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more author

About Betsy Woodman

more book

About *Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes*

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Meet Betsy Woodman



Joanna Puza Photography

Betsy Woodman spent ten childhood years in India, studied in France, Zambia, and the United States, and now lives in her native New Hampshire. She has worked as a teacher, history book editor, survey researcher, and music director. She has contributed nonfiction pieces and several hundred book reviews to various publications, and was writer/editor for the award-winning radio documentary series, *Experiencing War*.

This is Betsy's debut novel and the first of a planned series to feature Jana and her parrot, Mr. Ganguly.

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There's always a story behind a story, and another one behind that. I grew up in India because my parents, Everett and Ruth Woodman, wanted to see the world. My father came from a small town in New Hampshire, my mother from a Boston suburb. In 1952, they set off for Madras (now Chennai), India, with their two little girls: me, age six, clutching a Raggedy Andy doll, and Lee, age four, who was in charge of Raggedy Ann. My dad was headed for a stint as a cultural affairs officer at the United States Information Service; my mother, who had trained as a ballet dancer, was seven months pregnant with my sister Jane. We would spend ten years in India, where my youngest sister, Deborah, would also be born.

When we were back in the States on home leave, people would ask, "Have you ever ridden on an elephant? Have you seen the Taj Mahal?" They assumed our lives were somewhat exotic.

They didn't know the half of it. Our lives *were* exotic, but my sisters and I didn't think of it that way at the time. For us, it was just ordinary existence. Completely normal to live next door to three young movie stars who were the rage of India, as we did in Madras, and to have my mother studying dance with their guru and performing with their troupe. Routine to vacation on houseboats in Kashmir, to have dancing bears, stilt walkers, and snake charmers perform for our birthday parties. Commonplace to have a household staff of seven—or eight? nine?—with extras signed on when there was a

new baby or houseguests coming for a while. My best friend in Delhi at age ten was a Muslim princess, and for a while our next-door neighbors kept a tiger in the backyard, as a gift for Jacqueline Kennedy.

When we walked out the door, the pageant of India swirled by, day after day. Camels and bullock carts on the streets of the capital, cows with painted horns helping themselves to tomatoes in the marketplace, wandering holy men, a perennial fashion show of women in beautiful saris or swirling skirts and shawls, even the humblest decked out with earrings, necklaces, and armloads of bangles.

There were also the Indian holidays, religious and secular. To name only a few: Holi, when people gleefully smeared colored powder and squirted colored water on one another; Divali, when the nights rang with fireworks and houses were lit up with little clay lamps; Republic Day, with its awe-inspiring parade of soldiers, cavalry, tanks, elephants, and folk dancers.

The parade occurred not only on Republic Day, or from afar. It was right in our house, all the time. Hating the paranoia and parochialism of the Cold War, my dad had a simple approach to diplomacy. "Our job," he wrote home, "is to make friends. And what could be more fun!"

Make friends my parents did, with people of all ages, nationalities, and walks of life. Our "head bearer" (the majordomo of the household) kept track of how many dinner and lunch guests we had per annum; some years, counting repeat invitees, it totaled more than nine hundred. Our Christmas Day reception, held on the lawn in the bright December sun, became a Delhi institution—after the first year or two, my parents didn't even bother to issue invitations to it; people just knew, and they came.

Not only diplomats visited our house, although there were plenty of those—American, Iranian, German, Cam-

bodian, British, Dutch, Canadian. There were Sikh industrialists, Japanese businessmen. An American dancer came to pay his respects and ended up teaching at the ballet school my mother had founded. A well-known Indian painter would sit cross-legged on the terrace, chugging whisky and spouting politics while he made brilliant, swift sketches with our school pastels. A young Indian academic always bubbled over with ideas; he urged me to learn Sanskrit so that I could boast of being “the only American teenage Sanskrit scholar.” My parents’ guests included filmmakers, airline pilots, teachers, college presidents.

When the guests weren’t there, the vendors were, and they, too, were marvelously colorful. A favorite jeweler came often to display loose gems on a cloth on the living room floor; then he and my dad would sketch designs for earrings and brooches on the backs of envelopes, for gifts for my mom. Other merchants came with brass and copper wares, magazines, embroidered tablecloths.

Life was endlessly rich and entertaining, and we overflowed with creative projects. “Little theatre begins here,” said one local newspaper article, showing a picture of Jane, at age eight, putting on a puppet show. We organized fairs with booths of games. Lee and I were always at work writing, acting, and choreographing. We coproduced family newspapers, never lacking for stories with all those people in the house.

