

The Woman You've Never Heard of Who's the Reason You Practice Yoga

*The Goddess Pose:
The Audacious Life of Indra Devi,
the Woman Who Helped Bring Yoga to the West*

By Michelle Goldberg

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, 352 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Heather Hewett

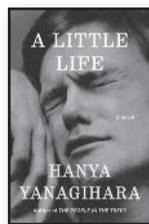
You don't have to own a mat to know that yoga has transformed from a countercultural interest into a multibillion dollar "growth industry." A 2012 *Yoga Journal* survey found that more than 20 million Americans practice yoga, and that practitioners spent more than \$10 billion a year on yoga classes and products. Most gyms and community centers offer yoga. In both hip and no-so-hip communities you can seek out a studio tailored to your particular preferences, whether that's hot, rock 'n' roll, prenatal, or aerial yoga. (My local studio describes the last as a "heartfelt connection to Yoga with the use of aerial hammocks suspended from the ceiling." I haven't worked up the courage to try it.) Alternatively, you can download a podcast, pull on your tights, and do some yoga at home. At bookstores, plenty of how-to guides shed light on pranayama breathing and side-crow pose and which chant goes with which of the body's chakra energy nodes. And next to those shelves are a growing number of books that cast a skeptical eye on the practice, including histories of individual scandals and recent investigations into yoga-related injuries and deaths.

Yoga cynicism is on the rise, and for good reasons. Today's Yoga Industrial Complex can trigger second thoughts, even among students who have done yoga for years and have experienced multiple benefits from the practice (I count myself in this group). It's easy to conclude that yoga has been fully commodified and corrupted by western capitalism. But this isn't the full story. In *The Goddess Pose*, the journalist Michelle Goldberg argues that yoga was never pure or uncorrupted. It has always been a "hybrid of ancient and contemporary ideas, an East/West fusion." Long before its discovery by the Bohemians and beatniks of the 1960s or its more recent entry into mainstream American culture in the 1990s, yoga was being reinvented by a dizzying array of teachers and popularizers, Indian and western. Goldberg's biography of Indra Devi, a Russian-born aristocrat who ended up in Hollywood, where she "taught yoga to stars and leaders," as her *New York Times* obituary put it, suggests how complex and surprising the history is.

Goldberg's biography—the first of Devi in English—provides a fascinating look at a woman who opened studios in Shanghai, Hollywood, Mexico, and Buenos Aires; introduced yoga to the Soviet cosmonauts during the cold war; and taught figures such as Greta Garbo, Yehudi Menuhin, and Panamanian Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera. Devi deeply influenced the yoga many of us practice today, and yet, unlike many other yogis, she doesn't have much name recognition. Goldberg's well-written and impressively researched biography begins to correct the record.



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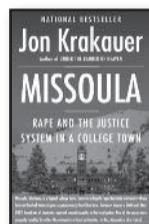


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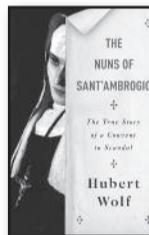
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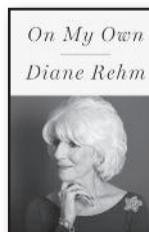
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The author approaches her subject as a “complicated, audaciously modern, sometimes inspiring, and sometimes maddeningly irresponsible woman, not as a spiritual exemplar.” She draws together materials scattered throughout several different countries—archival documents, old newspapers, government files, and several books penned by Devi herself—to assemble the story of this elusive and peripatetic woman. Because Devi changed her name multiple times, Goldberg divides her biography into four parts, each titled with her subject’s name during that period. In each section, she places Devi in her cultural and historical context, which is no small feat. Born in imperial Russia at the tail end of the century to an aristocratic mother and a Swedish banker, Devi—originally Eugenia Vassilievna—found herself in the middle of many of the next century’s major historical events and befriended an astounding array of individuals from many different countries. This situation presents advantages and challenges to her biographer. When material on Devi isn’t available, Goldberg fills in the picture with information about that particular place and historical moment; sometimes, though, Goldberg must bring in so many different events, social movements, and people that the details threaten to derail the story. That they never quite do is a testament to Goldberg’s skills as a journalist and a storyteller.

When Eugenia was eighteen, the Bolsheviks staged their coup and the country plunged into civil war. Her mother, who was separated from her father, lost everything. As Goldberg observes of Eugenia, “All around her, the country was turning into hell—and she was learning a lesson that would serve her for the rest of her long life: how to survive her world’s collapse by reinventing herself.” After her mother joined a theater troupe, they traveled throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Along with many other White Russian immigrants, they ended up in Berlin in 1923—the year Hitler first tried to overthrow the Weimar Republic. It was a time of chaos and hyperinflation in this “artistically vibrant” city, writes Goldberg, where Eugenia and her mother joined a Russian cabaret and continued to travel. During these years, Eugenia experienced various hardships—hunger, jail, anxiety, and heartbreak—but Goldberg can only imagine how her subject must have felt. The historical record is thin, partly because Eugenia’s lifelong cultivation of “relentlessly positive thinking” and a “buoyant, ingenuous approach to life” led her to downplay misfortunes in her own memoirs and writings.

A trip to Holland to attend a weeklong Theosophical camp (a precursor to contemporary retreats such as Omega or Esalen) fueled Eugenia’s interest in this movement, which had become popular during the last days of the Russian Empire and was attracting many Europeans interested in eastern religions, the supernatural, and the occult. Eugenia later called this camp a “turning point” in her life, an experience that fed her youthful desire to travel to India and would lead her far from traditional marriage and motherhood.

