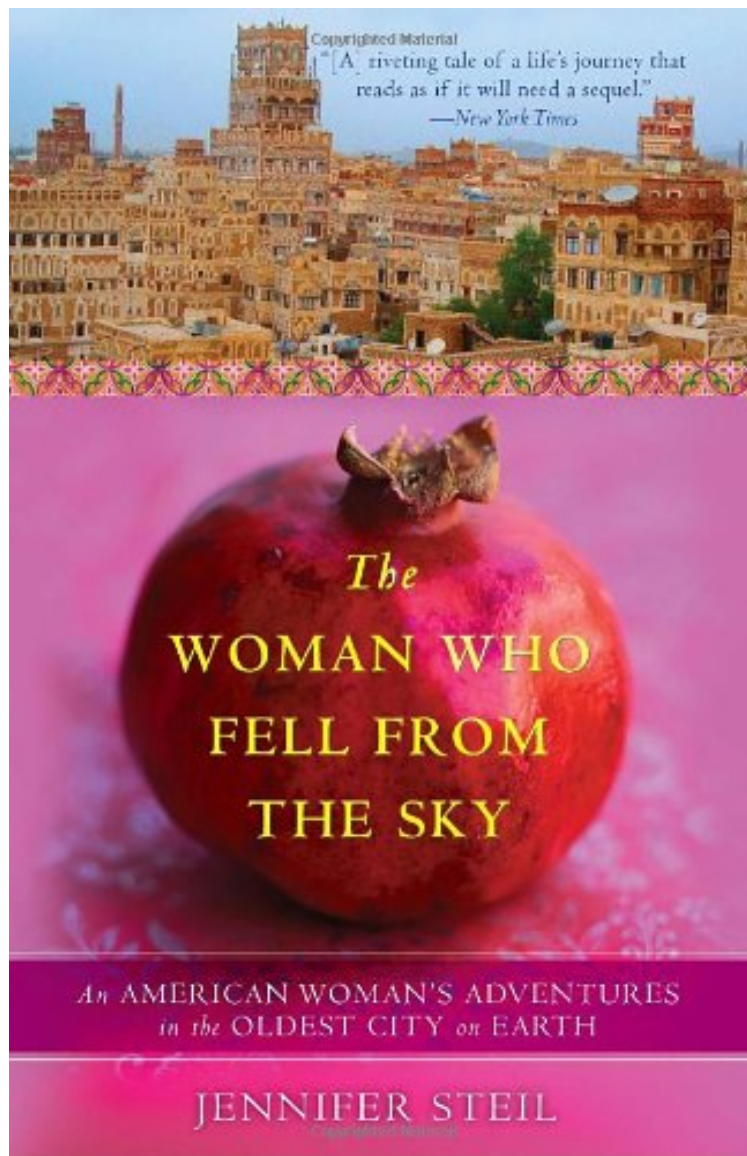


[Download] The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth

## The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth

Jennifer Steil

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#1096330 in Books Jennifer Steil 2011-07-05 2011-07-05 Original language: English PDF # 1 7.95 x .78 x 5.211, .1 #File Name: 0767930517352 pages The Woman Who Fell from the Sky An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth | File size: 49.Mb

**Jennifer Steil : The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Sour note at the endBy Frederick FungI chose this book for our Book Club, because the title intrigued me and the cover is attractive with a large, delicious pomegranate dominating the layout. I was not disappointed except when I got to the end of the story. The story is about Jennifer Steil, an American journalist who decided to take on a tenure to run the Yemen Observer, a twice weekly newspaper in Yemen. The prose is well written; flowing well, and generally informative about the culture and people of Yemen. I read it almost as an anthropological study of a different culture, of course from a western female's perspective. It gives detailed description of a male-dominated society, a pervasive habit of chewing qat (a mild stimulant leaf), and a pseudo-democratic society. Since I was reading it on my iPad, I was able to view the photos of Sanaa (the capital of Yemen), the ginger bread houses, and the islands. The problem of the book is the ending, when Ms. Steil became the mistress of the new British Ambassador, who was married at that time with a teenage daughter. The affair was covered in detail, and the book read like a cheap romance novel. I tried not to judge their affair on moral grounds, but it still leave a sour taste. Otherwise, it is a worthwhile book for the armchair travelers.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. AmbivalenceBy MarmaLakeFirearmsThis book is very good without a doubt. I approached it expecting a more in depth view at Yemeni culture and society and undoubtedly my understanding of the country has been enhanced by reading the book. So far, half way there but the underlying impression is of how Jennifer Steil gave her 120% to getting a newspaper to function against the odds. I cannot help but feel the tale is one sided; perhaps the odd hint that an ex lover Theo and her parted acrimoniously may point more to the complexity of her character and her achievements. She is undoubtedly very talented and the story is excellent. I was looking more for an insight into the lives of Yemenis themselves. Perhaps when I redo this on finishing, my summary will be different.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great read--very absorbing and very honestBy ABThis is an excellent book---it's well written and very honest. I became completely absorbed in it. The writer tells her own story and her experiences as the Editor of a newspaper in Yemen. I was totally impressed by the fact that she moved to Yemen, managed a newspaper, and did so according to her values while maintaining a sensitivity to the culture. I found her honesty and her fearlessness refreshing. I also appreciated the fact that many things were very difficult but she faced them as best she could.