We wrote plays, generally tales of crime and adventure. One of them we called “The Abduction of Brenda Brussels.” Another was based on Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and we staged it in the neighbors’ driveway so that we could build their pony into the plot. Ichabod Crane was supposed to gallop wildly away, but when the time came, the pony wouldn’t so much as trot, not even when goaded on by our yells of

“Hi-yo, Silver!” It plodded off, leaving us to rescue the climax with extradramatic acting.

The time came for high school, and I went off to Woodstock School, a coed missionary boarding school in the first range of the Himalayas. Here, too, there were new people to meet: American missionary kids of all different stripes, from the fundamentalist evangelicals to the relatively worldly Methodists; Nepalese aristocrats (who always seemed to be the backbone of the soccer team); kids from Thailand, Denmark, Taiwan . . .

Add to that the fascinations of the nearby town of Mussoorie, which, like Hamara Nagar in *Jana Bibi*, had three distinct bazaars, or shopping areas, full of textile and bangle shops, Tibetan jewelry peddlers, movie theaters and tea shops, and other ways for students to spend their allowances.

With all this wonderful material, I might have written *Jana Bibi* or some other book at an early age and lived happily ever after. It didn't exactly happen that way.

My family came back to the States, where I finished high school in New London, New Hampshire (oh, that first winter!), went to Smith College, married, taught French, studied and taught in Zambia for a year with my husband, and got a master's degree in anthropology from Brandeis University. Later, I raised my son, Ben (that was my practicum in primatology), and worked as a computer programmer.

From the mid-1970s on, I wrote hundreds of book reviews, mainly for *Kliatt* magazine, and the editors often assigned me books set in India. I'd go chat with them, and as I was leaving, they'd always say, “Oh, take whatever books you want from the pile we *aren't* reviewing.” Free drugs for a book addict! I carried off bags and bags. Books by the South Indian writer R. K. Narayan; by Brits-in-India Rumer Godden and Paul Scott; by the gentle Anglo-Indian

writer Ruskin Bond. Later, I also reviewed for *Publishers Weekly* and, much after that, for SoundCommentary .com.

It was after a trip back to India that I decided I had to get my own India experiences down on paper. I was lucky enough to join Sally Brady's writing group, which included Elizabeth Berg, Sebastian Junger, and other wonderful writers. On the first day, I thrust a three-hundred-page manuscript into Sally's hands. After reading it, she sat me down and fixed me with a kind but honest eye. "You can certainly write," she said. "But . . . there's no plot. There's no character development. And you also have a few problems with style." I had a lot to learn.

I also had some other things coming up, including a divorce and a move to New Hampshire. I settled into my new life, fact-checked history textbooks, did social surveys, studied the recorder, and joined a Scottish music society. I kept reading, writing, and reviewing, and books about India continued to fill up my shelves. I now also had another interest: Indian movies, increasingly available on DVD. When Netflix arrived, I could binge with impunity on the last sixty years of Indian filmmaking.

I liked watching the movies from the 1950s and '60s because the street scenes and the interiors were very much what I remembered. Instead of the enormous crowds, air pollution, street traffic, cell phones, television, and computers of modern India, these movies showed stubby-shaped Hindustan taxis and horse-drawn tongas, on streets that looked, by today's standards, practically empty.

I was also thrilled to rediscover songs I'd heard coming from radios in the bazaars as a kid: "Mera Joota Hai Japani" (My Shoes Are Japanese); "Chal Mere Ghode, Tik Tik Tik" (Go, My Horse, Tik Tik Tik); "Hava Mein Uda

Jaaye, Mera Lal Dupatta” (Off It Goes in the Wind, My Red Scarf). Then I found clips of them on YouTube. It shows how long scraps of songs can stick in your head that all I had to do was pick up the phone and sing one line, and my sister Lee could instantly fill in with the next. People still sing these songs in India.

My interest in Indian film went hand in hand with a campaign to learn more Hindi, my knowledge of which had been embarrassingly scanty. There is a story about an American missionary who came back to the States after thirty years and was asked to give a prayer “in the language of the people you served.” All he knew how to do in Hindi was count to twenty, so he did that with dramatic intonation and reverent pauses. When he had finished, someone at the back of the room cried out, “*Shabash!*” which means “Bravo!” I pictured something like that happening to me.

I now have an ever-growing passion for Hindi, with its onomatopoeia, shadings of politeness, and, as at least one textbook so winningly put it, “coloring verbs.” (Lest anyone underestimate its importance, Hindi is also one of the five most widely spoken languages on earth.)

