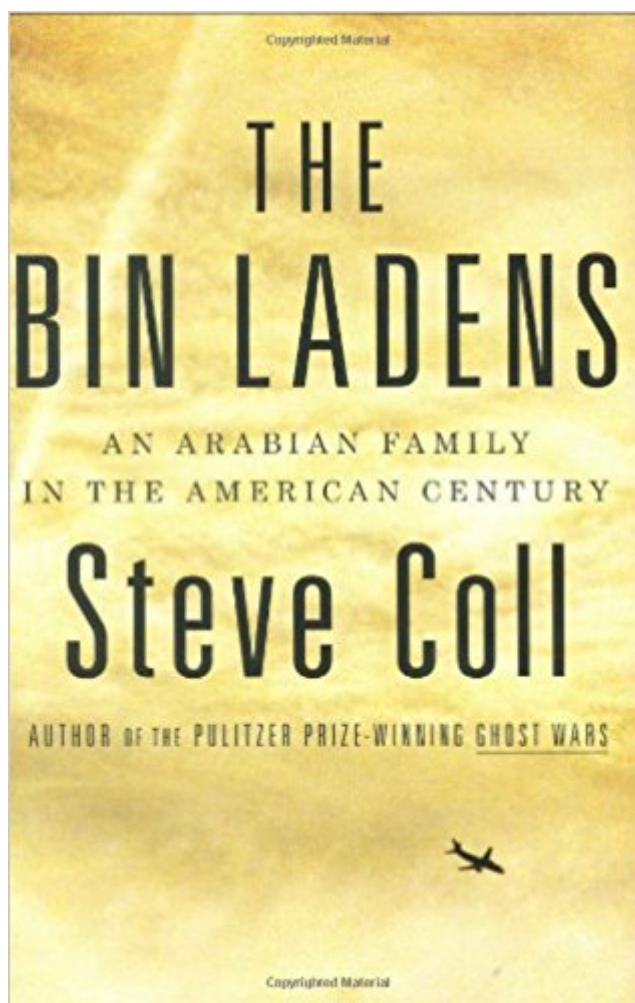


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The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family In The American Century



Synopsis

The rise and rise of the Bin Laden family is one of the great stories of the twentieth century; its repercussions have already deeply marked the twenty-first. Until now, however, it is a story that has never been fully told, as the Bin Ladens have successfully fended off attempts to understand the family circles from which Osama sprang. In this the family has been abetted by the kingdom it calls home, Saudi Arabia, one of the most closed societies on earth. Steve Coll's *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* is the groundbreaking history of a family and its fortune. It chronicles a young illiterate Yemeni bricklayer, Mohamed Bin Laden, who went to the new, oil-rich country of Saudi Arabia and quickly became a vital figure in its development, building great mosques and highways and making himself and many of his children millionaires. It is also a story of the Saudi royal family, whom the Bin Ladens served loyally and without whose capricious favor they would have been nothing. And it is a story of tensions and contradictions in a country founded on extreme religious purity, which then became awash in oil money and dazzled by the temptations of the West. In only two generations the Bin Ladens moved from a famine-stricken desert canyon to luxury jets, yachts, and private compounds around the world, even going into business with Hollywood celebrities. These religious and cultural gyrations resulted in everything from enthusiasm for America—exemplified by Osama's free-living pilot brother Salem—to an overwhelming determination to destroy it. *The Bin Ladens* is a meticulously researched, colorful, shocking, entertaining, and disturbing narrative of global integration and its limitations. It encapsulates the unsettling contradictions of globalization in the story of a single family who has used money, mobility, and technology to dramatically varied ends.

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Customer Reviews

The bin Ladens are famous for spawning the world's foremost terrorist and building one of the Middle East's foremost corporate dynasties. Pulitzer Prize-winning Coll (Ghost Wars) delivers a sprawling history of the multifaceted clan, paying special attention to its two most emblematic members. Patriarch Mohamed's eldest son, Salem, was a caricature of the self-indulgent plutocrat: a flamboyant jet-setter dependent on the Saudi monarchy, obsessed with all things motorized (he died crashing his plane after a day's joy-riding atop motorcycle and dune-buggy) and forever tormenting his entourage with off-key karaoke. Coll presents quite a contrast with an unusually nuanced profile of Salem's half-brother Osama, a shy, austere, devout man who nonetheless shares Salem's egomania. Other bin Ladens crowd Coll's narrative with the eye-glazing details of their murky business deals, messy divorces and ill-advised perfume lines and pop CDs. Beneath the clutter one discerns an engrossing portrait of a family torn between tradition and modernity, conformism and self-actualization, and desperately in search of its soul. (April 1) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The sprawling and immensely wealthy Bin Laden family has a past and present far more complex and interesting than that of one middle-aged man holed up in the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Coll, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a staff writer for the New Yorker, has written an impressive family saga that spans three generations and four continents and intersects with some of the key events of the last century. Osama is, of course, part of this story, but he isn't necessarily the most interesting or even the most important family member. Coll begins with an examination of the life and career of the family patriarch, Mohamed, who was born in poverty in southern Yemen, where he toiled in menial jobs. As a teenager, he immigrated to the port city of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. His cleverness and ambition meshed perfectly with the building boom fueled by the oil revenues of the Saudi royal family. Before his death in 1967, Mohamed had fathered more than 50 children by various wives, and Coll offers portraits of some of them. He effectively shows how the creation of the Bin Laden family fortune was, and continues to be, tightly bound to the fate of the Saudi royal family. This is a well-done, sweeping chronicle of a clan that continues to exert worldwide power and influence. --Jay Freeman