"I had no idea how to find my way around this medieval city. It was getting dark. I was tired. I didn't speak Arabic. I was a little frightened. But hadn't I battled scorpions in the wilds of Costa Rica and prevailed? Hadn't I survived fainting in a San Jos brothel? Hadn't I once arrived in Ireland with only \$10 in my pocket and made it last two weeks? Surely I could handle a walk through an unfamiliar town. So I took a breath, tightened the black scarf around my hair, and headed out to take my first solitary steps through Sanaa."-- from *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky* In a world fraught with suspicion between the Middle East and the West, it's hard to believe that one of the most influential newspapers in Yemen--the desperately poor, ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden, which has made international headlines for being a terrorist breeding ground--would be handed over to an agnostic, Campari-drinking, single woman from Manhattan who had never set foot in the Middle East. Yet this is exactly what happened to journalist, Jennifer Steil. Restless in her career and her life, Jennifer, a gregarious, liberal New Yorker, initially accepts a short-term opportunity in 2006 to teach a journalism class to the staff of *The Yemen Observer* in Sana'a, the beautiful, ancient, and very conservative capital of Yemen. Seduced by the eager reporters and the challenging prospect of teaching a free speech model of journalism there, she extends her stay to a year as the paper's editor-in-chief. But she is quickly confronted with the realities of Yemen--and their surprising advantages. In teaching the basics of fair and balanced journalism to a staff that included plagiarists and polemicists, she falls in love with her career again. In confronting the blatant mistreatment and strict governance of women by their male counterparts, she learns to appreciate the strength of Arab women in the workplace. And in forging surprisingly deep friendships with women and men whose traditions and beliefs are in total opposition to her own, she learns a cultural appreciation she never could have predicted. What's more, she just so happens to meet the love of her life. With exuberance and bravery, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* offers a rare, intimate, and often surprising look at the role of the media in Muslim culture and a fascinating cultural tour of Yemen, one of the most enigmatic countries in the world.From the Hardcover edition.

"From the first page of *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, Jennifer Steil comes across as a person blessed with sensibility and sensitivity in equal measure. She is the kind of woman who's not fearful of culture shock, danger, or the trials and tribulations of life in what is the Arab World's rawest land. Her writing is an absolute delight -- no nonsense, clear, funny, and sometimes alarming, as she threads her way through the ins and outs of Yemeni life. Steil has achieved far more than a simple description of a stint working at a newspaper in Sana'a. Rather, her book shines a vibrant light on the region, showing it how it is, with astonishing clarity from the inside out."--Tahir Shah, author of *The Caliph's House* and *In Arabian Nights* "Steil puts humanity and color into her description of a country most Americans know only as a desert haven for terrorists. Her affection for Yemen and its people will make readers want to see it for themselves. A lovely book that offers a large measure of cultural understanding in a region that is too

easily misunderstood and caricatured." --Nina Burleigh, author of *Unholy Business* "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky is that rare animal: a memoir which reads like a novel. From the exquisite detail to the passionate, poignant, and often hilarious story of one powerful woman immersed in centuries of patriarchal tradition, Steil takes us on a journey that left me exhausted and exhilarated. Hugely entertaining and vitally important to our times, the book tucks us under a veil and allows us a unique glimpse into a culture as old as Noah. Not only did I remember what it feels and smells like to live imbedded in the Arab world, I also relearned my craft of journalism along with Steil's students in her dusty classroom halfway around the world. Veils and hats off to this winner!" --Jennifer Jordan, author of *Savage Summit: The Life and Death of the First Five Women of K2* "With intelligence, humor, and courage, Jennifer Steil's book helps us see beyond stereotypes of male and female, East and West, conservative and liberal to appreciate the beauty and wonder of deeply rooted cultures--and the authentic relationships that can transcend them all." --Susan Piver, author of *How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life* and *The Wisdom of a Broken Heart* "Jennifer Steil's voice recalls that of Isak Dinesen and Freya Stark: generous and observant, unabashed in her love for her home in exile, yet unafraid to speak her mind about injustice, and everything laced with wit and rich detail. This is an important book about a corner of the world we cannot afford to misunderstand, and Jennifer Steil is the perfect person to guide us." --Tom Zoellner, author of *The Heartless Stone* and *Uranium*

