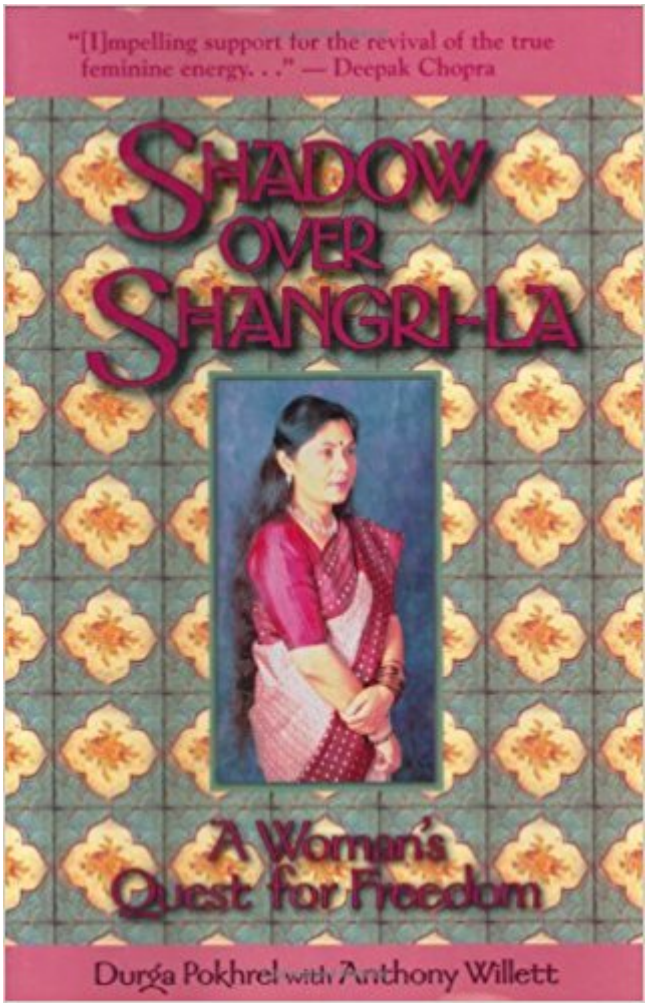
Shadow Over Shangri-La



Synopsis

Brutally interogated and imprisoned for eight months following her participation in the fight to bring democracy to her country of Nepal, Durga Pokhrel was sustained by a profound spiritual consciousness. She won the confidence and love of her fellow inmates, and became their source of strength. SHADOW OVER SHANGRI-LA tells her inspiring story of courage and fortitude.

Book Information

Hardcover: 334 pages

Publisher: Potomac Books Inc.; 1st edition (August 1, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1574880616

ISBN-13: 978-1574880618

Product Dimensions: 9.6 x 6.4 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.2 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,182,380 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #90 inÃ Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Holocaust #12241 inÃ Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Women #12779 inÃ Â Books > History > Asia

Customer Reviews

This memoir by a Nepalese antigovernment activist who, in 1981, was imprisoned without charges for nearly a year, is an indictment of the country’s rulers for human rights violations 15 years ago. Written with her British-born husband, the book’s power is diluted by clumsy writing and a failure to explain some of the details of Nepalese culture and politics. Until her arrest, Pokhrel, an upper-caste religious Hindu, ran a flourishing publishing company in Kathmandu with two friends, printing both political and nonpolitical materials. A few months before she was seized, strangers asked her help in a plot to kidnap the king’s son. She refused but failed to report the incident and gave them a considerable sum, ostensibly so they would stop bothering her. She assumes this incident figured in her arrest. Her account focuses on the appalling conditions of prison life, although her own suffering was mitigated by exceptional privileges, particularly the services of a cellmate as her maid and cook. After nearly a year of prayers and with the help of Amnesty International, she was freed, emigrating shortly thereafter to the U.S. Her unusual suggestions for prison reform include daily meditation and yoga practice for both staff and inmates, abolition of the caste system and implementation of traditional Nepalese principles of physical and mental health. Author tour.

