



The Rope: A Novel

By Kanan Makiya

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From the best-selling author of *Republic of Fear*, here is a gritty and unflinching novel about Iraqi failure in the wake of the 2003 American invasion, as seen through the eyes of a Shi'ite militiaman whose participation in the execution of Saddam Hussein changes his life in ways he could never have anticipated.

When the nameless narrator stumbles upon a corpse on April 10, 2003, the day of the fall of Saddam Hussein, he finds himself swept up in the tumultuous politics of the American occupation and is taken on a journey that concludes with the discovery of what happened to his father, who disappeared into the Tyrant's gulag in 1991. When he was a child, his questions about his father were ignored by his mother and his uncle, in whose house he was raised. Older now, he is fighting in his uncle's Army of the Awaited One, which is leading an insurrection against the Occupier. He slowly begins to piece together clues about his father's fate, which turns out to be intertwined with that of the mysterious corpse. But not until the last hour before the Tyrant's execution is the narrator given the final piece of the puzzle—from Saddam Hussein himself.

The Rope is both a powerful examination of the birth of sectarian politics out of a legacy of betrayal, victimhood, secrecy, and loss, and an enduring story about the haste with which identity is cobbled together and then undone. Told with fearless honesty and searing intensity, *The Rope* will haunt its readers long after they finish the final page.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Mr. Makiya loves Iraq—or the idea of what a new Iraq could be—and his rage and despair at the brutality that has seized his country comes through on every page....Mr. Makiya’s writing is sublime when his subject is the slide from decency to evil. His depiction of the descent into barbarism of Haider, one of the central character’s closest friends, is as good a portrait as we are likely to get of Iraq’s post-Saddam savagery....The book is an indispensable guide into the ‘warehouses of cruelty’ of the modern Middle East and gives us a better idea of why Iraq failed after being liberated from a tyrant, and why Sunnis and Shiites now so eagerly kill each other.” —**Reuel Marc Gerecht, *Wall Street Journal***

“Americans know very little about Iraq, and this was as true at the beginning of our war there as it is today. Now Kanan Makiya has written a fictionalized narrative of the first years of the American occupation, seen from the Iraqi (and the Shi‘ite) side. His book is a remarkable evocation of those terrible years, simultaneously informative, scary, worrying, and deeply engaging. Start reading it and you won’t stop—and don’t skip the beautifully written, morally and politically powerful personal note at the end.” —**Michael Walzer, author of *Just and Unjust Wars***

“A searing novel of the Iraq War from an Iraqi point of view, with Saddam Hussein in a starring role. Our narrator has no name, but The Tyrant certainly does, and it is on every tongue. As Makiya’s novel opens, Saddam’s body is swaying in the breeze, having been transferred by The Occupier to the Iraqis as ‘proof of our independence from the American invaders.’ Into that brief phrase a whole world is packed: the Americans are unwanted conquerors, the rulers of Iraq are exiles driven to hang Saddam out of ‘revenge, or blood libel, or communal solidarity,’ and a once-coherent nation, for better or worse, is now splintered irreparably.... A close study of the psychology of oppression and dictatorship, of a piece with the author’s now classic nonfiction study *Republic of Fear* (1989).” —***Kirkus Reviews*, *starred review***

“A razor-sharp dissection of the post-Saddam unraveling through the eyes of a fictional Shiite militiaman...highbrow, brilliant.” —***New York Magazine***

“*Set in Iraq soon after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, this novel follows an unnamed Shiite soldier in one of many militias jockeying for power. As he strives to understand the complex political, spiritual, and military world around him, he confronts convoluted loyalties and gruesome betrayals within his own family....Succeeds in its passionate dramatization of a mind-set still poorly understood by the American reader.*” —***The New Yorker***

“*Astutely challenging...deeply resonant....Nuanced and essential reading for every global citizen, this novel proves that all politics are personal.*” —***Booklist***