From the Hardcover edition. About the Author Before moving to Yemen in 2006, Jennifer Steil was a senior editor at *The Week*, which she helped to launch in 2001. Her work has appeared in *Time*, *Life*, and *Good Housekeeping*. She lives in Sana'a, Yemen, with her fianc, Tim Torlot, the British Ambassador to Yemen and their daughter Theadora Celeste.

From the Hardcover edition. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

One Fantasia in Gingerbread I didn't immediately see Zuhra when I walked into the bridal chamber. The room was dim, and she was curled over in prayer on the floor to my left, a mass of white satin with a black scarf over her head. Few people were allowed in the room with her--only sisters and dearest friends--and everyone was quiet. I stood still against a wall, watching her, waiting for her to finish. I hadn't thought I would see Zuhra until she began her slow, deliberate march down the catwalk that ran the length of the wedding hall. But her sisters had summoned me, pulling me by the hand into this back room. Zuhra looked tiny and vulnerable, solemnly whispering her prayers. But all hint of gravity vanished as she finished and pulled the veil from her face to beam up at me. She stood, the silky scarf slithering from her bare shoulders, and came to let me kiss her. Above the white of her Brooklyn-bought dress, her arms, back, and clavicle were painted with curling flowery vines, rendered in nagsh, a black ink favored by Yemeni brides. We didn't speak at first but just stood smiling at each other. "Antee jameela," I said, touching her tiny waist. "Beautiful. Like a little doll bride." "Really?" She turned this way and that, so I could admire all of her. Her thick black hair was piled on top of her head in fanciful hair-sprayed loops. Her dark eyes were outlined in kohl, her face thickly powdered, and her lips colored a pale pomegranate. "Really. I wish I could take a photo!" We had all been patted down at the door, to ensure none of us smuggled in a camera. Zuhra pulled me down beside her on cushions at the end of the room, where we stayed for another hour waiting for her guests to finish their sunset prayers and work themselves into a frenzy of anticipation. Zuhra passed the time chatting with me and making calls on her mobile phone, mostly to her groom, who was (contrary to tradition) picking her up at the end of the night. "You are sure you haven't argued with anyone today?" she said into the receiver. "You sound like maybe you argued." She was worried that her husband had squabbled with her brother but was evidently reassured. "Are you nervous?" I said. All the Yemeni brides I'd seen before had looked stricken with terror on their walks down the aisle. But unlike those brides, Zuhra knew her groom. "No," she said, smiling placidly. "I am just happy." Her two older sisters, clad in long, shiny ball gowns, popped in to tell us it was almost time. I stood next to Zuhra, feeling tall and awkward in heels, which I rarely suffer for anyone. Outside the door, we heard the increasingly boisterous ululations of women, meant as encouragement for the bride. As this Arabic yodeling threatened to reach a crescendo, Zuhra suddenly looked panicked. "My pill!" She grabbed her purse from a friend standing nearby and rummaged through the pockets of her wallet. She pulled out a blister pack of birth control pills, with all but four missing. We'd spent an entire afternoon picking out these pills, making sure they were the right combination of hormones and made by a legitimate pharmaceutical company. Zuhra struggled with the package, unable to get the pill out with her fake nails. "Here," I said. "Let me." I popped one out and handed it to her. She washed it down with a swallow of water from someone's bottle and picked up her skirts. "Jeez, Zuhra, just in time," I whispered as we started out the door. I entered the room just ahead of her. The hundreds of black-cocooned women I had seen hurrying into the hall earlier that evening had transformed into gaudy miniskirted butterflies, coated with glitter and lipstick, tottering on three-inch heels. There were no men. Zuhra's youngest sister thrust a basket of jasmine petals into my hand. "Here," she said. "Throw." Zuhra stepped forward. The lights had been dimmed, and all of the younger women and girls were on the stage at the end of the catwalk, their hands over their heads, swaying like so many colored streamers. Music swelled from behind the screen, where the band was hidden. At first I couldn't quite believe the evidence of my ears. At a Yemeni wedding I expected Arabic music. But no, Zuhra was starting down the aisle toward her married life to Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On," from the soundtrack of *Titanic*. There is an old joke about Yemen, told to any traveler who sticks around long enough: "Noah came back to Earth recently, curious to see how it had evolved since his time. In a private jet on loan from God, he first flew over France and said, 'My! Look at France! How it has changed! What exciting new architecture! What amazing