Pokhrel--a teacher, journalist, publisher, lawyer, and activist--suffered harassment, abuse, and imprisonment in Nepal in retaliation for her daring political views: her belief in democracy and personal freedom. A devout Hindu, she battled the pain and fear of isolation, starvation, and interrogation with meditation and prayer, earning the reverence of the Nepalese and capturing the attention of Amnesty International. As she recounts her harrowing experiences, including her tricky, life-saving escape to the U.S., Pokhrel also describes her early years as the youngest and least wanted of seven children. All but ignored by her father, who desperately wanted another son, Pokhrel pushed herself to become a brilliant student, and, resentful of restrictions forced on women, insisted on being allowed to attend college and graduate school and, even more shockingly, to marry only by choice. Pokhrel, ever modest, concludes her riveting story (which is coauthored by her husband) with a passionate and hopeful vision for a spiritually revitalized Nepal. Donna Seaman

This is a great story by a great storyteller, a fascinating dip into Nepal of 1965-1985. I called her the "Jane Fonda of Nepal; an unbridled feminist and social rebel, she flaunted all the rules and got nabbed when she told friends imaginary gangsters were in her home planning an attack on the Crown Prince. It was reported to the police and as she had been a very loud and public rebel and technically running for office from the same district as the PM - Surya Bahadur Thapa - he used the excuse to jail her. She had plenty of friends; her brother Ram ran the eye hospital, her dear and good friend Shirish Rana and his cousin were socially very prominent but nobody dared to speak up for her for months. A relative finally did, and a recent BF from England took it to Amnesty International, claiming she was a Prisoner of Conscience. When she got out, nobody would get close to her so she made friends with Mr. Al Schlorholz, head of United Missions. She impressed them, proposing to go into government - and a visitor to the Schlorholz's as ignorant as her BF about her past, invited her to Minnesota, where she made connections and traveled to Cambridge where she applied to various schools with help from her friend Lessie Klein (who later died in an auto accident while visiting Durga in Nepal) . With the "Prisoner of Conscience" story she talked her way into a one year Kennedy School MPA program, and that's when we met. In two weeks I'd studied every book on Nepali history and politics. For the next year I proceeded not only to write all her papers - she'd do the drafts and come over every evening - I prepared all her Education School admission documents. On a trip back to Nepal that year she met Tony from England and he spoke good Nepali, she said. So she got him into the same program while he got divorced. They moved in

together at Currier House while they were enrolled, where she became a favorite Prisoner of Conscience and elaborated her story for all. Me? I'd gone back to Nepal, she'd kindly given me letters to important people and I soon learned the truth. Simply knowing her prevented me from getting into a program there. Ouch. She'd made me her "Dai" or "older brother", so it was now my major cultural responsibility to find her a husband since her father was dead. I got her a marriage necklace (it's called a Potay), applied a little legal pressure and they were soon married.. She'd wanted me to write the self-serving "Shadow over Shangri-La", but now she got help from Tony instead. They settled in Kathmandu for twenty years. Me? I had done my duty, she had a "srimat ra chori" - a husband and a son - and she could never trade on her Harvard degree (I have two) or be in politics; I, on the other hand, can cook a mean dal bhat. They eventually returned to the US, where they live in Charlottesville, her kids are grown, and she's continuing to write. Thanks mero bahini (little sister) and good luck. Do read her book; it captures the feeling.

