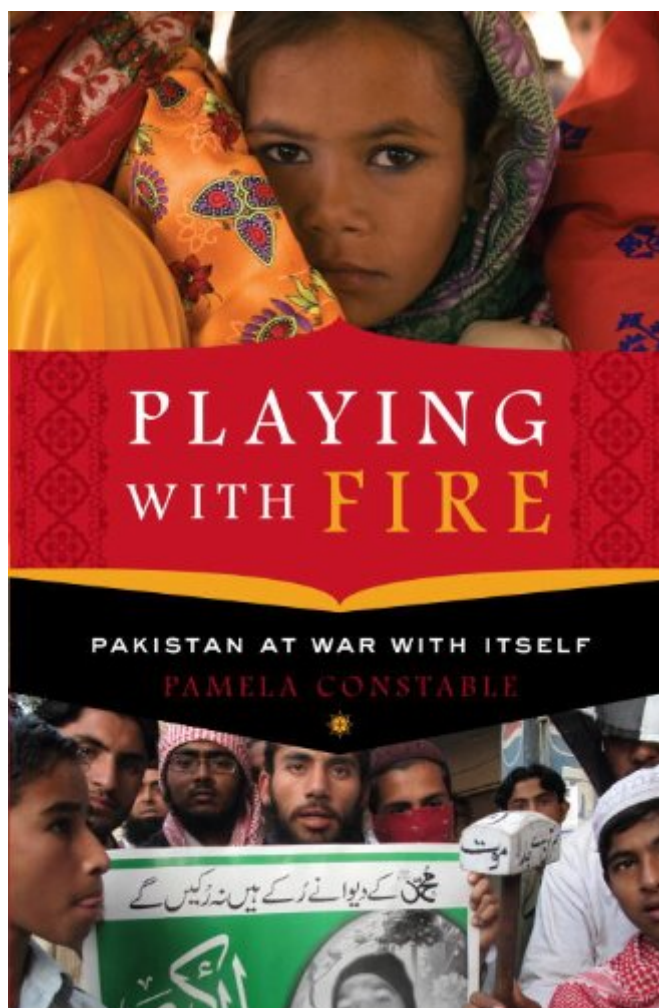


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# Playing With Fire: Pakistan At War With Itself



## Synopsis

A volatile nation at the heart of major cultural, political, and religious conflicts in the world today, Pakistan commands our attention. Yet more than six decades after the country's founding as a Muslim democracy, it continues to struggle over its basic identity, alliances, and direction. In *Playing with Fire*, acclaimed journalist Pamela Constable peels back layers of contradiction and confusion to reveal the true face of modern Pakistan. In this richly reported and movingly written chronicle, Constable takes us on a panoramic tour of contemporary Pakistan, exploring the fears and frustrations, dreams and beliefs, that animate the lives of ordinary citizens in this nuclear-armed nation of 170 million. From the opulent, insular salons of the elite to the brick quarries where soot-covered workers sell their kidneys to get out of debt, this is a haunting portrait of a society riven by inequality and corruption, and increasingly divided by competing versions of Islam. Beneath the façade of democracy in Pakistan, Constable reveals the formidable hold of its business, bureaucratic, and military elites—including the country's powerful spy agency, the ISI. This is a society where the majority of the population feels powerless, and radical Islamist groups stoke popular resentment to recruit shock troops for global jihad. Writing with an uncommon ear for the nuances of this conflicted culture, Constable explores the extent to which faith permeates every level of Pakistani society—and the ambivalence many Muslims feel about the role it should play in the life of the nation. Both an empathic and alarming look inside one of the world's most violent and vexing countries, *Playing with Fire* is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand modern Pakistan and its momentous role on today's global stage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Have both audible and hardcover. The author provides foundational perspectives essential to understanding Pakistani (and to some extent current Afghan) society. Incredibly easy and digestible style, each chapter is essentially an essay and communicates a point that could stand alone. However, Constable weaves these themes together and shows how they relate to creating a dynamic, dangerous, and drifting Nation that rightfully is considered a 'fragile' state.