innovation!' He then flew over Germany. 'Incredible! I would hardly recognize it! So much new technology! Such thrilling industry!' And then he headed to southern Arabia. 'Ah, Yemen,' he said fondly. 'I'd know it anywhere. Hasn't changed a bit.'"In many ways, it hasn't. Of course, I wasn't in Yemen back in the first millennium bc, when Noah's son Shem is said to have founded the capital city of Sana'a. But in many parts of the country, people are living exactly as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. They herd goats and cows; they grow wheat, pomegranates, and grapes; they travel long distances to fetch water. They live in simple square mud-brick homes. They paint themselves with nagsh for weddings. They pray. The ancient landscape reveals little evidence of the passage of time. On a flyover today, Noah would find that erosion has run light fingers over the jagged mountains of the central highlands. Long stretches of empty beaches in the south are touched by the same tides that have washed them since the Flood. In the east, desert sands shift in barely perceptible ways. The green terraces carved into the Haraz mountains in the west or the hills around Ibb and Ta'iz to the south may have been there since the dawn of agriculture, cultivated by generation after generation of Yemeni farmers. The dense vegetation of the valleys suggests the whim of a playful god who, weary of the relentless beige of Arabian rock and sand, tossed a thick emerald quilt over Yemen's countryside, creating a fertile layer that has fed the Yemeni people for generations. Noah would find the most familiar territory in the country's remotest places, such as the island of Soqatra, located 220 miles off Yemen's eastern coast. On Soqatra, there are few roads and fewer electric lights. The dominant structures are not the crumbling stone buildings (which blend so completely into the hillsides that you don't see them until you trip over a small child running out of one) but its fanciful dragon's blood trees, their tall, thousand-year-old trunks erupting into such a wild tangle of branches that they resemble a forest of umbrellas blown upward by the wind. Many Soqotri people still live in caves, where they boil tea over fires in a corner to serve with goat milk still warm from their animals. Their dining rooms are thin woven mats spread outside their doors, where they eat fish stew with chewy flatbread under salty night skies. There are people on Soqatra who have no idea what happened on September 11, 2001, in America. There are no radio stations, and almost no one can read. Everything they know they have heard from neighbors, imams, or the occasional foreign aid worker. Britney Spears does not exist here. Hollywood is meaningless. Ice cream would not survive--there is almost no refrigeration. Many of Yemen's mainland villages feel just as remote, tucked along a mountain ridge or at the edge of a stretch of desert. These villages get their news from state-controlled television or from the mosque. Only the elite would pick up a newspaper or read a book. But what use is news of the outside world to these people? Will it help their crops to grow? Will it keep their goats free from disease? Will it bring them closer to God? No? Well, then. Yemen has not only kept herself looking much the same as she did in Noah's time, but she also wears the same perfume she did when she was young. Cruising at a lower altitude, Noah would smell frankincense, the fragrant resin that put Yemen on the map for traders four thousand years ago and is still burned as incense; the acrid sweat of laboring men and rayon-wrapped women; the purple-and-white jasmine flowers that proliferate in its lush lowlands; and the smoke of wood fires warming bread ovens. In her cities, these odors mingle with the smell of frying beans and jalapeos, fenugreek-flavored meat stews, tobacco smoke, and roasted lamb, while the countryside is fragrant with overtones of manure and ripening bananas, dates, and mangoes. Following those scents earthward, Noah would soon glimpse clusters of boxy brown houses, their roofs strewn with airing carpets and drying laundry. Through the maze of streets hurry men on their way to mosque, women selling flat disks of bread, and children chasing a ball. Sana'a is one of the oldest cities in the Arabian Peninsula--and in the world. Built at least 2,500 years ago, it was once home to Sabeian kings and Himyarite rulers. Islam arrived in the seventh century ad, rearranging the face of the city. Many of the buildings erected during the time of the Prophet Mohammed are still standing, though crumbling a bit around the edges. The Great Mosque of Sana'a was built under the instructions of the Prophet himself, according to local legend. It is not only the biggest but the most famous mosque in the Old City (Sana'a al-Qadeema). It contains a large library and a host of ancient manuscripts. More than a hundred other mosques now populate the Old City, a fact that is particularly evident during the calls to prayer. No matter where you stand, you feel as if you are directly underneath a mosque loudspeaker. The muezzins drown out conversations and make it impossible to listen to music. Which of course is the point. Prayer is the only appropriate activity at these times. When Allah's messengers talk, you should be listening. No modern buildings mar the ancient aesthetic of the Old City, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984; it probably looks much the same as it did thousands of years ago. Noah would definitely recognize it. This is Yemen yesterday, this is Yemen today. Yet there are unmistakable signs of change, too. The city roofs are now dotted with satellite dishes. Billboards advertising GIRL brand ghee, the Islamic Bank of Yemen, cardamom and cinnamon toffees, and the fabulousness of President Ali Abdullah Saleh deface the sides of buildings. Women can be seen walking to jobs in government ministries. Men sport pinstriped Western suits or polo shirts. Brides march down the aisle to Celine Dion. A few silver Porsches can be spotted maneuvering down congested, Chinese-built roads. Even remote rural villages are now knee-high in modern detritus--plastic bags, candy wrappers, and soda cans. And if Noah were zooming by in June 2006 and looked very, very closely, he might have seen me, clinging to the edge of a building in the center of Sana'a, terrified, exhausted, but bursting with wild hopes for changes of my own. I was teetering on a ladder, under siege by my outfit. The long black skirt I'd bought back in Manhattan wrapped itself around my legs every time I took a step and the scarf kept slipping off my hair. Altogether too much

