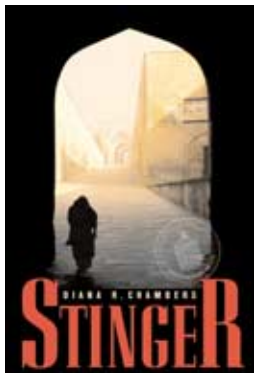


# Diana R. Chambers - Q & A



## *Stinger*

by Diana R. Chambers

Questions & Answers

### **1. Your novel is set in Afghanistan and Pakistan. How did you come to be interested in this region? Why did you write this book?**

Having studied Indian art and history, I've traveled often to India and keep up on regional issues. In the early 80s, I was appalled by the Soviets' brutal occupation of Afghanistan and then struck by the courage of the mujahideen: David slinging rocks at Goliath, and somehow managing to survive. The Afghans are larger-than-life figures and captured my imagination. I especially admired Commander Massud, a cultured man who spoke French and wrote poetry. He was also known as a progressive, unlike most of the other leaders, and I based one of my characters on him. Tragically, he was assassinated two days before 9/11 by two "journalists": suicide bombers eliminating a possible US ally during the retaliation bin Laden knew was coming.

### **2. How did you research the story? Did you travel there?**

I traveled twice to Pakistan and was especially fascinated by Peshawar, the ancient border town where the story opens, a hotbed of intrigue. I had the image of WWII Casablanca, that mysterious atmosphere. We traveled deep into the countryside, including some remote and very traditional Karakoram areas, and also visited the Darra gun bazaar, which I describe in the book as having a carnival-type atmosphere. Touring this arms village—at once cheerful and deadly—was a surrealistic experience that led to one of my most popular travel articles. Besides gun dealers, we met all kinds of people, mostly hospitable and gracious. We came close to the Khyber Pass but were denied entry for security reasons—ours! As the entrance to the Indian subcontinent, the Khyber Pass has had a storied—and violent—past, fought over by many would-be conquerors. In one nasty ambush, Afghan tribesmen let a lone Englishman survive to tell the tale. I really enjoyed my research and unearthed some wonderful old books, even dating back to the Mughal Empire before the days of the British Raj.

I have special fondness for the Mughal period and once researched a book about the great emperor, Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal in memory of his

beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal—one of the great love stories of all time. Later, I thought of doing a story about a hidden cache of jewels in another royal tomb. The story evolved into *Stinger*.

### **3. You've discussed your interest in the dramatic history of the Soviet-Afghan conflict. Do you see any additional relevance?**

It takes a lot to draw US attention to Central Asia, a very distant part of the world. America's current involvement in Afghanistan stems directly from 9/11. However, a not-so-long view of history would give us another perspective on how we actually ended up there this time—as well as our debt to the Afghan people.

The heroic Afghan resistance to the Red Army galvanized the world. As supported by a US covert assistance program—which included "mule-portable," shoulder-fired Stinger missiles—the mujahideen gained a stunning victory that led to the collapse of the USSR, and thus of communism itself! Ignoring the lessons of history, the Russians learned only too late that the tribal peoples of Afghanistan can not tolerate an invader and will always unite against the Farangi (foreigner).

After the Soviet defeat, America's focus shifted elsewhere and we declined the opportunity to help the Afghans rebuild their devastated land. Sadly, the absence of war did not mean peace. Conflicts between various mujahideen factions—including Pakistan-supported fundamentalists—led to the breakdown of civil order. The Taliban, originally welcomed as a law-and-order party, tightened its grip and brought the peace of terror. In a dangerous world, Afghans fall back on blood ties—the clan, with its ironclad tribal laws.

A sacred tenet of tribal culture is hospitality to the guest. When longtime ally bin Laden asks for refuge, he is granted it, without question. Another sacred tenet is vengeance. If clan blood is spilled, the feud will continue even for one hundred years—until the responsibility for vengeance is fulfilled.

To Americans, one hundred years is an impossibly long time. We have a short memory. Afghan memory stretches back into ancient times. Farangis come and go, but the Afghans endure.

