



Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the "King and I" Governess

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If you thought you knew the story of Anna in *The King and I*, think again. As this riveting biography shows, the real life of Anna Leonowens was far more fascinating than the beloved story of the Victorian governess who went to work for the King of Siam. To write this definitive account, Susan Morgan traveled around the globe and discovered new information that has eluded researchers for years. Anna was born a poor, mixed-race army brat in India, and what followed is an extraordinary nineteenth-century story of savvy self-invention, wild adventure, and far-reaching influence. At a time when most women stayed at home, Anna Leonowens traveled all over the world, witnessed some of the most fascinating events of the Age of Empire, and became a well-known travel writer, journalist, teacher, and lecturer. She remains the one and only foreigner to have spent significant time inside the royal harem of Siam. She emigrated to the United States, crossed all of Russia on her own just before the revolution, and moved to Canada, where she publicly defended the rights of women and the working class. The book also gives an engrossing account of how and why Anna became an icon of American culture in *The King and I* and its many adaptations.

Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the "King and I" Governess Details

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From Reader Review Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the "King and I" Governess for online ebook

Kristianne says

Though we discover through Morgan's biography of Anna Leonowens that most of the woman's life as we know it from "The King and I" or from "Anna and the King" or even from Leonowens' own books about her time teaching the King's children in Siam is actually a lie, we can tell that Morgan still admires her.

"Siam was the high point of Anna's life, not because it was the most important thing she ever did--to her it was not--but because it was the turning point in a process that made her at last into the woman she had all along had the potential to become." (p166)

The book has a dry academic taste to it, but the story of Anna Leonowens is fascinating.

AngelaGay Kinkead says

Really appreciate the author's consuming work to dig deeper into this seemingly unimportant story that has entertained and informed several generations now. Saw the original "The King and I" as a child, then loved the book as a young reader. Read it several times. Then saw the Jody Foster version of the movie. Always interested in filling in the gaps, I read a review of this book and immediately put it on my list to read. A fascinating expose' on Anna Leonowens, a mixed race Victorian woman, raised in India, not England. Her past was not at all what she presented in her writings, but the real story here is the way one resourceful and imaginative woman re-invented herself time and time again! She's a survivor, to be sure. Just as interesting is the sub-story of how Margaret Landon, author of "Anna and the King of Siam" created a romanticized and revisionist story that lives on . . . with a strong U.S. and Christian spin. (i.e. The real Anna appreciated the Buddhist religion in Thailand and was not the proselytizing Christian popularly portrayed. Bottom line? She wasn't who she said she was, but throughout her life, she pulled off some incredible accomplishments and in her later life, spoke out very publically about slavery and injustice of many kinds.

Cynda says

I give this book 4 stars because the research was thorough and because this biography stands a chance to become the classic -scholarly- biography of Anna Leonowens. I found the appendices to be enlargements of ideas discussed in the book. I think she might do well to do some pruning of her writing.

If you are in love with the movie -The King and I- and want to know more, you can learn more by reading this book. You will be in for some surprises if all you know about Anna is gleaned from the movies.

Muriel Hammond-teusink says

I totally enjoyed this book. I enjoyed this "biography"/story about one who lied about her parentage and picked a point in time, created a history, and lived it out for almost 70 years afterwards. I do not condone untruthfulness; but, this lady concocted a story, financially supported herself and in so doing created a life

for her children that would educate them beyond the possibilities of that time for folks of their perceived status.

I learned about the East India Company and can not be proud of it or British heritage in India. Thank God my British ancestors who made their ways to Canada.

I was fascinated by what I learned about Thailand and its court (in late eighteenth / early nineteenth centuries) and the needs of women during that time that carry forward into today.

Diane C. says

This book is very interesting and a historically accurate and powerful account of the times and the people. A real eye opener, and I would recommend whole heartedly, even if you are not fascinated by the Anna and the King of Siam story.

That said, it is rather dense and pedantic, not necessarily a FUN read. But has so much worthwhile info for history buffs, check it out.

Rebekah says

I just couldn't finish this book. The parts I read were interesting, but it was very slow, and I just wasn't in the mood to finish it before it was due back to the library. Most interesting thing I learned in the first third of the book was that Anna, as in The King and I Anna, was the aunt of Boris Karloff.