Not long ago, after several decades of collecting material, I ran out of excuses. So I wrote a book I intended to be the first of a boarding school series, possible audience unclear. But the real-life material wouldn’t stay put on the page; the milieu changed, the town took on a character of its own, and adult characters crept into the plot. A Muslim tailor . . . his nephew who wanted to be a singer in the movies . . . the owner of a store called the Treasure Emporium . . . Then, one day, I tossed off ten pages about a fortune-teller of Scottish origin who had a talking parrot. Jana Bibi was born. ■

Jana Bibi is Scottish, not arbitrarily, and not only because I had been playing Scottish music when I conceived of her. I saw Jana (born Janet MacPherson) as coming from a long line of Scots who worked in India—even before the time of the British Empire. Scots were heavily represented in the civil service, the army, the professions, and as tea planters, missionaries, and businessmen in British imperial India. Scottish educators founded schools and colleges; Scottish architects designed monuments and public buildings. The Scottish cemetery in Kolkata has fifteen hundred graves.

Moreover, many Scottish men, especially in the eighteenth century, took up Indian dress, ate Indian food, and married Indian wives. William Dalrymple’s stunning travel and history books, including *White Mughals*, tells about some of them. Flamboyant Scottish characters in India existed in real life, not just in fiction.

Jana is direct, pragmatic, and flexible and connects easily to people, no matter what their nationality or place on the social scale. She is at home in India, and she doesn’t feel happy anywhere else. It’s not surprising that she becomes an Indian citizen. At the wane of the British Empire, in newly independent countries all over the world, at least a few Brits “stayed on.”

Jana’s son, Jack Laird, in contrast, wants to keep the categories distinct and is working very hard to carve out a simple national identity for himself. His birth and early childhood in India and his father’s American roots don’t interest

him at all. He goes at being Scottish with a vengeance—bagpipes, golf, and all. You can be sure that he attends formal social functions back in Glasgow in a kilt.

Lal Bahadur Pun, as a musician and a soldier, also represents a remnant of empire and, in his own musical way, is a world citizen. As for bagpipes as a weapon? John Master's memoir *Bugles and a Tiger* describes Gurkha pipers playing for British army officers before dinner with a sound like "an approaching squadron of jets." I think the monkeys in Jana Bibi's Jolly Grant House would indeed scamper before such an onslaught of sound. Indeed, I read a news story about how the Austrian capital of Vienna had a piper drive the rats out of its sewers in 2010.

"Mary Thomas" doesn't sound like an Indian name, but it is common enough among South Indian Christians. The "Madrassi ayah" (nursemaid) is a character found in Indian fiction and in real life; my family employed one in Madras and two in New Delhi. Two were lovely, but one was very bossy and spanked my sisters and me with an old slipper. (My mother didn't believe this until the ayah got into a fight with an ex-lover in our driveway and broke his arm.) In contrast, Mary Thomas is definitely not violent, but she does have a strong will. Though from a very low caste, she does not have the typical subservient and fatalistic attitude; she has rejected her "sweeper" past and learned to read and write, and also to cook. Working for foreigners has given her a good opportunity to escape her origins.

The contemplative Feroze Ali Khan is one of the most important characters in the book. In India, the *darzis*, or tailors, are very often Muslim, as was Faiz Mohammed, who sewed for my classmates and me at Woodstock School. Like Feroze, Faiz would jot down our measurements in a little notebook, and he would consult a Sears, Roebuck catalog for styles. Did he write his private

thoughts in his notebook when he got home? It's not hard for me to imagine that he did. A vein of sentiment and philosophy runs deep in the Urdu-speaking people of India and Pakistan, even among the humble. In 1961, the Pakistani camel driver invited to the United States by Vice President Lyndon Johnson charmed everyone with his poetic statements. When Ramachandran, in *Jana Bibi*, says, "We're all poets and philosophers here," he means it.

Moustapha, as a character, is partly self-indulgence on my part . . . the beautiful young man with the golden voice who wants to be a singer in the movies. But lest he be dismissed as a cliché, I must point out that in real life, there are some famous examples of people in the Indian film industry who came from implausible backgrounds: a barber's son, a fruit merchant's son, a bus conductor . . . And Moustapha might indeed succeed in cinema. In the film industry, Muslims, a largely disadvantaged minority in India, work side by side with Hindus, Parsis, and Christians, and some have become megastars, including legendary playback singer Mohammed Rafi (1924–1980) and modern Bollywood giants Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan.

Ramachandran and Rambir are high-caste Hindus (although not Brahmans). Although Ramachandran has kept more to traditional ways and dress than Rambir has, both have made unconventional choices by settling in Hamara Nagar. University graduates, entertaining conversationalists—they owe a little bit to my dad's friend who wanted me to be a teenage Sanskrit scholar.

