

The Story Behind the Stories

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Journalist and author Gayle Tzemach Lemmon shares the stories behind her two *New York Times* best-selling books, *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* and *Ashley's War*

Hi, I'm Dan Morrell, editor of the HBS Alumni Bulletin and host of Skydeck.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon is a journalist and author of two New York Times bestselling books. Before coming to HBS, she was a political reporter and a TV producer in Washington DC. And she started writing about entrepreneurship in conflict zones while she was a student here.

Her first book, 2012's The Dressmaker of Khair Khana, tells the story of Kamila Sidiqui, a young female Afghan entrepreneur, who built a thriving business under Taliban rule.

Her 2015 book, Ashley's War, follows a team of female soldiers working alongside frontpoint US combat teams in Afghanistan, gaining access and building relationships that their male counterparts could not.

Associate editor April White spoke with Lemmon about the stories behind those stories. And the parallels between them.

You've written two bestselling books now and you were already, a journalist before you came to HBS. What made you decide to come to business school?

I really believed that business is among the most powerful forces changing the world for the better. And also, for the worse, but I wanted to be part of the for the better part. And really, have a career that was about moving in and out of the private sector and having an impact. Using what you know to learn what you don't and really. Taking the skills I had from news of being able to work with very imperfect information and to tell stories that connected to people. That created community. And figure out why the world worked the way it did in terms of capital markets. In terms of opportunities for people. In terms of how business could actually create opportunity and hope for people who needed it.

It was during your time here at HBS, that you traveled to Afghanistan. How did that come to be?

I had worked the summer between first and second year at BP in St. James Square in London, in 2005. And I was actually, on the tube the day of the 7/7 bombing. I was on the Piccadilly Line, on my way to St. James Square.

And I was really, already fascinated by the world and the forces that were driving change for the better and for the worse. And I just, really believed that entrepreneurship and job creation was one path to creating hope and opportunity. And that was something I really wanted to learn about and be able to talk about. And so, I really went on a flyer to Rwanda from London and all my bosses at BP were like, you're going where? What are you doing the last two weeks of the summer? And I stayed with Ali Shariff, who was a classmate. And just started interviewing a bunch of entrepreneurs who had small and medium enterprises, about how they saw the world. And what kind of work they were creating for others. And I ended up stringing a *Financial Times* piece from that trip.

This woman in Rwanda was this incredible story, about this lady who, yes, she had a basket company-- pretty traditional, when you think about what kind of work women do, particularly post-conflict in terms of low wage, but handicrafts, this kind of thing, that is also,



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culturally important. And she, yes, had a basket making business, but those women who were making baskets with her, among them were survivors of the genocide and women whose husbands had perpetrated the genocide.

And the woman who ran this company said, listen, when we come in here, we talk about business. No politics. Nothing that happened before. We talk about earning money. Making money for our families. And moving our lives forward.

And while, yes, they were making baskets, those baskets being made were being sold at a little shop called Macy's department store in New York City. And as it turned out, the day that the *Financial Times* piece ran, was the day she had arrived in New York to renegotiate her Macy's contract. So it happened actually, to be perfect timing to actually make a difference for her, too. And you get some great press for Macy's, which then, helped her renegotiate what she was earning on those baskets.

So that was the first time, going to Rwanda that summer, that I saw how it could all come together. And so, when HBS saw the piece run in the *FT*, one of my professors-- Jeff Jones, was a tremendous supporter of this work and without whom, some of it would not have happened-- said, well, what do you want to do next?

And I said, well, if you're going to write about entrepreneurship in post-conflict, we've got to write about Afghanistan, especially if you're talking about women. And that's how I just decided to go. I had a lot of friends in news, still, and my friend at CBS had a fixer, who she recommended for me to work with on the ground in Afghanistan. I just bought a ticket and went.

What was that first experience in Afghanistan? And how did you go about breaking down any of those barriers that you might have felt you had between you and the people you were talking to?

I had no idea what I was doing, going to report in Afghanistan. It wasn't like I'd spent time in South Asia before. But I know how to find a story. And the truth is, that if you are resourceful and humble and know how to listen, you can operate in most places in the world. If you come from a position of respect for the people who are hosting you and an ability to listen and learn, so much as possible wherever you are in the world-- and I think I was dumb enough to believe that anything was possible and really, just said, OK, I'm just going to get on the plane.

So that trip to Afghanistan turned into a case, correct?

It did. It turned into a case that we still teach. In fact, we teach it every year and have every year since. And it also, became a book, which was the first book that I did, which came out five years after I finished HBS, March of 2011. And it was *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*, about a girl whose business supported her family and her neighborhood, under the Taliban.

Tell me about teaching that case. What do you hope students take away from that experience?

I want students to see that business is not just about fancy people in fancy rooms and places with water, power, and light and very good infrastructure. That, in fact, some of the most resourceful and savvy entrepreneurs are in the toughest parts of the world because their skills have come to be honed and tested in very different ways. And I want to really expand our idea of what business is. And what kinds of careers students can have after.

You were working full-time at PIMCO and writing at night, as you turned the dressmaker story into a book. Why was it so important to you, to bring her story to a wider audience?

