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more author

About Betsy Woodman

more book

About *Love Potion Number 10*

...and more



Joana Puza Photography

# Meet Betsy Woodman

**Betsy Woodman** is also the author of *Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes*, the first book in this series. She spent ten childhood years in India, studied in France, Zambia, and the United States, and now lives in her native New Hampshire. She has contributed nonfiction pieces and several hundred book reviews to various publications and was a writer and editor for the award-winning documentary series *Experiencing War*, produced for the Library of Congress and aired on Public Radio International.

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# Behind the Book

The Hindi word for “novel,” *upanyas*, means “placing near or together.” I picture the ingredients for a stew laid out on the kitchen counter, along with utensils, cookbooks, and thoroughly unculinary things such as handbags, the day’s mail, and the rings and wristwatch you’ve taken off in order to cook. It remains to mix things up into something of interest. Here are some of the elements of *Love Potion Number 10*: childhood experiences, books, movies, research, issues.

## ANGLO-INDIANS IN LITERATURE AND LIFE

Miriam Orley is the Anglo-Indian schoolteacher who makes friends with Jana and whose struggle to find love is celebrated in the story.

“Anglo-Indian” once meant British folks who lived in India, but over the years it came to mean people of mixed Indian and British descent. Under the British raj, Anglo-Indians occupied an ambiguous position: sort of sahibs, sort of not—not claimed as kin by either Brits or Indians. They often held jobs in the railway system, in medicine and teaching, and in the military services. Some were prosperous; others, not so.

According to stereotypes, they spoke of England as “home” even if they’d never been there. When India attained independence, in

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1947, a great many of them *did* emigrate, mainly to England, Australia, and Canada.

In movies and books, they've sometimes gotten a bum rap as morally suspect characters, such as the beautiful but unscrupulous Alix in Rumer Godden's *The Peacock Spring* (book 1975, movie 1996) and Victoria Jones in John Masters's 1954 novel *Bhowani Junction*. This character was played in the 1956 movie of the same name by a sultry Ava Gardner. Doctoral dissertations analyze the racial attitudes behind such portrayals.

My own experience was with people of exemplary character, talent, and dedication. I had at least five Anglo-Indian teachers at Woodstock School, and most had been there for a long, long time. We alumni remember them with enormous affection and respect. My Latin teacher retired and lived at the school, receiving an unceasing stream of "old students" and remembering them with scary accuracy; the school library was named for her. My English teacher emigrated to Australia, married for the first time in her sixties, and ran a guesthouse. My two piano teachers were thoroughly Western in their musical training and tastes. The administrator and supervisor of the music practice "cells" was a very good-humored and kind woman who, in addition to her weekday duties, took students on hikes on the weekends.

No one of these ladies was "the real" Miriam Orley of this book, and I very much doubt that any of them was ever stood up at the altar, but Miss Orley's background as I imagined it contains some fairly common elements of the Anglo-Indian experience.

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Miss Orley and Jana spend a whole day trying to make a phone call to Australia. They have to wait for the line to be reserved, and then when the call comes through, Miss Orley can hardly hear anything and misses an important part of what Marcus Phillips, her pen pal, is saying on the other end.

I can remember only one instance in ten years of living in India when my family talked by phone to relatives in the States, and that was after my grandfather died, in 1958. That call, too, took a day to go through; my dad answered it, and the rest of us clustered around, not hearing what the stateside relatives were saying. My dad, with the receiver glued to his ear, couldn't hear much, either. All he could do was bellow, "We all send our love."

In 1961, there were 7 telephone lines per 100,000 people in India and, typically, no lines at all in rural villages. In May 2012, there were over 929 million wireless phone users in the country, and over half of all households had a mobile phone. To introduce uncertainty from or difficulty with communications in a story set in the twenty-first century, I'd have to think of a very different plot mechanism. Battery failure? Theft of a cell phone?

## CYRUS, LILY, AND MAX KING

I found among my parents' memorabilia photographs of some Parsi friends at a party. They were dressed in Western formal attire and having a wonderful time! My parents always spoke of them with much affection.

The Parsis are a tiny ethnic group, largely centered in Mumbai, whose influence is way out of proportion to their numbers. They have long been leaders in business,

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manufacturing, aviation, philanthropy, and the arts. The name Tata, to take the most prominent example, connotes steel, textiles, chemicals, aerospace, information technology—you name it—and Tata's reach is worldwide. I'm reminded of it when I brew a cup of Tetley tea, now owned by Tata Global Beverages. The upscale traveler in India might stay at a Taj hotel, the most famous of which, the Taj Mahal Palace, in Mumbai, was built by Jamsetji Tata and opened in 1903.