With “her charm and her aristocratic bearing,” Eugenia possessed a knack for forming friendships with powerful and influential elites; personal connections helped her realize what for many would remain pipe dreams. A friendship with a British feminist and Theosophist with ties to India, plus money from her banker-fiancé, enabled her to



Indra Devi

visit India. She was enchanted. After her trip, she broke off her engagement, sold her belongings, and sailed back, with enough money for only a few months and no concrete plans. After a short career in Indian cinema, acceptance into fashionable Indian society, and marriage to a Bombay-based Czech diplomat, she began to suffer from depression and severe anxiety. Unwittingly, she had traded a carefree existence for convention, and enlightenment for evening soirées.

Eugenia’s next metamorphosis, from society wife into yogini, proves no less fascinating. Here, Goldberg skillfully weaves in the story of yoga’s evolution, showing how Eugenia holds a rightful place in the lineage of this culturally hybrid and endlessly evolving art. From its origins in classical Indian yogic philosophy and the physical yoga developed by medieval Hindu ascetics, modern yoga underwent reinvention during the late nineteenth century. Western ideas about the spiritual value of physical fitness, American transcendentalism (itself shaped by “romantic conceptions of Indian thought”), and the growing Indian nationalist movement all shaped yoga’s evolution. For those who sought independence from their British colonizers, hatha yoga presented an authentically Indian form of physical culture, and several notable figures helped to foster a hatha yoga renaissance in India, including Sri Krishnamacharya, an innovator

who drew from Indian philosophy, Nepalese yoga, and the gymnastic tradition of Mysore Palace (as well as, most likely, the Danish) in his development of a dynamic and flowing form of yoga intended for young boys.

After several failed attempts, Eugenia finally persuaded this “brilliant synthesizer” to teach a western woman, and as the months went by, she found herself transformed by the practice and freed from her anxiety attacks. When her husband was transferred to Shanghai, Krishnamacharya charged her with bringing yoga to the rest of the world—providing the seed for her incarnation into Indra Devi, the teacher who began her career instructing expats during the Japanese occupation of China and continued, after World War II and her marriage ended, in Los Angeles.

In the US, Devi started over—without a job, family, or connections. Yet she could not have picked a better place than southern California, ground zero for the emerging New Age culture. Devi opened the first yoga studio in Los Angeles, and her fame began to build. She was invited to teach at Elizabeth Arden’s Maine spa, and she gained a following among Hollywood stars; she soon befriended Gloria Swanson, who penned the foreword to Devi’s bestselling 1953 book, *Forever Young, Forever Healthy*. The yoga in this book and in

her classes represents what Devi had learned from her teachers, a moderately challenging mix of exercise and relaxation combined with “elements of New Thought and nature cure and even a light sprinkling of feminism,” as Goldberg describes it. While other yoga teachers share credit for introducing yoga to the US, Goldberg notes that Devi was instrumental in spreading a version of it that was both “resolutely free of religion” and particularly appealing to women, even “respectable bourgeois ladies.” Goldberg observes that this may be one of the “ironies” of hatha yoga in the US: “rich housewives discovered it well before it became the avant-garde enthusiasm of beats and hippies.” (In keeping with this history, in its 2012 survey, *Yoga Journal* identified 82 percent of practitioners in the US as women.) For Devi and the women who studied with her, yoga wasn’t about self-acceptance but rather self-help.

Goldberg’s insights about gender and class suggest a range of complex reasons for yoga’s prominence today. In keeping with New Age beliefs, yoga links health and salvation: by assuming certain physical poses, one can transform both body and soul (“clearer skin and clearer thoughts,” Goldberg quips). When stress entered

the cultural lexicon in the 1950s (as in, “I’m so stressed out”), yoga provided a drug-free alternative to tranquilizers. However, the main goal was adjustment to the status quo—an objective, Goldberg points out, that’s in keeping with contemporary business applications of mindfulness meditation in workplaces. (This all changed during the next decade, when Devi became convinced that the world was in the midst of a “spiritual crisis” in need of yogic religious teachings.)

Goldberg does not shy away from exploring Devi’s internal contradictions. Over the course of her life, Devi developed a detachment that looked, to some, like callousness; after her second husband, Sigfrid Knauer, suffered from a series of strokes, she refused to care for him. “Her freedom was too important to her, her antipathy to quotidian domestic obligations too deep,” explains Goldberg. Contrary to Hindu and Buddhist disciplines, Goldberg notes, Devi hadn’t truly dissolved her ego; instead, she had used “eastern spiritual techniques” to deepen her own form of individualism. Yet Devi’s detachment kept her moving forward, and she remained vital for decades into old age. When she was 85, a rock star invited her to Argentina, and she moved to Buenos Aires, where

she founded a yoga school; for years after this, she continued to travel. As global interest in yoga exploded, she became known for her youthful spirit and energy. She died in 2002, at age 102.

Most yoga today is far more physically challenging than what Devi taught; it originates from the teachings and innovations of other yogis. Yet Goldberg argues that Devi’s spirit continues to “animate” modern western yoga: It’s part of the same “cultural matrix as organic food, holistic spas, and biodynamic beauty products—things that seem to go together so naturally that it’s easy to forget that they weren’t always linked.” Goldberg convincingly suggests that Indra Devi transformed a male discipline into an “uplifting ritual for cosmopolitan, spiritual-but-not-religious women.” While there’s certainly more to be said about this cultural shift, Goldberg makes a strong case for viewing yoga as a flexible and adaptable cultural form that has constantly changed to meet the needs of the current moment. Whose needs it meets, and whose it does not, may be its as-yet unwritten story. 🌐

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