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Illinois Wesleyan Community Reading *The Underground Girls of Kabul*

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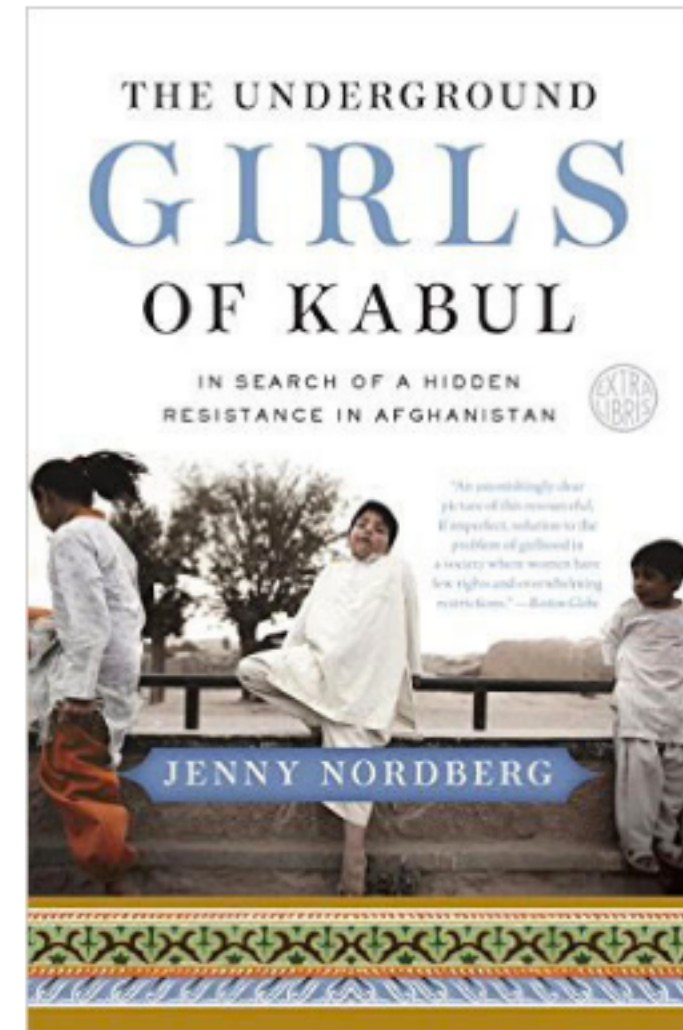
June 14, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, journalist Jenny Nordberg's book about the practice of *bacha posh* — disguising young girls as boys in gender-segregated Afghanistan — is Illinois Wesleyan University's [Summer Reading Program](#) selection.

The book was selected in response to the University's 2016-2017 intellectual theme [Women's Power, Women's Justice](#). Incoming first-year students are expected to read the book and complete reading questions for discussion during Turning Titan: New Student Orientation in August. IWU faculty, staff and alumni are also invited to read the book.

A New York-based foreign correspondent and columnist for the Swedish national newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, [Nordberg](#) broke the story of *bacha posh* in 2010 in *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*. *Bacha posh* is the term for a girl who is "dressed up like a boy." The practice dates back more than a century in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, in which some families without sons will pick a daughter to live and behave as a boy.

"It's a creative, some would say desperate, way to buck the system in a suppressive, gender-segregated society," Nordberg writes on the book's website. "In Afghanistan, men make most of the decisions and women and girls hold very little value. From the moment she is born, an Afghan girl has very few rights and little control over her own life...For Afghan girls, posing as a boy opens up a whole new world. It affords a girl freedom of movement..."



Author Jenny Nordberg will speak at Illinois Wesleyan's President's Convocation on Sept. 14.
(Photo by Magnus Forsberg)

At adolescence, however, most are switched back to young women, entering into marriage and bearing children of their own. It is a traumatic transformation for many; a few maintain their *bacha posh* status.

In a review of the book in *The Washington Post*, scholar and author Rachel Newcomb writes: "If *bacha posh* are made and not born, what explains the desire some of them have to remain in a male identity, risking not only cultural stigma but also potential violence? Nordberg raises a number of intriguing questions about the processes of gender-identity formation in other cultures, using a range of historical and anthropological sources to describe similar practices elsewhere."

The book also raises new and profound questions about gender in children and adolescents, nurture vs. nature, religion, sexuality, and of what roles women play in war. Five years in the making, Nordberg's cross-border investigation was described by *Publishers Weekly* as "one of the most convincing portraits of Afghan culture in

print."

Receiving wide critical acclaim, *The Underground Girls of Kabul* is the winner of the 2015 J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize, and was also recognized as a *Salon* Authors' Favorite Book, *Publishers Weekly* Best Book, one of *Buzzfeed's* Best Nonfiction Books of 2014, and a finalist for the Goodreads Choice Award in nonfiction.

Nordberg will talk about her book at the President's Convocation on Wednesday, Sept. 14, at 11 a.m. in Westbrook Auditorium.