In the story, Cyrus and Lily King are Parsis from Bombay, and Max King is half French and half Parsi. I've made them all gastronomes, and Max is the pilot who changes young Tilku's life. While researching the book, I was lucky to have several phone conversations with Rustom Captain, who was Prime Minister Nehru's helicopter pilot (Yes he was Captain Captain). Also a Parsi, Rustom was, early in his career, the youngest flight instructor at the Bombay Flying Club. He flew all sorts of aircraft, both helicopters and fixed-wing, and in 1968 took John Lennon and the maharishi Mahesh Yogi up in a chopper on a sightseeing tour during the Beatles' famous visit to the maharishi's ashram in Rishikesh. Rustom gave me details about models of helicopters and flight requirements, and described what it was like to make a helicopter landing during the 1960s, when local police would have to be alerted to keep back the hordes of curious onlookers. Accordingly, in the book, Captain Max King has to cope with the crowds of people rushing in from the streets of Hamara Nagar to see him and, as Mr. Ganguly puts it, that "big bird."

## RAMBIR AND RITU: ENGLISH AND HINDI

The characters of the newspaper editor Rambir Vohra and Ritu, his brilliant scientist wife, bring up a number of

topics. One question the reader may ask is, Why an *English-language* newspaper?

The answer: because they were the most common. In 1961, there were 7,651 newspapers published in India. The largest number, 1,500—20 percent—were English-language, closely followed by 1,439 Hindi-language papers, or 19 percent. (Of daily newspapers, however, there were more Hindi ones.) So Rambir's paper is not an anomaly.

Moreover, Rambir would very likely read, write, think, and dream in English, and would basically use Hindi for such mundane purposes as communicating with the laundryman.

The relation of Hindi and English is fascinating. English, of course, has been infiltrating Hindi for a long time, and in films and television, this phenomenon is accelerating. In the Hindi films of forty or fifty years ago, the characters used a small number of English phrases. "I love you," "I'm sorry," and "Go to hell!" marked moments of high emotion. In contrast, some of today's supposedly Hindi films seem to contain more English dialogue than Hindi, with the two languages alternating even within the same sentence. Even when there are perfectly good Hindi words available, English ones crop up.

While watching a new Hindi talk show, *Satyamev Jayate* ("Truth Alone Prevails"), I noticed that guests used English for such basic words as "brother," "sister," "parents," and "family." They also paired an English verb with a Hindi auxiliary. This is not merely a matter of importing technological terms or describing new social phenomena ("living-together arrangements"). It seems that Hindi has swallowed English practically whole. This is the kind of thing that gives language purists apoplexy, but you could also argue that this borrowing is making Hindi the largest, most flexible, and most expressive language in the world.

## ARRANGED VERSUS LOVE MARRIAGES

Of different caste and class backgrounds, Rambir and Ritu have gotten married against his parents' wishes, and have been shunned by his family. I have to confess that this is a cliché of Indian movies, and the filmmakers usually but not always supply a happy ending. In the blockbuster 2001 film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness), the young couple goes off to London after the man's father, his eyes flashing, throws his son out of the house. Both the parents and the children are grief-stricken, and the tagline in advertisements for the movie is "It's all about loving your parents." On the talk show mentioned above, *Satyamev Jayate*, before an all-India audience, a runaway bride pleaded to her parents to forgive her and show her just a little bit of love. So, too, does Rambir, in *Love Potion*, long for reconciliation.

At least Rambir and Ritu have been allowed to live in peace. Some young rebels who elope don't fare as well, and in the most tragic cases, they are hunted down and murdered.

To add a bit of family lore: in the 1950s, my dad was asked to serve as a go-between to arrange a possible marriage between a Brahman boy and a Nayar girl. The young people were for it, the girl's mother was for it, but the Brahmn parents put the kibosh on it. In the end, each married the person chosen by their families, and within their own caste.

## WOMEN IN SCIENCE

Ritu is a modern woman highly exceptional but not without role models. In one conversation with Rambir, she mentions the real-life Anna Mani (1918–2001), an Indian



physicist and meteorologist who as a little girl passed up diamond earrings as a birthday present and asked for a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* instead.

Although most Indian women still face staggering hardships, it must be noted that women from *elite* families, unburdened by the drudgery of housework, have long had opportunities that their counterparts in the West did not. Women were admitted as medical students to Madras Medical College as early as 1878. Someone pointed out to me that this was not a case of the society being enlightened; rather, in conservative communities, women were not allowed to be examined and treated by men, so women doctors were critically needed. For whatever reason, the opportunity was there.

Another area relating to Ritu and her career is the ideological and legal framework provided by the 1950 Indian constitution, in many ways an inspiring document. It mandates equality before the law for citizens, regardless of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. (Enforcement, alas, is another matter.) As for the “duties of the citizen,” one such duty is indeed “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform.” Ritu is among the few people who live up to this ideal.

## MAGAZINES AND MEDICINES

Finally, in painting the picture of Abinath and his apothecary, I must mention the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. The *Weekly* was one of my favorite publications growing up, especially the photographs, jokes, cartoons, and a section called “Our Young Folks’ League.” This newsmagazine, published from 1880 to 1993, also had photography contests and published an annual compilation of children’s

art. The crossword puzzle contests were perennially popular and offered prizes not only to people who got all the entries correct but also to “one-error” and even “two-error” winners.

