



The Grammarian

Annapurna Potluri

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One can know everything about a language and nothing about a culture. So it is with French academic Dr. Alexandre Lautens, who travels to India to study the dialect Telugu in Annapurna Potluri's first novel, *The Grammarian*. It is 1911, and India has long been a British colony. Lautens's host, the patriarch of the Indian Adivi family, is nearly as much of an outsider in his own country as is Lautens.

The theme of the outsider is foreshadowed early in the book when Adivi's daughter Anjali, who contracted polio as a child, reads a newspaper story about Ishi, the last survivor of a nomadic tribe in the Sierra Nevadas, and cries for the loss of his family, culture, and language.

Even though oppressed and insulted by the British, Adivi emulates the English not only in his dress but also in his own oppression of his servants and his daughters. He views Anjali's disfigurement as a blemish on the image of the perfect family that is so important to him, and favors her younger sister, who is soon to be married.

Lautens finds Anjali an obliging source of information and establishes a habit of discussing the Teluga language with her over breakfast. Yet his knowledge of the culture and what lies in Anjali's heart remains stunted. When he unknowingly breaches a critical cultural limit through his friendship with Anjali, he is thrown out of the Adivi household. Anjali has committed her own unforgivable breach, not only through her relationship with Lautens but worse: She has published an article titled "Free Women in a Free India," for which her father unceremoniously evicts her.

The characters are well drawn and mostly sympathetic, while the language of the book itself often soars. The sights, sounds, and smells of India leap from the page as we follow Anjali and witness the impact the crucial event had upon her life. The plot and the setting are ripe for a much longer epic—the book spans thirty-plus years in just under three hundred pages. Therefore, some of Anjali's later experiences seem rather lightly sketched and will leave the reader wanting to know even more about such an interesting character and time. This novel will especially appeal to fans of historical fiction and those interested in India.

Annapurna Potluri studied comparative literature and linguistics at New York University and earned an MPhil in theoretical linguistics from Cambridge. Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, she has also lived in Italy and India.

KAREN MULVAHILL (Spring 2013)

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