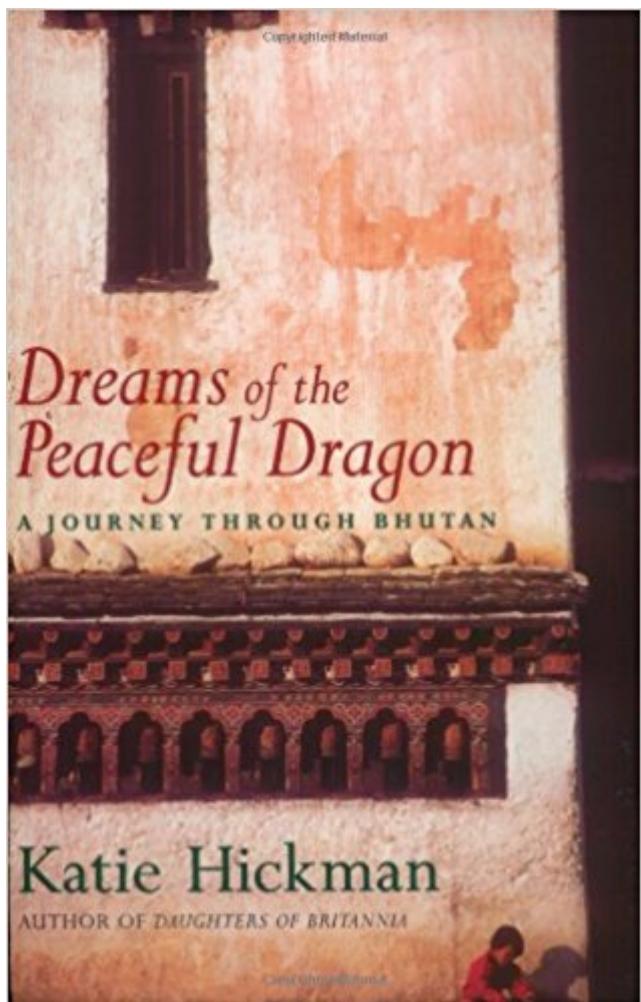


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Dreams Of The Peaceful Dragon: A Journey Through Bhutan



Synopsis

Bhutan is a remote kingdom in the Himalayas, isolated from the outside world for three centuries. The western part has been opened to limited tourism, but the eastern part remains closed. Katie Hickman is one of only a handful of foreigners ever to penetrate these eastern lands. Her trip to Bhutan with photographer Tom Owen Edmunds took a year to set up. They journeyed from the capital Thimphu in the west to the easternmost borderlands and the remote mountain-top retreat of the barbarous Bragpa people. They lived as Bhutanese, and met merchants, abbots, wandering priests, lamas, hermits, a reincarnation of the Buddha and a sorceress. Katie Hickman's account contains all the unexpected and humorous aspects of travel, but, above all, it is about the people of Bhutan.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The charm and vivacity of the writing match the mood of the trip.” -- The Times Literary Supplement

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has been isolated from the outside world for more than three centuries. Although the western part has been opened to limited tourism, the eastern part of Bhutan remains closed. Katie Hickman and photographer Tom Owen Edmunds are two of the few foreigners ever to enter these eastern lands. Starting from the capital Thimpu in the west, they traveled to the easternmost borders and the mountain-top retreat of the barbarous Bragpa people. Along the way, they met merchants, abbots, wandering priests, lamas, hermits, a reincarnation of the Buddha, and a sorceress. Filled with all the adventure and humor one might

expect from such a journey, Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon beautifully captures the mystery of this remote kingdom.

One of the first accounts by a Westerner who visited (as of the mid-80s, although this is not specified) the then-less accessible eastern reaches, Katie Hickman's travelogue proceeds in expected fashion. That is, she's a competent travel writer and her integration of the remarks of earlier visitors helps give background for her own Raj-reminiscent trek. Oxford educated, from a diplomatic family, with an international upbringing, she does exude the air of privilege. She and her companion, photographer Tom Owen Edmunds (with 250 rolls of film), gain quickly via Calcutta connections the sponsorship of the Bhutanese royal clan that allows them all the time they need and lots of horses to make the arduous trip. The lateral east-west road, due to landslides and construction, is out between Jakar and Mongar. The pair and their guides must go by horse over a long stretch. However, this crucial part of the itinerary lacks excitement. Perhaps those more enamored of horses may find it more enticing, but for me, it did not keep my interest. Also, the tone Hickman adopts can grate. She twice puts down the annoyingly brusque Westerners on a group tour who cross their path. While their "unmistakable plumage" of garish windbreakers and their rude insistence on taking photos of monks where it is not allowed may merit critique, she seems oblivious to her own entitlement and the professional and social connections she and Tom enjoy, compared to the everyday tourist consigned to a package tour--besides, any tourist in Bhutan must go in the company of guides and an approved itinerary--which only the royal intervention overruled and extended without limits in Katie and Tom's case. Late in this tale, all the same, two incidents enliven it. One horribly, as leeches infest the pair and one bite makes her bleed profusely from the back of her head as she attempts, in a memorably graphic scene, to sit at the foot of a beady-eyed lama in a dramatically situated temple. Trying, damp and twitchy with imagined or real leech bites to sleep near him that night, musicians and chanters blare. Tom says: "It's like sleeping inside a grand piano." A bit later, as they find the Bragpa (aka Brokpa) yak-herders of Mera and Sakteng, lots of inebriation and celebration reward them off-road. Like many travelers, the chronology and scenery seem to take the viewer out of now. "Mera had the easy earthy intimacy of a medieval tavern. But Sakteng was a Childe Harold's tower, a darkling place, deep and mysterious as legend."

