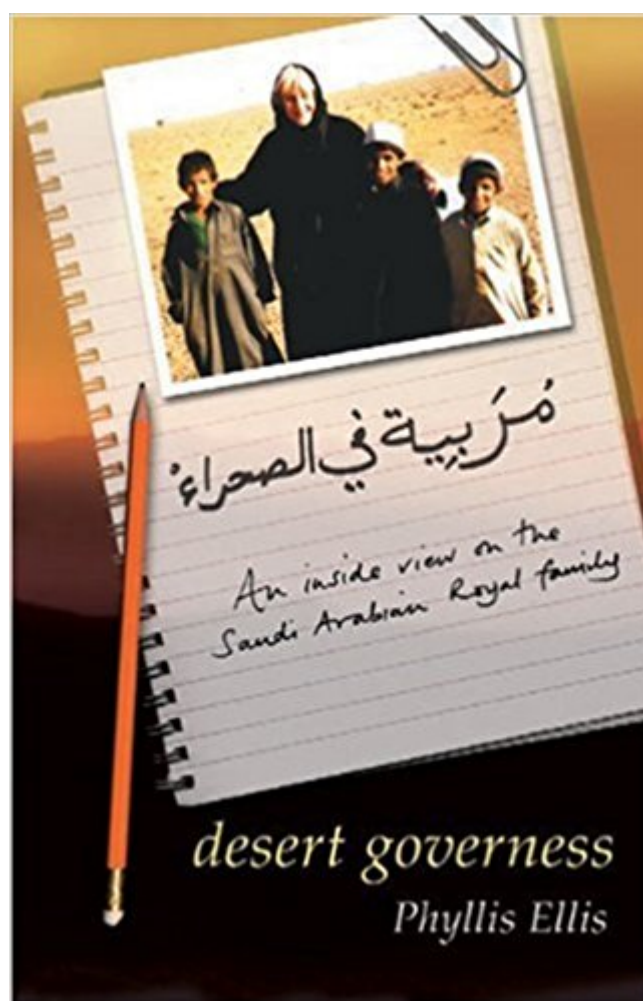


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# Desert Governess: An Englishwoman's Personal Experience With The Saudi Royal Family



## Synopsis

Recently widowed, Phyllis Ellis answers an advertisement requiring a governess in Saudi Arabia for two nieces and a nephew of the King. In a few days she is on her way, and suddenly her life is transformed as she struggles to cope with the total strangeness of her new home. Here she has little freedom of movement; every excursion requires permission and forward planning, and contact with the outside world, including her family, is almost impossible. At the same time she has to establish herself within the royal household and carry out her teaching responsibilities. Phyllis Ellis shares her shock at this stultifying restrictive life with its inevitable frustrations, yet she also learns of the bonds of warmth and affection that unite the Saudi women she meets, the strength of their faith and the positive aspects of kinship. Her informative book provides an exotic glimpse of a very private world.

## Book Information

Paperback: 200 pages

Publisher: Eye Books; 1st ed edition (February 1, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1903070015

ISBN-13: 978-1903070017

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #5,150,639 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #90 in Books > Travel > Middle East > Saudi Arabia #1464 in Books > Travel > Specialty Travel > Family Travel #12787 in Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Travel

## Customer Reviews

Phyllis Ellis was an actress, comedienne, singer and dancer. Desert Governess is her first book.

Your expectations will determine whether you like this book or not. If you would like to know how an average middle class English woman reacts to a life as governess of princes in Saudi Arabia, how an average English woman responds to the loss of a husband, and seeks to earn a living, then this book is for you. If, on the other hand, you would like to be able to enter that country, to see what you will never be able to see because you are an outsider; if you expect detailed descriptions that would enlighten you as to how these people live within and without the palace, then this book is

