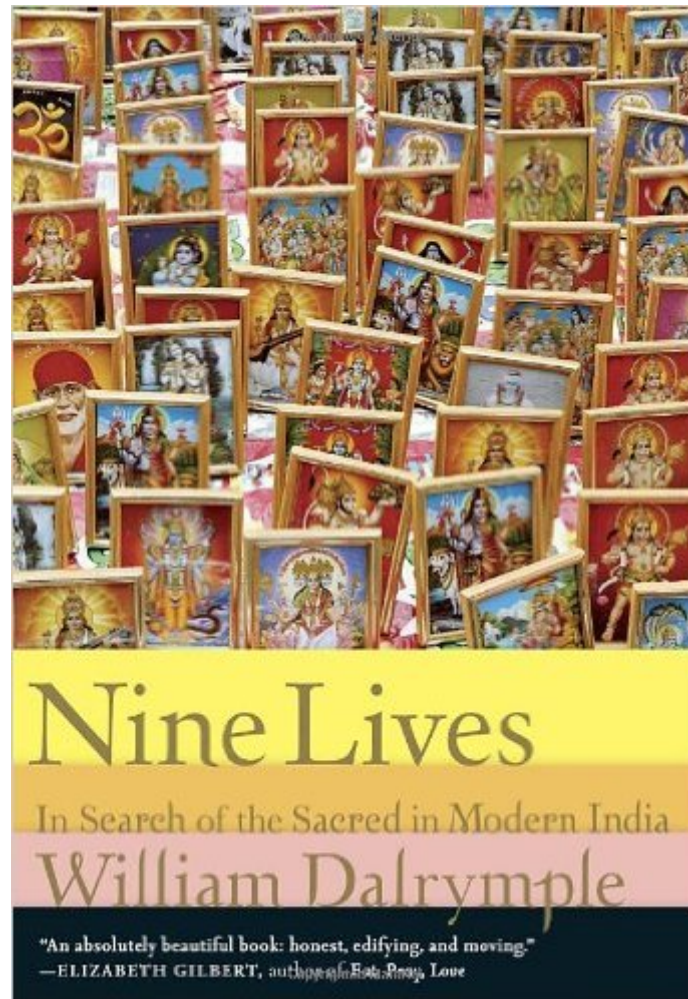


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Nine Lives: In Search Of The Sacred In Modern India



Synopsis

From the author of *The Last Mughal* (â œA compulsively readable masterpieceâ • â ”The New York Review of Books), an exquisite, mesmerizing book that illuminates the remarkable ways in which traditional forms of religious life in India have been transformed in the vortex of the regionâ™s rapid changeâ”a book that distills the authorâ™s twenty-five years of travel in India, taking us deep into ways of life that we might otherwise never have known exist. A Buddhist monk takes up arms to resist the Chinese invasion of Tibetâ”and spends the rest of his life atoning for the violence by hand printing the finest prayer flags in India . . . A Jain nun tests her powers of detachment as she watches her closest friend ritually starve herself to death . . . A woman leaves her middle-class life in Calcutta and finds unexpected fulfillment living as a Tantric in an isolated, skull-filled cremation ground . . . A prison warder from Kerala is worshipped as an incarnate deity for three months of every year . . . An idol carver, the twenty-third in a long line of sculptors, must reconcile himself to his sonâ™s desire to study computer engineering . . . An illiterate goatherd from Rajasthan keeps alive in his memory an ancient four-thousand-stanza sacred epic . . . A temple prostitute, who initially resisted her own initiation into sex work, pushes both her daughters into a trade she nonetheless regards as a sacred calling. William Dalrymple chronicles these lives with expansive insight and a spellbinding evocation of circumstance. And while the stories reveal the vigorous resilience of individuals in the face of the relentless onslaught of modernity, they reveal as well the continuity of ancient traditions that endure to this day. A dazzling travelogue of both place and spirit.

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Customer Reviews

William Dalrymple's latest book, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, raises the question in relief: what is sacred, what is spiritual, and how do those qualities exist against a backdrop of daily life, its woes and joys, triumphs and travails? Dalrymple seeks out individuals who imbue their lives with their own apprehensions of the sacred. These exemplars are more often than not at the fringes of modern India (and in one case, Pakistan). Three or four truly stand out, lingering in the reader's memory--not just because Dalrymple lets us see them as fully developed individuals, but because their beliefs are so strong, so informed by their lives. The book isn't perfect: a couple of the choices are, if not unconvincing, then not up to the standard of the others, but they are the exception. The nine seekers cover a broad swath of belief systems in India, though sidestep orthodox Muslim and Christians. In fact, they are mostly unorthodox, outside of the mainstream of belief. They need to be, in a sense: if they weren't, their devotion would be halfhearted, not defining. The first chapter, "The Nun's Tale," is powerful and disturbing. The young nun in question is a Jain, a member of the sect that began around 600 BC and which is most notable for its belief in absolute non-harming of other beings. Jains gently sweep the paths they take, to avoid stepping on insects, and will wear masks to protect any flying creatures or even microbes from being breathed in. Prasannamati Mataji comes from a well-to-do family, but at an early age is drawn to the ascetic life of the Jain nuns. Following tradition, she ceremonially plucks all her own hair out as a sign of her devotion to the way, and wanders with her fellow Jains, no possessions but her bowl, her whisk, and her robes.

I never come home from India with less than 25 kilos of luggage. I throw away clothes to make room for books. Therefore, let me save you the backache: this is the book you must read. Presenting itself as nine "non-fiction short stories", *9 Lives* portrays expressions of faith that are often romanticized or sensationalized, such as that of a tantric priestess, or ritual prostitute, or Tibetan soldier monk. As an obsessive reader of books about India, I can assure you that much of what is found here cannot be found anywhere else -- the alternatives are often sensationalist nonsense, or else dry as dust. For example, the first chapter, about a Jain nun: I dare you to find elsewhere a readable brief narrative of Jainism that explains the basic beliefs and shows how they can continue to compel those that believe. I've spent time in three of the places Dalrymple explores here -- Sravanabelagola, Dharamsala and Tarapith -- and still I learned so much about each. (I admit I have an awful fear that the chapter about Tarapith -- the very most beautiful in the book -- will provoke a tourist boom in dusty Tarapith. In which case, let me warn you, the road is one of the most treacherous in India. Potential devotees are strongly advised to take the train.) Dalrymple writes in spirited opposition to

the forces that threaten to homogenize spirituality in India. Almost all of what he profiles here is in danger of being blotted out. Particularly praise-worthy is Dalrymple's ability to get entirely out of the way of his subject. We learn nothing whatsoever about Dalrymple's personal spiritual journey -- and I mean that as very high praise.

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