



Beyond the Next Village: A Year of Magic and Medicine in Nepal

Mary Anne Mercer

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Beyond the Next Village is a nurse's memoir about her transformative, extraordinary experiences in Nepal.

American nurse Mary Anne Mercer's sensitive memoir *Beyond the Next Village* is about the challenges of her life-changing year in Nepal.

Although Mercer had been interested in foreign travel since her childhood in Montana, it wasn't until 1978, following a painful divorce, that she set out from San Francisco for Nepal to volunteer as a nurse in remote villages for one year. After a brief interlude in the relative comfort of a mansion in Kathmandu where she engaged in intensive language study, she was dispatched to the village of Gorkha, which was accessible only on foot. To get there, she had to cross a precarious suspension bridge and then trek on for ten hours. A porter carried her baggage. Her duty was to join a team of local staff charged with immunizing as many children as possible from diseases including tuberculosis.

In spite of her initial enthusiasm, the cultural differences that Mercer encountered shocked her. She recalls choking down a welcoming meal made of a goat she'd played with earlier, hiding her revulsion at the hair still attached to the meat. However, she also understood that cultural sensitivity was essential to her success. Her early impression that the people she met were dirty was challenged by how difficult she found it to keep clean herself; she learned not to judge others. And when patients blamed their afflictions on curses and evil spirits, she made no effort to disavow them of such beliefs. Instead, her book reflects that Catholic invocations of saints serve a similar function, and marvels that the rain did indeed begin to fall after a village ceremony invoking showers.

For the most part, the book focuses on the Nepalese people whom Mercer encountered. It includes sketches of Sita, independent and sari-clad, who was part of the vaccination team; Bhim Raj, a good-natured porter who instigated a rebellion against carrying women's clothing; and the many patients whom Mercer tried to help. Her early doubts about making a connection with these people gave way to meaningful relationships. And extracts of Nepali conversations attest to Mercer's efforts to assimilate into the local culture.

Mercer is an effective storyteller; the book's scenes are vibrant. They include hours-long treks on blistered feet, experiences of fording a river by holding the hand of a guide, and a close call with a human-eating tiger. Astute reflections, as of the social services gap between the city-dwelling expats who paid people to cook for their pets and the villagers who lacked access to food and medication, recommend the book further. In expressing wonder and appreciation for the beauty surrounding her, with details as of abundant butterflies and scarlet poinsettias lining a trail, Mercer becomes a respectful guide through a culture that helped to shape her sense of direction for her future.

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SUZANNE KAMATA (April 17, 2023)

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