“*Makiya’s book is a challenge to Iraqis—many of whom are fed up with their corrupt leaders—to stop blaming the West and confront the officials who are destroying their country. He believes that only some form of federalism—that rises above a strict Shiite-Sunni divide—can save the country. The novel couldn’t be more timely. Last week Sadr’s followers invaded the Shiite-led government “green zone” for the second time in a month, purportedly protesting against corruption but really seeking more power. As Sayyid Majid’s death makes clear, Iraqi Shiites must first stop killing one another before the country can emerge from chaos. That is the harsh truth *The Rope* wants Iraqis to face.*” —***Philadelphia Inquirer***

*“Powerful....By keeping his creation torn and anguished as he digests unpalatable facts, Makiya forces us to sympathise, to see his character as a human as well as a soldier, a lost boy gulled into believing anything and duped into doing the dirty work of others.” —Malcolm Forbes, *The National* (Abu Dhabi)*

About the Author

KANAN MAKIYA was born in Baghdad. He is the author of several books, including the best-selling *Republic of Fear*, *The Monument*, *The Rock*, and the award-winning *Cruelty and Silence*. He is the Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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The Hanging

Morning

I checked my watch, over and over again, determined to catch the precise moment when the lever would be released. I still almost missed it, the trapdoor clanging open before he had finished reciting his prayers.

“The Tyrant was hanged on Saturday, December 30, 2006, at 6:09 a.m.,” I wrote in the evening of that day in a blue-ruled school notebook, whose cardboard covers Mother, God rest her soul, had lovingly wrapped in pink paper decorated with white carnations. She never let me throw away those old notebooks, mandatory in my secondary school in Najaf. The notes I recorded in them between 2003 and 2006 form the backbone of this account.

Three hours and ten minutes earlier, at 2:59 a.m. precisely, he had been transferred to Iraqi sovereignty for the first time since his capture, proof of our independence from the American invaders.

His transfer came on the heels of “a bitter struggle between us and the Occupier,” my uncle and mentor said.

“Did the Occupier agree to the transfer?” I asked Uncle.

“Not at first; they fought hard to delay it. But they caved in,” Uncle replied, “like they always do.”

The prime minister wanted the hanging to coincide with the day Sunni Muslims celebrated the first of the four-day Great Feast, and he wanted it to coincide with the day of his son’s marriage. All in the government agreed a higher authority had to rule. And so it was.

After the Sunni Grand Mufti decreed the first day of the Great Feast to be December 30, 2006, our Shi’a clerics ruled that a hanging on the day before the Great Feast was permissible, but not on its first day. And so the prime minister settled on the earliest hour of the morning of the Great Feast, minutes before sunrise and the start of the Great Feast, as the day of the hanging. Technically, the Tyrant would be hanged and the prime minister’s son married the day before our Great Feast started.

Sunni clerics saw through the prime minister’s ruse. They said the Tyrant, a Sunni, was in fact being executed on a day Sunni Muslims consider a celebration, thus spoiling their Feast; meanwhile, we Shi’a got to celebrate the day our bitterest enemy had been executed, thus enhancing our celebrations.

Thus was the order of the firmament set by the timing of the rising of the sun; it permitted us to execute one of theirs on the first day of their Feast, but not them to execute one of ours on the same day; and this even

though all are Believers of the one true faith. It has always been thus.

The body of the Tyrant was flown by helicopter to the prime minister's house, where the wedding celebrations were under way. Accompanied by a chanting, delirious crowd waving Kalashnikovs in the air, the corpse was carried from the helicopter's landing pad to the front door of the house, vacated for the prime minister's use by twelve American lieutenant colonels. At the door of the house in which the wedding party was being held, the shroud was peeled back from the Tyrant's face in his coffin, exposing his bruised and broken neck to the frenzied delight of the chanting mob.

Our new rulers, including the prime minister, are former exiles, returning from cities like London, Tehran, and Damascus. I do not know whether revenge, or blood libel, or communal solidarity was behind the timing of the hanging; perhaps all of them. There are no written records to support one view or the other. On the contrary, the government and the court were at pains to stress their desire to apply the rule of law, to rob the insurgency of its titular head and prime symbol.