not for you. For this is more about Phyllis Ellis than it is about Saudi Arabia. That life in Saudi Arabia is restricted for women and men is a given. That it must be very difficult to live there is also understandable. But what I missed about the book were good, detailed descriptions. For instance we learn that she sleeps in a big high bed, from which she falls and twists her ankle. But what about the rest of her room? Did this palace have rugs on the marble floors? Were they Persian? Were they colorful? Were there plants indoors? What are the prevalent colors? Do people curtsy? She mentions the boring landscape of the public parks outside the palace. But why was it boring? Was it repetitive? Was it just grass? We don't know. The lack of detail makes this adventure very generic and too concerned with the author's emotional state. The information she provides about customs and geography, about Ramadan and date palms could all be acquired from a good text book. Because I expected to see through someone else's eyes, I was disappointed.

Excellent book, great read and really puts you inside the palace. Thanks for writing this!

Recently widowed Phyllis Ellis answered an advertisement for an English Governess for a Saudi Prince and two Princesses. She found herself a near-prisoner in a luxurious Marble Palace. Phyllis Ellis describes her life among women, vivid as butterflies in their own quarters, who turn into anonymous black crows when they venture out. She, too, had to be masked and shrouded from head to toe when she left the Palace grounds. Her description of life behind the veil is so vivid I had to leave the book and go outside ankles uncovered and barefaced - just to prove to myself that I could. Leaving the Palace for any reason was difficult. Permission had to be given and a driver and chaperone found. Even finding a stamp for a letter home was an ordeal. For this, too, women are dependent on men - yet another means of control. Guardians of the strict moral and religious rules are on patrol and failure to keep the rules is severely punished. An unmasked moment could be dangerous. Inside the Palace the days passed slowly. There was a great deal of near-ritual sitting around. Phyllis knew that her every move was watched. This intensely private society seems not to allow for personal privacy. Within the tight framework of restrictions this is also a book full of colour and life. The pages buzz with excitement at the wedding of a Saudi Princess. The women go to great lengths to beautify themselves with coiffures, jewels and designer clothes. They dance the night away. Men only appear at the end of the evening when they come with the groom to collect his bride. Where there is complete segregation of the sexes and everything is forbidden, the slightest encounter becomes erotic ... and dangerous. Phyllis Ellis has written a book full of compassion for the women she met, and affection for the family who employed her. She makes no judgements

about the world she found herself in. The facts are so strange to us that comment is unnecessary. Phyllis Ellis was an alien in a world of ritual and routine - a place where there is no room for doubt. Her courage and humanity stood her in good stead. The narrative, full of fascinating insights, bowls along. You do have to keep reading.

Unfortunately, this writer needed an editor, BADLY. As someone who lived in Saudi Arabia for 17 years, I wished for this writer to really describe the country and the people well. If you're a person truly interested in the lives of women in Saudi Arabia, then I suggest you buy the Princess books by Jean Sasson. I don't make this suggestion lightly. I lived there and I KNOW the lives women live and it was wonderful to read books that were not only exceptionally well written but gave vivid and accurate descriptions of Saudi Arabia and the women who live behind the veil--both royal and non-royal...I'm sorry this particular book didn't reach further... It's a great subject for the time...

While this book is an interesting story, and provides a good look into a fascinating culture, it is not well written. The writing is hard to read, doesn't always make sense and is very choppy. It is also a little hard to follow at times because the paragraphs jump all over the place. Considering the unusual opportunity the author had, this could have been a fascinating book, but unfortunately the mechanics bring it down and make it rather irritating to read. Also the author seems to be a little confused regarding some facts about Islam.

As a single woman who also worked in Saudi Arabia, I found her book a little too stiff, but then I realize she was living within the confines of a royal family compound and not out in the general public often. For a lighthearted intimate view of Saudi Arabia from an enlightened single American woman's perspective, I also recommend 'SINGLE IN SAUDI' by GENIA.

If you want to read about Saudi Arabia, then this book is not for you. It is a story about an Englishwoman who goes to S.A. to make a living as a governess. It is not especially interesting or well written, sadly lacking in descriptions of both the country and the palace. Don't expect another "Princess"!!

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