ESSAYThe best memoir you never heard of:'Shadow Over Shangri-La' offers compelling and timely story of NepalBy Cynthia HavenSunday, November 12, 2006Every so often a reader discovers a memoir that has the power to disturb long after the last page is turned. It shakes your world -- but not only yours. Its author becomes a megastar, a household word appearing on talk shows, perhaps even bagging a Nobel Prize (think Rigoberta MenchÃƒÂº). The book shoots to the top of the best-seller lists and becomes required reading at universities.And every so often one runs into a memoir that should have had such power -- and mysteriously didn't. It winds up at the top of the remainder bins.Durga Pokhrel's compelling, inspiring "Shadow Over Shangri-La: A Woman's Quest for Freedom" was published in 1996, and disappeared without a bubble in the sea of annual offerings. But its true relevance might be now, as Nepal hovers on the brink of change. With the signing of a peace agreement on Nov. 8, Maoists terrorists have joined an interim government -- but after waging a 10-year insurgency, the Maoists' track record for nonviolence is unpromising.The Himalayan kingdom, home of Everest and Annapurna, is 550 miles east to west and 100 miles north to south, much of it mountainous -- but its strategic importance is disproportionate to its size. It lies between the world's most populous democracy, India, and communist China, or more specifically, the Chinese province of Tibet. Maoist influence could destabilize the entire region -- but few in the world worry about the peril; few people could name a famous Nepali since Gautama Buddha."Everyone who cares about freedom should be interested in her story," writes Chinese human rights activist Harry Wu in the book's foreword. Yet hardly anyone has read it at all. Ten years ago, "Shadow Over Shangri-La" vanished from bookstore shelves long before word of mouth

might have given it a second, or even a first, life. Its intelligent and appealing heroine, an inconnu outside her native land, had been adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience two decades ago. She might be someone who could successfully put a face on a national crisis, making a remote people and culture more immediate to an uninterested world, which exhausted Nepal's sound-bite possibilities when the hippies left in the 1970s.Pokhrel's tale begins with her political frame-up for an attempted kidnapping of the crown prince -- an almost comical Keystone Kops imbroglio, with bombs toted like cell phones. ("I was being portrayed as a revolutionary and extremist when I could not even kill a mosquito," she writes.) It includes her 18-day hunger strike as she was detained in police custody without charges, and her subsequent imprisonment in the far western hinterlands of Nepal, where dirty prisoners lived on blackened, maggot-infested rice, which smelled like "a dead animal." What followed was worse: In the hellish Kathmandu Central Prison, arbitrary torture and beatings were routine entertainment for the prison staff. Prisoners, sometimes girls in their early teens, were jailed without charges or trial. The socially inconvenient were herded with the naked pagal, the mentally ill prisoners who were injected with tranquilizers and living amid bedbugs, fleas and feces. Pokhrel ends with an impassioned plea -- a visionary hope for a Hindu democracy, a cry that echoes to the present day.Who has heard of it? I bought my own copy on .com for 65 cents. The book had deeper ties for me: I had lived with Durga 28 years ago in Kathmandu, when she was a little-known political activist, a young professor and journalist with a law degree (an unprecedented combination for a Nepali woman, even today), a rebel whose Brahmin family in the easternmost hill country was constantly arranging marriages for her that she resisted. Rejected by them, she lived alone.Time has done much to both of us, but some things time cannot undo: "Shadow Over Shangri-La" brought back the Durga I remember -- fearless, headstrong and dedicated, with an astonishing lack of self-pity.We had been introduced at the bungalow of scholar and statesman Rishikesh Shaha, then chairman of Amnesty International's Nepal chapter, an erudite, roly-poly man in his early 50s. He presented her like a national jewel, with good cause.She was in her late 20s, her unbound black hair hanging well below her waist. Her sari was a brilliant yellow that might have resembled a monk's saffron -- but I'd never seen a monk wear chiffon. The lift of her head was proud, almost defiant, as was her half-smile as she drifted into the room and stood before us in "Namaste" greeting. She was unbending, like a lily.By that time, she had already been jailed on several occasions in the corrupt Hindu kingdom with one-party rule. Durga was one of the promising up-and-comers of the outlawed Nepali Congress Party. Her dedication to democracy was her bond with Shaha, who had been his country's ambassador to the United Nations as well as its foreign minister. An opponent of royal autocracy, he had only recently