There are dozens of books about Pakistan on the market today. Most of them are fairly limited in the scope of their efforts to describe this huge multi-faceted nation in the throes of imminent self-destruction. Ms Constable's work knows no such boundaries. The author has had close personal contact with the richest Pakistani families and the poorest rejects of this feudal society. While reading her book, it does not take much imagination to smell the rot and corruption that permeates the government, the judiciary, and the privileged classes of Pakistan's 20 elite family who own most of the country's industries, agriculture, and military. The stench of the foulest slums of Pakistan's largest cities, pales in comparison to that of the revulsive odor that seeps under the mahogany doors and across the polished marble floors of the halls of power where the rich get richer and the poor get ground into oblivion under an entrenched system that favors only the powerful and denies any semblance of justice or equity to those who must rely upon themselves and have no privileged connections. Try as they might, noble, honest, hardworking Pakistanis are faced with an almost impossible choice between irresponsible and inaccessible monolithic political dynasties or radical Islamic fundamentalist groups who offer instead brutal draconian Shari'ah Law. Many choose the latter. The slightest glimpse of hope does not come until the epilogue wherein Ms. Constable reports her brief encounter with Abdul Sattar Edhi, Pakistan's equivalent to Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, a true living saint. We can only hope that his work will continue even if it is only a Band-Aide on a gaping chest wound.

This book has lots of good information about Pakistan, but is not well organized for people coming to it with minimal background. The chapters focus on topics, which means the chronology is always hard to follow. I like to know the chronology. When a sentence begins with "On December 10" how hard would it be to put in the year? Too many sentences like that lead to confusion. It would help to have a table with the chronology of important events and names of leaders and their times of hegemony. And definitely a map should have been included. Too many acronyms slow down the reading.

For those who are interested in understanding Pakistan and how it has come to its current state, concentrating on the influences that are present today on the Pakistani people, sympathetically written by Pamela Constable, a veteran foreign correspondent for The Washington Post. This book does not concentrate on political matters but rather is focused on several key topics that describe Pakistani society, including the lack of opportunity for women in the country, the ineffective justice system, the strong and dominant military, and the rising influence of religious extremism. The author deals less with the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan, which has been amply covered by others. This is a book that attempts to assist readers to understand the Pakistani peoples themselves, and the influences on their lives today. The author explains how the appeal of the Taliban to people in Pakistan derives largely from the terrible ineffectiveness and corruption of Pakistan's own government. When the people do not see a future for their children, when they do not feel that they have access to justice, they turn to the alternative that does offer a future (they hope) as well as a more efficient justice to them, even if it is crude and frequently cruel. The Taliban was beneficial to Pakistan when it served as a proxy against India, but it is now out of control in Pakistan and it has turned against the Pakistani state. Pakistan has a population of over 170 million people, sixth largest in the world, largely poor and with one of the largest illiteracy rates of any nation in the world (overall literacy rate of 56% in '08). Half of the population is under 15 years old. Modern Pakistan was born at the same time (1947) as the current nation of India, with vastly different result. The country does have great potential, and this book can help readers understand the difficulties faced by the people of Pakistan in their lives today.

Once again, Ms. Constable rises to the occasion and applies her considerable talents to helping us all understand Pakistan. For an American to translate this cultural divide in language we can understand, without dumbing down one bit of the complexity, says much about her analytical

abilities. That I find understanding Pakistan to be elusive, and she brings it all into such (intense) focus, makes this one worthy read. Make this book a priority if you care to understand this culture and dissect the politics of the region.

There are plenty of books on Pakistan that fill the reader in on its troubled political history, but few that cover the past 18 months (mid-2010 to late 2011). This one fills that gap nicely. The author is surprisingly clear-eyed about the state of opinion (one could just as well say delusion) in that country, given her liberal world-view. Worth a look, if you're seeking an update.

Eye opener to what really is going on with the Pakistan issues. Still does not excuse the actions, but now I can see why people are angry with the rest of the world. Heartbreaking at the same time.

Pamela Constable's journey into Pakistan carries the reader into this complex and perplexing society with sizzle and savvy. It is solid reading for both the foreign policy "experts" and for those of us who follow with great interest but less intensity the world's developments. Certainly it enabled me to see Pakistan through fresh eyes.

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