

Jonathan Raban

Excerpt from his review of “The Atomic Bazaar” by William Langewiesche, New York Times Book Review, May 20, 2007.

“The Atomic Bazaar” is an important book, but not a perfect one. The best nonfiction books, like good novels, have their own organic structure: chapter flows naturally into chapter, the architecture of the whole sustained by a multitude of subtle foreshadowings of what’s to come and subtle echoes of what has gone before. That is not how any book by Langewiesche works. Like its predecessors, “The Atomic Bazaar” comes with the curse of The Atlantic Monthly all too visible on its pages, its chapters like free-standing boxcars, loosely coupled by a large general theme — much as they appeared in separate issues of the magazine between November 2005 and December 2006. Too little work has gone into its translation from journalism to book. Though short, it’s littered with clunky repetitions and recapitulations, as when we’re repeatedly told what H.E.U. is and does, and A. Q. Khan twice falls from public grace. Again and again I found myself scribbling “Been there, done that” in the margins. This is a serious pity, for Langewiesche is such an outstandingly able writer that he owes the world a proper book, and not another piece of bookmaking whose individual parts are splendid but ultimately fail to compose a shapely, aesthetically satisfying and conclusive whole