Because I don't know any villains personally, Bandhu Sharma had to come out of my imagination, and also (perhaps this is not a surprising confession) out of Hindi movies. If his turnaround seems overly sentimental, my defense is that in plenty of Hindi movies, especially the old ones, bad guys have a change of heart, and gangsters weep when they disappoint their mothers.

For the Far Oaks students, I barely scratched the surface of my own boarding school experience.

Finally, Mr. Ganguly, Jana Bibi's parrot. In India, members of his tribe (*Psittacula krameri manillensis*) are everywhere; they swoop down like green clouds and have conferences in the trees. Good talkers, they were brought to Europe in the time of Alexander the Great, and are now favorite pets all over the world.

At the end of this book, we leave Jana in a tranquil state. However, I worry about Moustapha in Bombay, and about Ramachandran, with his growing family. Editor Rambir could easily work himself to exhaustion. Also, with a Cold War going on, could Kenneth Stuart-Smith be collecting more information than the merits of the local tea shops? Might Jana find romance? I'm eager to revisit Hamara Nagar for the next book, and confident that, no matter what, Mr. Ganguly will provide his candid avian opinions.

MAGIC CARPETS

Here are a few films that would have been shown in 1960 at a movie theater like Hamara Nagar's Bharat Mata. I like them for their engaging plots and zingy song-and-dance sequences, and for the ideals they express—redemption, reconciliation, hard work, and the search for justice.

Boot Polish (1954). Two orphans take to the streets, determined to earn their living without resorting to begging.

Do Aankhen Barah Haath (Two Eyes and Twelve Hands, 1957). A prison warden tries to rehabilitate six murderers on a remote country farm.

Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai (The Land Where the Ganges Flows, 1960). A simple trusting minstrel wanders into a gang of outlaws and falls in love with the leader's daughter.

Mother India (1957). A village woman struggles to surmount repeated catastrophes.

SOME MEMOIRS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

These memoirs by Westerners may help explain why Jana Bibi considers India home. Stephen Alter's *All the Way to Heaven: An American Boyhood in the Himalayas* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1998) chronicles American missionary life in the hill station of Mussoorie in the mid-twentieth century. In *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* (New York, William Morrow, 1987) British author Rumer Godden describes, among other things, surviving in World War II India as (essentially) a single mother living on a shoestring. Norah Burke was the daughter of a British Forest Officer in the early twentieth century; her *Jungle Child* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1955) recalls the enchantment of that experience.

As for evocation of place, R. K. Narayan's *My Days: A Memoir* (London, Penguin, 1989) is good background reading for his novels set in the fictional town of Malgudi. Ruskin Bond's *Landour Days: A Writer's Journal* (New Delhi, Penguin, 2002) takes us into the first range of the Himalayas. Narayan's terrain is South India, Bond's is in Jana Bibi's territory, but both writers pull me in and make me feel at home. ■



Questions for Discussion

1. The idea of going on a pilgrimage comes up several times throughout the novel. Are there any parallels to be drawn between Jana's decision to live as a missionary or her decision to move into the Jolly Grant House and Feroze's pending pilgrimage to Mecca? What about Moustapha's journey to Bombay to pursue his musical career?
2. What role does Western society and culture play in this novel?
3. What purpose does Jack serve in this novel? What image does he project of life outside of India? Do you see Jana differently once Jack has been introduced in the story?
4. How does Jana's history help shape her as a person?
5. How does religion affect the characters' lives?
6. Compare the different images of family we see in this novel: Jana and her son; Jana and her adopted family (Tilku, Mary, etc.); Feroze, Moustapha, and Zohra; Police Chief Bandhu, Manju, and Raju; and Sandra and her father. More specifically, how do the parent-child relationships differ? What do they have in common?
7. What role does the Far Oaks School play in the daily life of the small town?

8. Between his conversations with Yusuf Baig and his diaries, the author gives us many chances to get to know Feroze. Does the Feroze we see with Yusuf Baig differ from the Feroze we see through his diary?
9. Music is everywhere in Hamara Nagar. Discuss its different functions throughout the novel.
10. Is there a moral to be taken from this novel?
11. Do you like the way the author ended this novel? Do you think Jana will ever leave India? Why or why not? What does the book have to say about nationality, belonging, and home? ■





Namaste

From

THE WOODMANS

Everett M. Woodman

For more on Betsy, Jana, and the whole gang, please visit www.betsywoodman.com, where you'll find photos, notes on the writing process, and much more, including news about Jana Bibi's upcoming adventures!