material was swirling around me. I clung to the ladder with one hand and pulled at my drapery with the other. I was standing between two roofs of a tall gingerbread house in Sana'a. It was my first morning in the country--my first morning in any Arab country, for that matter--and my first time attempting to dress like a Yemeni. The building I was climbing belonged to Sabri, the amiable director of the Yemen Language Center, and housed his apartment, a dozen or so students of Arabic, and, temporarily, me. I needed a place to stay while teaching a three-week journalism workshop to the staff of the Yemen Observer, and Sabri had kindly accommodated me. Having landed in the middle of the night, I had no idea what Sana'a looked like. All I remembered from the hazy, nausea-inducing car ride from the airport was a series of bright storefronts, wheelbarrows brimming with mangoes, and men. Hundreds and hundreds of men. Men in long white robes (called thobes) with daggers dangling from ornate belts; men in Western suits; men in patterned foutahs, traditional Yemeni man-skirts. There had been no other women on my flight, and I saw none at the airport. I found this most peculiar and striking. Yemen seemed to be a land without women. Sabri was leading me up the side of his house to show me one of his favorite views of Sana'a. The bright early-summer sun sailing up the sky made me squint as I climbed, and I resisted looking down until I had managed to haul myself--and several yards of black fabric--up the last rung of the rickety ladder and staggered to Sabri's side. I was out of breath. Sana'a lies at 7,218 feet above sea level, and you can always tell who the foreigners are by who is panting on the stairs. I stood next to Sabri on the flat, dusty rooftop and gazed around me. Sand-colored mountains rose from the plain in every direction. Having spent my formative years in Vermont, I have always found the sight of mountains enormously reassuring, and this morning was no exception. Below us stood the fantasia in gingerbread that is Sana'a's Old City, a cluster of tall, square, cookie-colored homes trimmed with what looked like white frosting, surrounded by thick, high walls. Sabri pointed out some of the more prominent of the city's hundreds of mosques, liberally sprinkled across the city in every direction, their slender minarets thrust perpetually toward God. Sabri's house stood just outside of the Old City, on September Twenty-sixth Street, named for the date on which the Yemen Arab Republic was officially formed in 1962 (sparking civil war that lasted until 1970). As I stared silently at the improbable landscape, Sabri carried on, explaining to me which direction was north (toward Mecca) as well as the locations of various neighborhoods, hotels, and major streets. He also pointed out the antennas for his wireless Internet, on a roof below. He was particularly proud of these. I was overcome with gratitude for Sabri. When I had shown up on his doorstep close to midnight the night before, reeling with disorientation, he had rushed downstairs to welcome me with the sprightliness of a woodland faun. In his early forties, Sabri was slim, dark-eyed, curly-haired, and quick to dissolve into laughter. Even better, he seemed delighted to see me.