### **4. How does Pakistan fit into this picture?**

Because the US needed to keep its involvement with

the mujahideen covert, next-door neighbor Pakistan became the distribution center of foreign aid. As its quid pro quo, Pakistan demanded control over resupply, which led to control over favored factions. There were other regional rivalries at play. Pakistan and India are like a couple in a bitter divorce, which in this case was Partition following Independence from Britain. Since India had an alliance with Russia, Pakistan was eager to help America. They benefited by a vast increase in US assistance and military support—from a “trickle to a torrent,” in the words of one of my characters.

**5. This is your second book published in a little over a year. Do you consider yourself a fast writer? What is your process?**

My process is to be stubborn and never give up. This book was begun as a screenplay over fifteen years ago. At that time, there was absolutely no interest in Afghanistan. In fact, I often drew blank looks when mentioning the locale. In any case, I later rewrote the story as a novel, but received little interest. Over the years, I kept at it and revised it several times. It has now come into its own due to the changed political landscape. But *Stinger* has also benefited by the passage of time. Each rewrite made it better; as my skills as a writer improved, so did the book. I have also gained a deepened perspective on the material. In retrospect, I can see the results of our failure to back the moderate leader, Massud, while allowing Pakistani support of Afghan fundamentalist groups. And as I mentioned earlier, our haste to leave the region created a power vacuum that enabled the rise of the Taliban. I was able to make some of these points in the story, which increases its relevance.

My earlier novel, *The Company She Keeps*, has a similar story of try-try-and try-again. It too went through several incarnations and it too finally came to birth. The last third of the story takes place in Iran, which I actually never visited, and yet people always ask if I've been there. Many say it was their favorite part of the book. I explain that I've traveled to many Islamic countries and combined my affection for the culture with my research. Travel writing has taught me how to evoke the smell of a place, just as screenwriting taught me economy in narrative and the importance of dialogue to reveal character.

**6. Where do your characters come from?**

From my head, from life, from a combination thereof. I follow business and international news and often get really good ideas there. Massud, the mujahideen leader, provided the model for Jamal in my story. The CIA officer Nick is the same character in *The Company She Keeps*. He is fictional and one who developed over time. He was origi-

nally something of a smart-aleck, but later I got to know his more earnest and idealistic side. Robin was based on a real journalist who had spent a great deal of time in Iran and Lebanon. I admired her gutsiness and outspokenness. I gave Robin some of my thoughts on the condition of women in Afghanistan. Having existed so long with these characters, I found that they came to take on a life of their own and speak their own dialogue. Some of the secondary characters were based on people I met while traveling.

**7. What are your thoughts about the position of women in Islam? How do you reconcile this with issues of cultural and religious sensitivity?**

Afghan women were making progress until the Soviet invasion. Whatever their sins, the Soviets gave women education and career opportunities. They continued this practice in Afghanistan. One of my characters—the female journalist—voices many of my conflicts and concerns. Over the years, I've thought about these issues a lot and my opinion has evolved. I admire Islamic culture and art. I have been the recipient of warm hospitality, and have encountered many happy, respected, educated women in Muslim societies. And I do understand the historic roots of purdah: the veil functioned as a legitimate protection against marauders in days of old. However... I now see the tragedy of child marriage and abuse of woman as an ingrained and ongoing reality. I favor improving their condition however possible, education, health, civil protections. The Taliban rule was utterly destructive of women's lives. For this reason, I can see some possible benefit of the American involvement in Afghanistan. I remain cautiously hopeful.

**8. How would you characterize the genre of your writing?**

I have eclectic tastes in life and naturally bring that into my work. I'm interested in both the world out there and the world within: adventure and the human heart. I love a great story with complex, believable characters. I like mysteries and espionage. In *Stinger* I've tried to combine all these elements into an exciting and suspenseful work of fiction that is grounded in reality. The mystery begins in an exotic Central Asian border town when a shipment of Stingers goes missing in plain view. A graveyard murder leads us deeper into a shadowy world of spies and secret agendas. Amid all these conspiracies, a “rogue” CIA officer and an investigative journalist weave their own webs as they vie to find an elusive Afghan leader, who also happens to be her former lover. The romantic triangle that develops obscures things further until the truth is revealed in a shocking climax.