Ann Costello says

About Anna Leonowens of Siam and the King. Fascinating account of how she changed her image to become what she wished and what would benefit herself and her family. And how our perception of Siam/Thailand was shaped by her life and her biography. I was sometimes put off by the author's style. She tends to repeat herself which always strikes me as a bit patronizing. But aside from that, I couldn't put it down.

Elevate Difference says

Almost everyone in America has heard of Anna, the famous upper class English lady who held her own with the King of Siam. What most people haven't heard is the real story behind the better-known, fictionalized character. Susan Morgan has devoted over a decade to fleshing out the life of Anna Leonowens in Bombay Anna. This was not an easy job given the lengths Anna went to alter her past, even writing a false biography for her grandchildren.

Contrary to Anna's claims of an upper class English upbringing, she was actually a mixed-race child born in India to a mixed-race mother and a low-ranking English soldier. She grew up in tented barracks and among the local children. Her intellect and facility with language set her apart. When her husband, the love of her

life, died, Anna faced limited prospects as a widow. For the sake of her children, she moved to Singapore, where no one knew her, and cleverly recreated her past.

Morgan shows the readers how successful Anna was at reinvention. Not only did her story hold, but her children moved freely among the upper classes, and her grandchildren attended prestigious universities. Morgan's painstaking research is clear, and her devotion to this topic comes through in the book. She describes the stages of Anna's life with precise detail, sometimes more than a general reader may need, but *Bombay Anna* serves the dual purpose of bringing the real Anna to life for pleasure readers and providing a treasure trove of facts for historians and scholars. Morgan even provides a brief biography of Margaret Landon, whose book (*Anna and the King of Siam*) catapulted Anna Leonowens to fame.

Often times, such fact-laden books can be cumbersome to read - not this one. Morgan writes skillfully, and *Bombay Anna* often reads like a novel. By the end, the reader holds an intimate knowledge of Anna and may even regret not having been able to meet her.

Anna was a woman ahead of her time. She refused to live her life subject to racial discrimination and social constraints, and adapted in order to overcome a system designed to hold her back. Anna rejected proselytizing in favor of respect for world religions, she had a strong social conscience, and she valued education more than anything else. She could make herself comfortable among a wide variety of people – from Russian peasants to residents of the king's harem and Siamese nobility to American literary intellectuals.

See the movie with Jodie Foster. Enjoy the musical. But if you want to know the real story, pick up *Bombay Anna* and be prepared to find an inspiring story of an incredible woman.

Review by Jessica Jacobson

Melissa Neelakantan says

I can understand why some readers have struggled through the book. It is very repetitive and there is a lot of time spent on other people besides Anna. And for me, the end really seemed to drag.

However, reading this as an historical biography, focused on what can be known about Anna and her time and places in history, I still found it really interesting to read. The author did an incredible and thorough job with her research. Superbly researched! It's really impressive how she could piece her life together from the records she found. Great detective work to investigate the "lies" in Anna's story and uncover the reality. Although the author shows us that Anna's tales of her life were often inaccurate, she does it in a way where, at least for me, I understood why Anna would have created her own "history."

Gayle says

This was a very interesting topic and contained much information that put *The King and I* in historical perspective. Unfortunately, I thought it was incredibly repetitive. Sometimes the same thing was said more than once on the same page. I am probably in the minority with this view. I just think a good editor should have tightened it up and made it flow. It isn't a narrative, but the organization should have been more apparent and useful.

bookczuk says

I really want to read this book, but I'm just not in the mood for non-fiction right now. I keep skipping over it when picking it up, so shall put it away for a bit until the spirit grabs me to check in on Anna again.

I've been fascinated by what I've read so far, particularly that Anna totally reinvented herself and her history. Her actual history, which the author/researcher tracked down, placed her born and raised in an area of India where I've spent much time: Ahmednagar, in Maharastra. My brother and sister-in-law lived just outside there for nearly 40 years (she's still there). At one point in my life, I thought I'd go back there and work permanently at a rural health clinic where I'd done some volunteer work, but then I met javaczuk and the rest is history.

