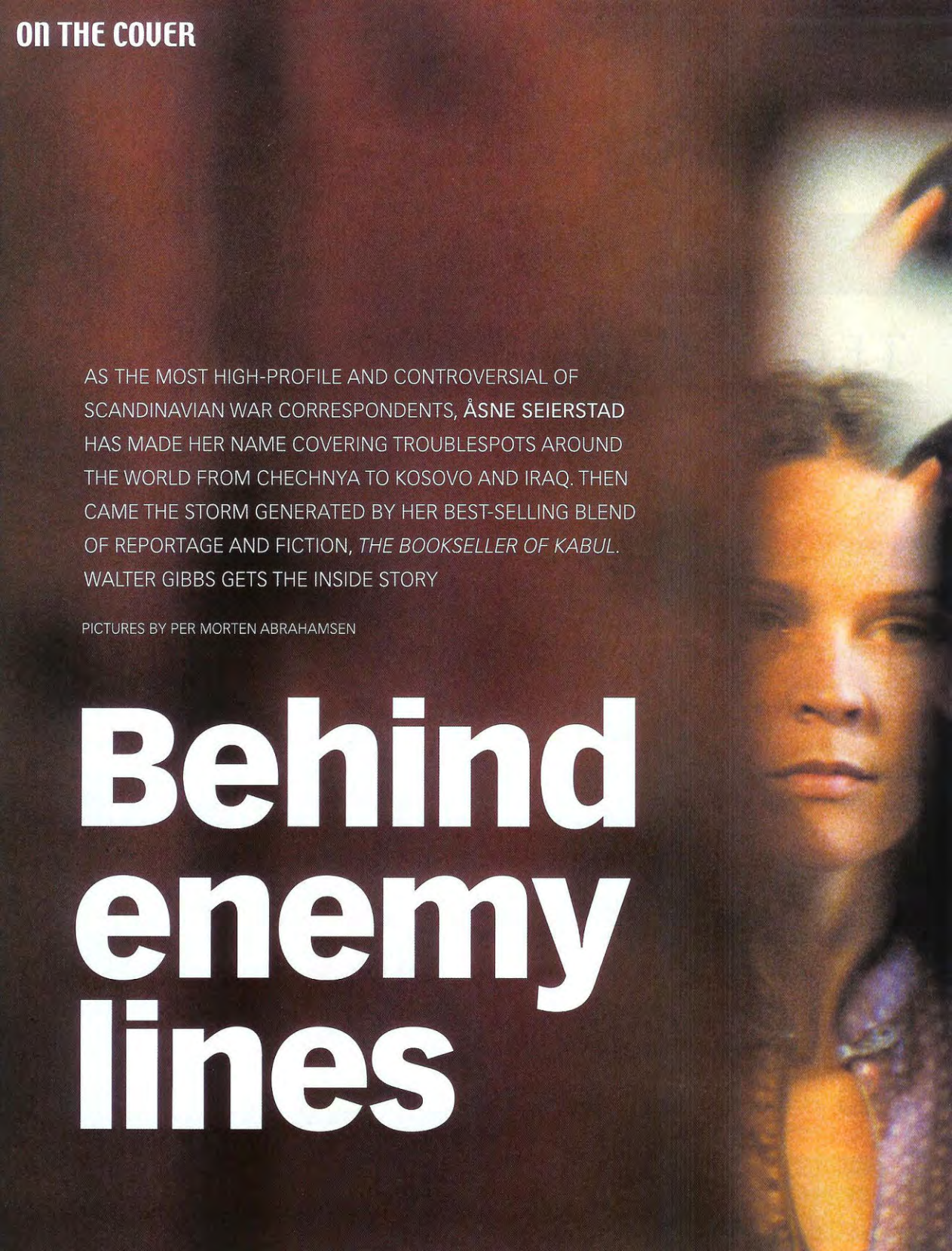

AS THE MOST HIGH-PROFILE AND CONTROVERSIAL OF SCANDINAVIAN WAR CORRESPONDENTS, **ÅSNE SEIERSTAD** HAS MADE HER NAME COVERING TROUBLESPOTS AROUND THE WORLD FROM CHECHNYA TO KOSOVO AND IRAQ. THEN CAME THE STORM GENERATED BY HER BEST-SELLING BLEND OF REPORTAGE AND FICTION, *THE BOOKSELLER OF KABUL*. WALTER GIBBS GETS THE INSIDE STORY

PICTURES BY PER MORTEN ABRAHAMSEN

Behind enemy lines

mart bombs had been hitting Saddam Hussein's palaces, offices and military posts for three weeks. But on April 7, 2003, the U.S. military dropped the show of precision and began simply swarming the Iraqi capital. As sirens wailed, tank shells exploded and Kalashnikovs crackled, Swedish national television went live to the only Scandinavian journalist left in Baghdad.