The advertisements are now as fascinating to read as the articles. Ads touted radios, wristwatches, hair dyes, and unbreakable false pistols “most useful for dramas . . . or to frighten thieves.” You could write away for home study courses in radio engineering, drawing, and foreign languages, or for “C. H. Rai’s Sex Books (All Illustrated).”

For the joyful mix of Western and Ayurvedic medicine that Abinath’s Apothecary offers, I took special delight in perusing the ads for patent medicines. There was “Banaji’s Original American and German *Homoepathic* & Biochemic Medicines, Mother-Tinctures, (and) Dilutions from the lowest to the highest potency in original form,” and “Diapepsin,” which “helps the stomach to digest starch and protein.”

Promising a fountain of youth was Royal Oonum, “the ideal tonic for youthful vitality irrespective of age . . . prepared separately for MALE & FEMALE.” This formula was advertised as having been based on “the latest findings of GERIATRICS (the branch of modern medicine dealing with the psycho-somatic disorders and diseases of premature OLD AGE in men and women and its up-to-date scientific treatment with hormones, vitamins, minerals, electrotherapy, psycho-analysis, medical hypnosis, medical radiesthesia, etc).” I note that the price would have put it out of reach of most people: Rs. 50 (roughly U.S. \$10 in those times) for 63 tablets; Rs. 200 for 252 tablets. Wonder if I can get for some myself.

Compared to all these supplements, Abinath’s alphabet of vitamins and his Love Potion Number 10 seem like pretty tame stuff! ■

# Real People, Real Lives

The following nonfiction books give a hint of the mind-boggling diversity of Indian people and experiences.

## ANGLO-INDIAN TALES:

Ruskin Bond, *Scenes from a Writer's Life: A Memoir* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1997), and *Ruskin Bond's Book of Humour* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008). Bond's gentle, self-deprecating humor and affectionate vignettes transport us to twentieth-century life among Anglo-Indians.

Margaret Deefholts and Glenn Deefholts, eds., *The Way We Were: Anglo-Indian Chronicles* (Monroe Township, N.J.: CTR Publishing, 2006). A delightful anthology of forty-two articles.

Shirley Gifford-Pritchard, *An Anglo-Indian Childhood* (Bloomington, Ind. Author House, 2005). A sunny and affectionate account, complete with family pictures.

## PARSI CULTURE:

*Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India: A Photographic Journey* (Woodstock: Overlook Duckworth, 2004).

A magnificent book of photographs, biographies, and personal memories.

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Niloufer Icaporia King, *My Bombay Kitchen: Traditional and Modern Parsi Home Cooking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Here's where I got the food ideas for the Kings' picnic. Mouthwatering! (That the author's last name matches Max's is pure coincidence.)

#### GRIM REALITIES:

Two groundbreaking journalistic accounts portray life as most of us will never know it.

Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012). The garbage sorters of the Annawadi slums strive heroically for a better life, but the legal system and the world economy are heavily stacked against them.

Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Mehta goes deep into the underworld of Mumbai and tells a mesmerizing tale.

#### DEVELOPMENT AS A TWO-EDGED SWORD:

Akash Kapur, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012) An Indian raised in the United States returns to his ancestral land in South India and finds economic and social transformation and environmental catastrophe.

#### THE MANY WAYS OF LIFE ON EARTH:

Lastly for stunning depictions of exotic religious practice across the whole Indian sub continent, read William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (New York :Vintage Books, 2009). ■

# Questions for Discussion

1. The idea of arranged marriages is very prominent in this book. How do you feel about arranged marriages? Do you think your parents would have chosen a good partner for you?
2. In Jana Bibi's life, love can be found in many ways—Love Potion Number 10 being one of them! Discuss the different ways the couples in this book met: from a long-distance pen pal to a university romance to a traditional arranged marriage. How do you think the way two people get together influences their relationship in the future?
3. Which of Jana's suitors did you want to see her end up with? Do you think she should remarry?
4. Jana's interest in dream interpretation comes to the forefront in this novel. What role do dreams play in the story?
5. How do you think Jana's previous marriage and her experiences as a missionary influence her outlook on love?
6. Jana's houses and living arrangements throughout her life are clearly very important to her, as we see her reflecting on them as benchmarks of her own personal development. What does the Jolly Grant House say about her now?

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7. Ritu, as a woman scientist, is a wonderful female role model and, in 1961, is quite ahead of her time. Did you have a strong female role model growing up? If so, how did she affect your life?

8. How has Hamara Nagar changed from the time of *Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes*? Discuss the repercussions from Kenneth Stuart-Smith's write-up and Jana Bibi's fortune-telling on the town and the townspeople.

9. How do you see Tilku's future shaping up? Do you think he will become a pilot? Do you think Max's character is more important to the story as a love interest for Jana or as a role model for Tilku?

10. Is Jana the rightful owner of Mr. Ganguly? How do you think the kidnapping plot would have been different now than in 1961?

11. What role does Aunt Sylvia play? What does her relationship with Mr. Ganguly tell us about each of them? What about her relationship with Jana?

12. What did you think about the way the author chose to end the novel? Would you have ended it differently? ■