The truth was, I didn't know it was a book when I left HBS, but I knew it was a story I was really obsessed with. Kamila had just started her next business when I first met her in December of 2005. I went back in 2007 and I was at PIMCO at the time. I didn't tell anybody



other than my assistant, where I was going because they would have thought it was entirely insane, to go from Newport Beach to Kabul. Who would do that on their vacation?

When I was reporting *Dressmaker*, things really were blowing up. In seven week period, one time in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Interior had an IED explosion. The Ministry of Defense, somebody tried to attack. Three foreigners were nearly, kidnapped. Two foreigners were shot dead on the street. Another journalist we knew was taken. So things were happening all the time, from a security standpoint.

And so, it was a huge issue, not just for me, but also, to get people to talk with me because how did we find a place to meet? Where could these young women be safe? And was it OK that they were talking to a foreigner?

And we used all kinds of security maneuvers. I would wear no makeup, a ponytail, and big black pants, black shirt, and black Aerosoles from Target and from the Aerosoles store. And then, I would wear a jacket and headscarf from the Islamic clothing store in Anaheim, California to really blend in so that nobody noticed us.

And the truth is that, that-- then by the time you're done reporting a book like *Dressmaker*, it all feels very-- I don't want to say second nature because that's not true, but you have a much more immediate sense of your own mortality. And a real respect for the grace with which everybody around you, who doesn't have the benefit of a passport that could take them out of there when things get rough, lives. And it really does change you.

What kind of responses did you get to this first book?

I always say *Dressmaker* was the little book that could. No one expected much from that book, but I knew if you took out Afghanistan, even took out the Taliban, it was really a story about what a young woman did when her back was against the wall. And how she overcame obstacles and odds that were really stacked against her, to make a difference not just for her family, but for families around her neighborhood.

You could get down to the fact that it was just a story about an entrepreneur creating hope and that's actually, what happened. We got this incredible mail pretty soon after the book came out, in March of 2011, from this entrepreneur who had in pretzel company in Chicago. And she said, you know what? If these girls can get through the Taliban, then I can get through the recession.

And I never really expected people to take it that personally. And to see that we had another entrepreneur-- an organic cleaning solutions entrepreneur from Detroit-- who wrote and said, you know what? This book inspired me to keep going, even though things have been so tough with the downturn. And I thought, wow, no one thinks of Afghanistan as a place that inspires and creates hope.

How do you communicate to your reader, both this idea that we are talking about people who are very similar to us in a lot of ways and make that personal connection, while at the same time, telling them how different circumstances can be?

I think there are two ways. One is, you have to make politics deeply personal. You have to make all of what's happening in people's lives deeply personal to people who will never meet them. Who will never go to their country. Who will never know them. And I think, you do that by focusing on common humanity.

And the thing with Kamila's family is that she was a young woman who could have been-- she would have been an entrepreneur wherever she was in the world. She's just incredibly savvy. Really funny. Had a Filofax, a white board, wrap around glasses. And just, was this really modern young person, who was trying to change her country.

Your second book is also set, in part, in Afghanistan. *Ashley's War* is about the women of the cultural support teams who went into battle alongside the US special operations troops. What drew you to that story?



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Well, after *Dressmaker*, I think every writer has a post book hangover. What do I do next? Am I really ever going to find another story I love this much? And I was wondering, whether I was going to or whether I would just move onto the next adventure professionally.

And then, I was hosting an event and this marine said to me, well, it's like the story of Ashley White and all those young women who were out on Ranger raids. And I said, what? Because this was 2012 and the combat ban on women in ground combat, in the American military, was very much in place.

And I had been in and out of Afghanistan a decent amount and I said, well, wait a minute? What about the combat ban? I thought women weren't allowed to be at the front. And how was this actually possible?

And my mother-in-law's from Texas and if you say something really dumb, she always goes, bless your heart. And those Marines looked at me with, kind of, that same expression, like you don't know anything. Of course, women have been out there for years.

And I took that as a challenge because I think every great book, every great story starts with a puzzle, with a question that doesn't make sense. And so I set out to figure out, what were these young women doing on nighttime operations, on special operations missions, on the ground in Afghanistan in 2011? Who sent them there? And how did we, as a country, not know that they existed? And I started with those sets of questions in that story and that reporting became *Ashley's War*.

Were the challenges of reporting that story very different from reporting *The Dressmaker*?

Very different, actually. *Ashley's War* is a story about this groundbreaking, all-women special operations team recruited for Ranger and SEAL missions, because their country needed them. It's a story of service and it's a story of raising your hand, when your country asks.

They went there not just willingly, but they couldn't raise their hands fast enough because they were this incredible group of young women, who started as teammates. Became friends. And really, ended their time at war as family. And the only people who knew what they had seen and done at the tip of the spear, while officially they weren't there.

So the story was so obvious, but the reporting was very difficult at the beginning because not many people wanted to speak with me. What helped was that Ashley White's family-- who are just, really, genuinely incredible people, a family that is really focused on service and on hard work, and commitment, and sacrifice for the next generation-- they would vouch for me when I would go try to meet more people to talk to me about who these young women were.

Now, do you see a common thread, which has run through both of your books-- a connection between Kamila and Ashley?

Yeah, absolutely. Where I see the similarities between the two stories at the heart, they are both stories about resilience and courage and grit. And the power of serving a cause greater than yourself. And unconventional teams filled with underestimated women, who rose to the moment. And who showed not just what was possible for them, but what was possible for everybody who would come after them.

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