returned from exile.With Durga, I met men who would play prominently in Nepal’s future: B.P. Koirala, a newly released Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, who would later become the nation’s first elected prime minister; his brother G.P. Koirala, the current prime minister; Ganesh Man Singh, a disciple of Gandhi who was considered Nepal’s father of democracy; and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, who served as prime minister twice. When I returned to my then-home, London, I schlepped through Gatwick in Durga’s pink-and-blue chiffon sari and a pair of sandals; my luggage had been stolen days earlier on India Rail.Durga’s path took her to exile in the West in 1983, after receiving a tip-off that she was to be rearrested. Friendly American tourists sent her a plane ticket to Minneapolis. She escaped into a Minnesota blizzard with little more than a lightweight sari and a pair of sandals. The 16-year American sojourn that followed (an American Durga would have seemed an oxymoron in the 1970s) garnered her a Harvard doctorate, marriage to a specialist in rural agricultural development and conservation, and three half-English sons. "Shadow" was written in exile, largely from memory. Police raids and distance had whisked away many personal records, which, perhaps, accounts for some discrepancies in dating.But how to account for the total disappearance from the public eye of her own powerful testimony? Alas, the authors with the best stories to tell may not have the publishing savvy to climb the best-seller lists.Durga, in a characteristic moment of intuition, had found a publisher only a quarter mile down the road from her digs in the outskirts of Washington, D.C. When a manuscript was requested within days, she may not have realized how vital the right publisher is to a trade book’s success (and not one largely devoted, as Brassey’s was, to military history).She and her husband and co-author, Anthony Willett, approached the project like the scholars they are, and not like veterans of the showbiz that is publishing today. They received a grant from the J. Roderick MacArthur Foundation, and a tiny advance from Brassey’s. But in the world of trade books, the size of the advance signals the publisher’s commitment to the project, and how much it will promote and publicize the finished book. Durga never had an agent to tell her this. Author tours were small and largely confined to the East Coast. Translation rights, TV rights, movie rights were not discussed. The book received little notice and no major reviews -- not even from the Washington Post, where the authors were living and the publisher was situated.Publisher’s Weekly justly criticized the book for its occasional infelicities, which, to my memory, closely replicate Durga’s own idiosyncratic English, and also the book’s shortcomings in explaining Nepalese culture and politics. It further notes "her own suffering was mitigated by exceptional privileges, particularly the services of a cellmate as her maid and cook." The reviewer failed to grasp that Durga’s "privileges" largely accrued because she was classified as a political prisoner rather than a criminal one, and the "maid" was simply a lower-caste woman

deferring naturally to a Brahman. Such is the world of caste. Even in hardship, Durga was served by the loyal cook she always referred to simply as "Lama" -- a mild boy so self-effacing that, in the months he cooked for us, I cannot recall him uttering a single syllable, a kid so unassuming I was surprised to find he had a full name (Ram Bahadur Lama) listed in Durga's index -- or that he was listed at all."Shadow" is labeled "biography/women's studies" -- a category that, in Barnes & Nobles everywhere, foredooms it to shelf space alongside Gail Sheehy's "Passages." The jacket cover has a well-meaning blurb from a friend of Durga's, health guru Deepak Chopra ("impelling support for the revival of true feminine energy"), that further pigeonholes "Shadow" as a "woman's book." Although Durga is a passionate advocate for Hindu meditation, prayer and yoga, especially for prisoners, "Shadow" is no New Age textbook.In the reptilian mutual eating of the publishing world, the English-owned Brassey's Inc. soon became Potomac Books Inc., which was acquired by American book distributor Books International in 1999. Some will argue that "Shadow" is outdated. The royal family she discusses in the book was assassinated, en masse, in 2001. Ironically, they were slaughtered by the Crown Prince, who had been the centerpiece of Durga's political charges."Shadow" was published the year the Maoists began their decade-long People's War -- characterized by looting, abduction, torture and extortion -- which has so far left 13,000 murdered by one side or the other, most of them civilians, and many of them children. (The villagers say that 95 percent of the people support the Maoists -- by force -- only 5 percent by choice.) While Maoism is being consigned to the dustbin of history, even in China, it thrives in the green hills of Nepal, a country whose Nepali Congress Party was ultimately too weak to forge lasting democracy.One political insider of my acquaintance described the political situation in September: "Now, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah regime, we are the only country in the world that has a heavily armed terrorist movement openly operating its national office in the capital city. They have some 40,000-plus regular guerrillas in their People's Liberation Army and another 100,000 less well trained but armed militia -- almost as many people as the formerly Royal Nepal Army. "In October, when the Maoists deployed 200 rebel soldiers in the Kathmandu streets as "security patrols," one wondered whether it was the first step toward a rumored revolution. ("We have arrested 190 people, of whom 180 were freed after investigations," the Maoist commander said, blithely overlooking the illegality of the move. One can only speculate what methods were used in the investigations, and what happened to the remaining 10.)Durga, a devout Hindu, would say the nation's problem remains unchanged since she wrote her book: She would say that the nation's dilemma stems from a loss of dharma -- a term encompassing personal duty and sacred action, resulting in social harmony. ("I remember first recognizing at this time that human rights issues extended beyond political killings, imprisonment,