With a finger on her earpiece, eyes darting upward, Åsne Seierstad began to tell of the invasion, but was drowned out by rippling explosions. The young Norwegian winced and tried to continue, but two more explosions, obviously close, seemed to blow her off a platform and out of the camera frame.

"Åsne Seierstad has disappeared," the SVT morning news anchor said, as the unmanned camera kept rolling. Breakfasting Swedes held their breath as more shells landed, flouncing the palm trees. Finally the reporter re-emerged, spitting sand. With a toss of her blonde ponytail she downplayed the danger. Thousands of Iraqi children had it worse. But as she explained: "It's hard to know where the bombs are falling, where the rockets are coming from, where the artillery is. So I jump when everyone else jumps."

A year later Seierstad and I are slurping reindeer soup at Frognerseter, a rustic lodge high over the Oslo Fjord. At 34, she's the most famous and controversial of Scandinavian war correspondents – tall and angular, but with a soft, seemingly guileless face capable of opening doors and hearts. She can also be stubborn; and as a freelancer, she answers to no one. Editors who have tried to order her out of some killing field or other have felt the lash of her tongue by satellite phone – "You can't tell me what to do!" – even as her mother was calling them to demand, "Get Åsne home, now!"

Her freedom, such as it is, irritates some of her more staff-bound and tradition-bound rivals. From Baghdad she freelanced for five European television channels, five radio stations and eight newspapers, reportedly earning up to 10,000 dollars a day. Her book from Afghanistan, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, has sold more than a million copies in 25 languages and was short-listed for a British book award, the prestigious EMMA (Ethnic Multicultural Media Awards) which she actually won in early June. In elegant prose, it exposes cruelty and sexual oppression in a real Afghan family. But it also exposes the author. Her journalistic methods – such as the spectacular betrayal of her main source – have come under harsh scrutiny. Yet the gripping and tragic story needed telling. A reviewer in *Le Monde* described Seierstad as part ethnologist and part Tolstoy. Her new book, *101 Days*, portrays her own tribe, war reporters, at work in Baghdad under Hussein.

"WORKING IN A WAR ZONE," she tells me, "you must have all the pores of your skin open. You have to be like an animal, grasping every change in the air, every new situation, every smile and every hint of anger. It reminds you that you've only got one life."

She denies needing the rumble of artillery to sleep at night. In recent months she has visited 16 relatively peaceful countries, most of whose languages she speaks, and she's busy planning a reporting trip across the United States. As we chat, a film director sidles up with news on his latest project. Then her mobile phone rings. "Sorry, it's my Spanish publisher," she says, switching to a rapid-fire Castilian punctuated by laughter and concluding with "Ciao!"

As a teenager Seierstad fell in love with Russian novelists and even consummated the relationship by moving to St. Petersburg "to see the bridges Dostoyevsky wrote about." She shared a single room there with four Russian girls in a converted brothel. By the time the first Chechen war broke out, in 1994, she was a student at Moscow University, living in a tiny apartment with a family of five and sending occasional reports on Russian life to Oslo's *Arbeiderbladet*. She had no press card and very little notion of herself as a journalist, but shy she was not. She went to the Ministry of Defence to ask about Chechnya.

"They said, 'Go to the military airport tomorrow at 5 am,'" she recalls. "So I showed up and went to Grozny in a plane filled with Russian soldiers! I was allowed to sit with the officers and they served me vodka and cucumbers all the way to my first war. They left me with a bullet-proof vest and a helmet that must have weighed 50 kilos. And I was alone. Very scary. The first thing I saw at the airport were three tough German guys from *Der Spiegel* or *Stern*. They were leaving, and they were like, 'Get the hell out of here! There are snipers everywhere.'"

"You want to move away. It's probably an instinct"

A girl in the street took Seierstad home to a household of women. The men were dead or fighting. During a long night of bombardment, a child was born, and Seierstad had her first war story.

"IT WAS THE HOUSE WITHOUT MEN," she recalls, "and the boy who was born. I see it now as a pattern: Look for the civilians, look for the stories. You don't always need to know where the big fights are going on."

In Chechnya she translated for European and American journalists who repaid her by transporting her to rebel strongholds. At »

But you grab the opportunity.

"Look for the civilians, look for the stories. You don't always need to know where the big fights are going on"

A life in the spotlight. Clockwise from top left: Demonstrating on May 1st 1975 together with older sister Tori, demanding more kids' playgrounds; In Saddam's palace after the overthrow of the dictator, relaxing in one of the extravagant presidential chairs; The Seierstad sisters preparing for a gymnastics competition. Åsne wanted to be a ballet dancer, but wound up a gymnast; Reporting from Baghdad, shortly after the American troops' arrival in Iraq; Together with former Taliban soldiers in Khost, in the troubled eastern parts of Afghanistan. Seierstad sends her story via satellite, a miracle to most of the soldiers who had never seen a telephone before

» night she filed her own reports. Her resourcefulness later took her to China, France and the former Yugoslavia at the height of the 1999 Kosovo War. She also spent a year covering Norway for the state television network.

