

THEIR JORDAN

The world's youngest queen is a Palestinian in an ethnically divided country, a modern woman in an ancient role.

Jan Goodwin explains the royal paradox of Queen Rania.

Photographed by Patrick Demarchelier

It was a spectacle worthy of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Jordanians from every corner of the country flooded Amman to line up along the flower-strewn, 12-mile route that snaked through the capital city. Troops on camelback appeared as mirages through the shimmering dust their mounts churned up. Tribal bedouins in full desert dress followed, eager to pay their respects. They had all come to celebrate the ascension of King Abdullah II to the throne, which he unexpectedly inherited after the death of his father, King Hussein, four months earlier. But as Abdullah, wearing a ceremonial uniform replete with gold braid and a chestful of medals, stood waving to his cheering subjects from the back of a convertible, the crowd was equally captivated by the radiant woman at his side. Rania, who at 28 was about to become the world's youngest queen, was the very picture of a monarch: beautiful, elegant, regal, her model's figure shown off to perfection in a traditional silk *thaub* gown the color of desert sand. Her \$2 million diamond-encrusted tiara flashed in the June sun.

Only those closest to Rania knew the tiara was borrowed goods, lent by her sister-in-law, Princess Haya. "Why should I spend a vast amount of money on something I will not wear very often?" explained Rania at the time. And when Throne Day finally wound to a close, Their Majesties Abdullah and Rania retreated not to one of the eight royal palaces scattered around the capital but to their four-story home on the outskirts of Amman.

An ordinary house instead of a palace, a borrowed tiara. What kind of queen is this?

Rania has been queen for one year, and already she is drawing comparisons to Princess Diana. Yet while Rania clearly has the photogenic looks, the glamour, and a talent for reaching out to ordinary people, she is no protocol-jarring rebel, nor is she hampered by the neuroses that tormented Diana. More significantly, Rania and her husband are not figureheads-in-waiting: They are actual rulers who now must attempt to lead one of the most troubled Middle Eastern nations into the modern economy.

Although Rania is a hands-on wife and mother, with two small children and another baby due in September, she is fast becoming a central power broker in Jordanian political affairs. Queen Rania, in fact, has big ideas for the future of the country. She has become a champion of child abuse causes and women's rights—both taboo topics in the traditional Muslim state until now. She has advocated that every child be taught English so that Jordan can compete in the global market. She has lobbied to introduce computers into classrooms—in a country where many schools lack even basic furniture. And with her Palestinian heritage, she has become a symbol for the healing of intense ethnic divisions—Palestinians, despite the fact that they make up an estimated 65 percent of the population, are still denied many basic opportunities.

"The king chose as a bride someone he considers to be an equal," says Prince Zeid bin Raad, whose father was cousin to King Hussein and who was virtually raised with Abdullah. "He listens to her ideas. They feed each other's intellectual curiosity. They're a perfect match, two people very comfortable together, who think along the same wavelength, who ▶