I will pick this up again. This note was written December 19, 2011. The book is about 1/3 finished.

Rebecca Huston says

A fascinating look at the heroine of *The King and I*, Anna Leonowens. Turns out that her real life is much more amazing and interesting than just being a governess in a king's harem. Great read and recommended.

For the complete review, please go here:
http://www.epinions.com/review/Book_B...

Margaret Elder says

The author had an interesting story to tell, but she didn't tell it as well as she could have. The biography is bogged down with irrelevant details about too many other people, and there are places where chronological order is not kept. The beginning frankly drags, and it was not until the material about life in Siam that I got interested. Since this was a selection of a book club I belong to, I wanted to finish, and I'm glad I did, for the book is much more interesting toward the end.

Pearl says

Excellent, excellent, excellent!

I didn't know much about Anna Leonowens, except the movie and musical of Anna and The King or The King and I, the later being written by someone else. The former being based off of Anna's memoirs during her time in the Siam court, a book which I have read some time ago now and at the time thinking it was totally non fiction. Wow, was I wrong.

Anna was born and grew up in India and was a quarter Indian on her mothers side, unlike the portrait she painted about her self of how she was an English lady born in England who later on went to India along with the many other stories she told people. At first I didn't understand why she would do this, but now that I

think of it, Victorian society is unforgiving and Anna lying about her past and up bringing would seem a better image for her self and children.

Most of the book is about her time in the Siamese court, which is of course, the time the reader would like to know about the most. I'm Thai myself and of course, took Thai history in school, but I learned so much more about King Mongkut's court in this little book more than any other Thai source I ever read in school. Fascinating to me. It also of course shows the king being human who is treated with a God like status. (like the modern monarchy of Thailand today)

Anna was a woman truly ahead of her time, while Victorian woman stayed home, she ventured the world and got stuff done! a real inspiration to me and (hopefully) other woman out there.

I found it interesting that the author used "I" referring to herself in parts of the book. A big "no no" as my history lecturer says. But I liked it, it gave it more of a story feeling to it, even though it was non fiction.

If you want to know about the real governess of The King and I, this is the book to go to.

The Library Lady says

Okay, call this a spoiler, but Anna Leonowens, "Mrs Anna" of "The King and I," was not a cultured, middle/upper class English woman, but rather an Anglo-Indian army brat who through brains and determination got an education and created a whole new identity for herself.

Susan Morgan did an excellent job of researching Anna Harriet Edwards Owen's life. But unfortunately, like so many historians enthused by their subjects, she doesn't retell it well.

This is yet another professor of English--"Distinguished" is apparently part of her title, that could use her own book as a classroom example of what NOT to do. As someone with a BA in English myself, it makes me really wonder...

This reads like a research paper, a thesis. Morgan endlessly gives a little information, then either does a long winded expository of her subject's background, be it the Anglo Indian Army or the development of Singapore, OR, uses various citations to back up an argument about how Anna (or her relatives) must have felt. For an example, she has a two to three page meditation on the reinvention of self, comparing Anna's invented background to Judy Garland's role in "A Star Is Born," when she sings about being born in a trunk in Pocatella, ID. It's lengthy and could've been done in the first paragraph. Instead she goes on and on. *Or should I perhaps intone "Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." ?*

As other reviewers have noted, Morgan also repeats herself a great deal. She gives us information about people out of time context, and then comes back to the same information when she reaches that period. I don't know who edited this, but it's really noticeable.

You can get some good information if you pick through this, but it takes work. The real Anna was a fascinating person. Her time in Siam was just a small part of her life. She was a scholar of many languages (she taught courses in Sanskrit), she did lecture tours, she traveled through Russia in her 60s during the time of the last Tsars, and she raised her 8 grandchildren. Oh, and her great-nephew was Boris Karloff.

Yet, for all of her enthusiasm, Morgan doesn't succeed in making the "real" Anna live and breathe on these pages.

It's highly ironic that Margaret Landon (and Morgan devotes a final, unnecessary chapter to Landon and her

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husband) made Anna feel real when I read Anna and the King of Siam long ago, and that "The King and I" did the same.

They may contain false history, may be offensive to the people of Thailand in many ways, but it was well done.

This isn't.