"I did a totally mediocre job in Norway," she confesses. "As a reporter, you are supposed to come into the morning meeting with ideas, and I never had any ideas. I could think of nothing within the framework of the evening news. I was so embarrassed! I was sent to cover, like, flower exhibitions and theater plays. Once I was sent to do a story on the central bank lowering interest rates by 0.25 percent. They gave me the questions to ask, but it didn't interest me. I said, 'OK, folks, interest rates are going down.' But I thought, 'So what?'"

In Oslo, Seierstad lives in a crooked, three-floor log house with a leaky roof. Since her study is piled high with papers and books, she often carries her laptop to the dining room to write amid the open suitcases with clothes spilling onto the floor.

"When you really focus on your work," she says, "there has to be a blind spot, and for me that is all the practical things. I'll carry a single lamp from room to room in the dark before I finally realize, 'Åsne, you have to go out and buy light bulbs.'"

She has never dared drive a car, and happily rides her bike around town. But if her destination happens to be the Hindu Kush range of Afghanistan – as it was after September 11, 2001 – she mounts a horse. That is how a scruffy Seierstad reached Tajik and Uzbek mountain fighters in the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance before moving south with them, under fire for six weeks, against the retreating lines of the medieval Taliban regime.

IT WAS IN THE AFGHAN CAPITAL of Kabul that she met the bookseller. Shah Mohammed Rais was an outwardly liberal man in his 50s who had shielded Afghan literature from Taliban book-burners. When Seierstad proposed moving in with his extended family to write a book, he welcomed her and she donned a burka. She took part in weddings, pilgrimages and every form of daily struggle. Ugly secrets came to her, too – about the casual rape of a beggar girl, about the murder of an unchaste woman by her brothers. In the book Seierstad describes Rais as a tyrant, humiliating his mature wife by acquiring a new bride of 16 for a bit of rice, some cooking oil and a cow.

Though Seierstad gave her subjects pseudonyms, only one man in Kabul fitted her description. So when *The Bookseller of Kabul* came out in English, Rais jumped on a plane to Oslo and hired a lawyer. "She doesn't understand how shameful it is to write such things on paper," he told *The New York Times*.

Suddenly Seierstad was the story. A Swedish author accused her of an "ethical breach" that put the bookseller's family in mortal danger. Academics scolded Seierstad for judging Muslim customs by the standards of Western feminism. The book's foreword made it clear she was not presenting an objective record. But her novelistic devices – long passages of conversation that she could not actually have heard, scenery she could not have witnesed and thoughts and feelings that could only have been inferred – gave pause to fellow journalists who might have defended her more vigorously.

She herself insists that every single bit of dialogue and description is properly documented, and many feminists laud her courage. »

"Being at the right place at the right moment in history is scary"

» "I felt like I had a sword and I was fending off the enemy in all directions," she tells me, actually rising in her chair and swinging an imaginary blade. "There were reporters outside my house, knocking on the door. They even spent the night there. But they were only interested in my feelings. Is she crying yet? Has she broken yet? Does she regret what she did?"

No, no, and no. But the sword makes me realize something: No writer is truly free.

"Maybe some people want to think journalism is a very precise science," she says. "But it can't be. It's about telling a story. It is not stenography. To make it true – really true – you have to shorten things and you have to enlarge things."

JANINE DI GIOVANNI, the renowned correspondent for *The Times* of London, chalks the controversy up to journalistic envy. She and Seierstad, she says, wandered through Kabul and the bazaars of Baghdad talking to fishmongers, birdsellers and veiled women while most of the press corps practiced rooftop journalism – the search for a column of smoke to write home about.

"We had magical experiences together," di Giovanni says. "We were much more like anthropologists than journalists in the way we reported on people. Åsne has so much *chutzpah*. When she wants something, she gets it. It's not easy for a woman in this profession, especially if you are as beautiful as she is."

The Bookseller of Oslo

NAME | Åsne Seierstad
BORN | 1970 in Oslo, Norway
LIVES | Oslo, rest of the world
WORK | Freelance reporter, author
BOOKS | *The Bookseller of Kabul* (for which she won the prestigious EMMA Award 2004), *101 Days*
FORK IN THE ROAD | At 24, masquerading as a journalist to interview the speaker of the Russian Parliament. "I had wanted to work in the UN, but this was amazing. As a journalist I could talk to anyone, about anything!"
FOR FUN | Cross-country ski races of up to 90 kilometers in length
PET PEEVE | "How much money we in the West spend on stupid things"

Shortly before the final American assault on Baghdad, di Giovanni was ordered out of Iraq by her employer. "Think twice," she told Seierstad. But the Norwegian stayed and became one of the few Western women to experience the invasion.

"Being at the right place at the right moment in history is scary," Seierstad tells me. "You want to move away. But you grab the opportunity. It's probably an instinct." ◎

WALTER GIBBS
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