and harassment to the social realm of domestic tragedies," she writes.) No doubt her sense of dharma was greatly reinforced by Nepal's decision, pressured by Maoists, to abandon its Vedic roots and its commitment to being the only Hindu nation in the world."What secularism does in inherently religious societies like Nepal and India is to politicize religion, and the last spectacle I wish to see is a Hindu resurgent movement mobilizing against other groups in society," she writes.That was the point where Durga broke with the Nepali Congress party she had worked so hard to promote -- that, and its elimination of the monarchy from its constitution. Durga served on the royal cabinet as its minister of women, children and social welfare until it was disbanded after April's political upsets. She is tainted by her association with the short-lived government of King Gyanendra, but she says she was motivated by her wish to clear herself of charges for which she never stood trial. Gyanendra may not be a great king or even a good one, but until last year, he was considered Nepal's living incarnation of Vishnu, an important link with Nepal's past and its ancient traditions. Durga's longed-for Nepal -- akin to Gandhi's erstwhile dream for an agricultural India -- is already part of our vanishing choices."Shadow" has many scenes of "institutionalized torture," featuring haunting characters the reader will never forget, but I will remember this one, early in the book, when Durga, in police custody, hears the terrified screams in the night of the "new prey." At 3 a.m., she speaks to a police officer:" 'Did you kill somebody tonight?' I asked." 'You always imagine something big; he is not killed. As a routine treatment he was enclosed in a sack and beaten. But he would not speak a word, so some other police friends put a couple pins in his fingers. That is all,' he replied." 'Who was he?' I asked." 'Not a big shot. It was your cook, Lama,' he said."Don't hold your breath for the Nobel.Cynthia Haven most recent book is "Czeslaw Milosz: Conversations."[...]

For most people, the country of Nepal (nestled between India and Tibet) conjures up images of magnificent Himalayan peaks.Nepal is an incredibly wonderful country of great contradictions - breathtaking beauty against a backdrop of poverty and political and social injustice. Shadow over Shangri-La is the true story of one woman's experience in this country on the top of the world.Durga Pokhrel was born into wealth and privilege in Katmandu's educated upper class, but as a young woman her conscience led her into Nepal's underground democratic movement. As a university lecturer and a prolific writer (with an opposition printing press), she worked tirelessly for political change in her country. Arrested for her activities, Pokhrel was thrown into a medieval-like prison "where women were hung by chains from beams, beaten mercilessly and left to die." Eventually adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, Pokhrel was freed from prison but death threats against her continued. She left Nepal and found safety and good friends in Minnesota

and eventually received an advanced degree from Harvard, married and had a family.The years spent away from her native country only strengthened her resolve to return to Nepal one day and be an effective agent for change. Today, the political tides have turned in this now fledgling democracy and Pokhrel and her family have returned to Nepal. More passionate about her politics than ever, Pokhrel has recently been appointed as the director of Nepal's newly formed Commission on Women.