The hanging took place in the oldest Shi'a district of Baghdad, in a former intelligence compound, circled by the winding Tigris on three sides and walled off from the populace by a forbidding concrete wall on the city side, recently topped with bales of barbed wire. Government officials, flanked by the personal guard of which I was a member, met the Black Hawk helicopter transporting the Tyrant to the compound he had built for the purposes of interrogation, torture, and execution.

I had visited the compound before in the company of Uncle and his friends during the summer of 2003. "You are an expert on the compound," the turbaned commander who appointed me said. "We might need you in case something goes wrong." And so he decided I should be on the detail assigned to guard the prisoner from the time of his transfer into Iraqi custody to the moment of his execution.

The Tyrant slowly descended the folding steps released from the helicopter, pausing at the top to look around him as though to take advantage of the view stretching to the sinuous bends of the Tigris and the Golden Dome beyond. Looking down, he would have seen the dilapidated complex that had, under him, known better days. His feet touching the tarmac, he paused again, and then walked at an exaggeratedly leisurely pace, past flanking rows of American guards, medics, and other Occupier officials. Stiff and unbending, his back straight as a ramrod, the occasional flicker of a smile across thin lips, he thanked and bade farewell to each and every American, some of whose names he seemed to know. They in turn treated him with equally exaggerated respect, as though he were still a head of state. Walking him to a three-story concrete pillbox of a building with no identifiable entrance canopy, the party moved toward the hole in the wall that passed for a door. Papers were exchanged among officials, including a nervous, balding, mustachioed man to whom my eye was drawn, because his stomach rippled like jelly over a tight belt.

This completed the formalities of the Tyrant's transfer into our custody. My comrades and I, all in freshly minted uniforms of the New Army, took over from the American escort.

I had grown up with his images, wall-size on the street, or framed in glass in every office and living room of the Republic. The Tyrant would appear dressed as an Arab or as a Kurd, as an officer in battle fatigues or as a peasant carrying his spade, kissing children or leading men into battle. For the first time, I was able to observe the man himself.

He was dressed in a black camel hair overcoat made by his favorite Turkish tailor. Freshly dyed, his hair was signature black; his face, calm and impassive, the Stalin-like mustache copied by Iraqi males for a quarter of a century recently trimmed. At the point of handover, his features turned scornful, though he did not say a

word, not even to the ministers and government officials present. They did not or could not look him in the eye and were constantly shifting their weight and shuffling their feet. He stood like one of his statues, looking past them when they addressed him, reading from one of their papers; it was as though they were not even there. Wordlessly and motionlessly, the Tyrant humiliated his new jailors.

This man once possessed absolute power; now he had none. Our government officials, on the other hand, never had power and would not recognize it if they had. To be sure they were seekers of it, but to them power was the chauffeured bulletproof vehicle, the size of their security escort, and the amount of noise and disruption the screeching wheels of their convoy could make scattering ordinary people about in the streets, people who would then turn back to look at them with what the officials misconstrued as awe. The Tyrant knew better. He knew that the true politician is one who plays the game, perfects gestures and facial expressions, not some of the time, but every second of every day. He also knew that there is no escape from power like his, no exit, no way out of the predicament that being always onstage creates; there is only death.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Helen McCormick:

Spent a free the perfect time to be fun activity to accomplish! A lot of people spent their free time with their family, or their very own friends. Usually they carrying out activity like watching television, gonna beach, or picnic in the park. They actually doing same task every week. Do you feel it? Do you wish to something different to fill your personal free time/ holiday? Could be reading a book can be option to fill your cost-free time/ holiday. The first thing you will ask may be what kinds of e-book that you should read. If you want to attempt look for book, may be the guide untitled The Rope: A Novel can be great book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

Lena Drew:

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Sean Jones:

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