Coll is an engaging writer. His prose here is even better than in his award-winning "Ghost Wars." He

draws the reader completely into the time and frames of the substance of his always interestingly drawn, subjects. He has done a magnificent job of turning the Bin Laden's family history into a mini history of modern Middle Eastern geopolitics, especially as it applies to the U.S.-Saudi relationship. This history, of course is the story of the Bin Laden family, which consisted of the patriarch, Mohammed, his many wives and his fifty-four children, of which the "black sheep" was the infamous Osama. Oddly, Osama and his terrorist activities become a sidelight here rather than the center of the narrative. For, other than his global mayhem, Osama turns out to have been a thoroughly boring and not very bright member of the family. For those interested only in Osama, may I recommend the book by his sister-in law Carmen bin Laden called "Growing up bin Laden." Carmen has a bead on him as a brewing not very bright or interesting person, who somehow became pious and cast his lot with religion. In any case, Osama certainly is not in the same class as his older brother Salem, who until his accidental death clowning on dune buggies was the center of this story and of much international jet-setting and geopolitical intrigue. Nor was either son as talented or as industrious as their father, Mohammed. The first half of the book is about how Mohammed's father was forced to flee Yemen (after a borrowed ox had died and he failed to make good on the debt incurred as a result). Mohammed grew up in a small poverty-stricken town in Yemen, but at an early age migrated to Africa and on to Saudi Arabia, where he insinuated himself into the good graces of the Saudi royal family. Through grit alone, he turned himself into whatever kind of expert the King needed and then always performed well above expectations. As a result, he was constantly able to enlarge his duties and responsibilities until he was not only the King's number one contractor, but his number one financial fixer as well. As his wealth grew, so too did his influence. The second half of the book gets into the bin Laden's relationship with the royal family, the oil company consortium Aramco, and its number one sponsor, the USA. Among the most interesting of many interesting and revealing facts is how the Saudi King roped Ronald Reagan into geopolitical debt by clandestinely footing the bill for illicit funding to the contras, hostage-trading with Iran, and supporting Osama as he was losing the fight to the Russians. It was "Charlie Wilson's War" in the flesh. There is something here for everyone and enough intrigue to fill a good spy novel. A great read. Five Stars.

My husband reports that this is very fascinating - how different things are in different cultures

This book covers two generations of the sprawling Bin Laden family. Interestingly, terrorist outcast Osama isn't the focus here. The bulk of the book covers Mohammed, the original patriarch, and his

fun-loving eldest son Salem, who took over leadership of the family when his father died abruptly in a plane crash. The combination of Salem's playboy antics and business empire building set against a Saudi/Islamic culture rapidly facing challenges from the outside are the most fascinating parts of the book. The story actually drags a bit when Osama comes up; he's not nearly as interesting as some of his siblings. I wouldn't call the book riveting reading, but it is an interesting story, and very well researched. The book was written before Osama was killed. It's a credit to Coll's knowledge and research that his speculation of where and how Osama spent his final days matched pretty closely to what actually happened.

A very fair and complete account of the life of the Bin Ladens, from their ragged beginnings in Yemen, to the builders to the Kingdom in Saudi Arabia, and to the rise of the wayward son, the terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Reading this book I was able to understand a lot about the conflicts of a country that wants to modernize, is attracted to the technology of west, but at its core is tied to a very conservative religious doctrine, and is very suspicious of the west.

This is a very well researched and written book. The story takes you for an in-depth look at the history of one of the wealthiest families in Saudi Arabia or the Middle East, while explaining the parallel history of Saudi Arabia and its rulers, the Al-Saud family. This makes the book more interesting, as it is not only a biographical work on the Bin Laden family only, but explains the deals going on in Saudi since the 1930's up to around the year 2000. Coll does a superb job in humanizing a family who's name, for most Americans, means evil.

I liked this book. It gives a total insight to the Bin Laden family. The story goes back to Osama's grandfather who was very poor and how he used his talents and hard work to build the Bin Laden Empire. Osama was much different from his family members. This book elaborates on the family as a whole. While it talks about Osama and his getting into the Muslim Brotherhood; it also shows the rest of the family and much different lives from their brother Osama. I like biographies and couldn't pass this one up. It is worth reading.

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