(186) Hickman to her credit differentiates between a traveller's reveries of anticipation, the possibility ahead of enchantment that drives one on, and the "grumblings of the camel men" (60) who must accompany and cater to the romantic and testy whims of those who hire the locals. You don't get much sense of the Bhutanese who wait on her and meet her, and this report relies much more on

the perspective of an intelligent Englishwoman and her wry companion who seek to get under their own skin, to hear the heartbeat that isolation and endurance intensify. For longer reports from about the same relatively "pre-modern" (the road connected, but not yet electricity, TV, phones, or the internet) period in the eastern region, see Jamie Zeppa's "Beyond the Sky and the Earth" (reviewed by me May 2012) and Ken Haigh's "Under the Holy Lake" (reviewed Dec. 2012). Both teachers of English from Canada, Zeppa and Haigh nearly overlap in place and time with Hickman, but their stints allow them a deeper insight into this area. This counters the brief glimpses and the few photos Edmunds includes here that can't offer much depth or context. Hickman's (first published in 1988) book ends very suddenly. Almost as quickly as the pair and their retinue burst into the Bragpa's villages, they realize that they must return. At that moment, Hickman concludes.

Hickman writes beautifully. This book is a captivating account of her own journey into the depth of Bhutan, which she records honestly from the bottom of her heart. Hickman, unlike most western writers on Bhutan, captures something of the soul of Bhutan, as she narrates her own emotional journey as a young woman of good sense and rich sensitivity. At the same time, the book is also an exciting adventure story. Anyone with good wanderlust in their heart will not be able to put it down until all the pages are turned, and will be left yearning for more after the last page is read. While eastern Bhutan remains less exposed to outside visitors than the western part of the country, it is now much easier to travel there than during Hickman's time. There is now a motorable road to everywhere she went on foot and ponies. Television, telephone and internet highway -- prohibited or non-existent back then -- now bring in outside information more easily to Bhutan. Most importantly, Bhutan has achieved a phenomenal increase in the literacy of her people, with English as the chosen medium of class-room instruction and as the "link" language among the country's numerous linguistic groups. As such, beyond its literary value, this book also has a place in the historical literature, capturing the ways of the eastern people of Bhutan before their greater exposure to the outside world. Having said that, however, Bhutan's vision of "Gross National Happiness" (being more important than Gross National Product), and the enlightened development strategy associated with it -- balancing material and spiritual gains, and valuing its historical, cultural and natural heritage -- mean that Hickman or any other visitors would find the soul of Bhutanese people not much altered since her visit. The book would certainly tempt many to consider visiting this unique Himalayan nation called Bhutan. Like Hickman's own, it promises to be a journey of personal discovery, leaving one to ponder some cosmic reasons why such a nation exists on earth...

I was anxious to read about Bhutan before and after a visit there, but I found this book a disappointment. I don't know what I expected from someone's first attempt at writing such a book, and at a relatively young age- but I didn't feel that the author was able to move beyond her own needs and discomforts. The writing is self-conscious. By chance I came across the web journal "The Elegant Variation (TEV)." Here is their definition of TEV, and it fits the writing in this book perfectly! I've not read her other books, but I hope they have matured."The Elegant Variation is "Fowler's (1926, 1965) term for the inept writer's overstrained efforts at freshness or vividness of expression. Prose guilty of elegant variation calls attention to itself and doesn't permit its ideas to seem naturally clear. It typically seeks fancy new words for familiar things, and it scrambles for synonyms in order to avoid at all costs repeating a word, even though repetition might be the natural, normal thing to do: The audience had a certain bovine placidity, instead of The audience was as placid as cows. Elegant variation is often the rock, and a stereotype, a clichÃ©, or a tired metaphor the hard place between which inexperienced or foolish writers come to grief. The familiar middle ground in treating these homely topics is almost always the safest. In untrained or unrestrained hands, a thesaurus can be dangerous."

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