

The Story of My (Academic) Life, or, the Uses of Serendipity

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Editors' Note: Wendy Doniger, the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, gave a keynote address at the 2007 ASIANetwork Conference. Below is her written version of her presentation.

My intellectual career is a tale of friendship and serendipity. I was nourished by several deep friendships—first with my mother, then with several great teachers, and later with colleagues in fields other than the one for which I had a union card. And I was gifted with serendipity (which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident). Horace Walpole, the 4th Earle of Oxford, coined the word “serendipity” in 1754, referring to the story of “The Three Princes of Serendip,” that is, Shri Lanka Dvipa; it’s an Orientalist term. I would define serendipity as the art of appreciating a new possibility when you come across it unexpectedly, the willingness to veer from your projected path and take one you never thought of. Serendipity is particularly valuable when things, inevitably, do not turn out as you wished (as in the old joke: Do you know how to make god laugh? Tell him your plans; or, as John Lennon put it, life is what happens when you’re making other plans). At such moments, if you are a serendipitist (a word that James Joyce coined in 1939, in *Finnegans Wake*), you discover that the new possibilities before you are in fact more useful than what you had intended to do, that what you found turns out to be better than what you were looking for.

Parental Influences

I was born in 1940 in New York and raised in Great Neck by Jewish parents who had come to America (my father from Russia/Poland, in 1919, my mother from Vienna/Marienbad, in the 1920’s) searching, like modern pilgrims, for freedom *from* religion. My mother was a devout Communist, who felt that the world would not be fit to live in until the last rabbi was strangled with the entrails of the last priest. It was not until I went to school that I learned that there was such a thing as

paper white on both sides; I had done my early drawings on the backs of flyers for Henry Wallace and Ella Winters. During the McCarthy Era, people like Pete Seeger and Zero Mostel drifted in and out of our house. (In high school, I was vice-president of the Great Neck chapter of the World Communist Youth organization; the president, Peter Camejo, ran for governor of California last year on the Green Party ticket). My father was a New Dealer, who adored Roosevelt. (My earliest memory is of him taking me on his lap as he wept and told me, “A very great man has died.”) Both of my parents regarded themselves as ethnically Jewish; they sent money to Israel and to the Anti-Defamation League, fought for the Rosenbergs and against anti-Semitism, and always managed to get some more pious relatives to invite us to a Passover seder. But neither of them would be caught dead in a synagogue.

Yet my mother gave me a copy of E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, when I was about 12 years old, and it changed my life. I wonder now what made my mother choose that book for me. I can guess, partly. My mother had a nose for great books, and she knew me very well. I had been, from very early childhood, enchanted by stories about other worlds, fairies and gods. And since my mother regarded this as a literary, rather than a religious, taste, she encouraged it. She also gave me Rumer Godden’s *The River*, and Aubrey Menen’s wicked satire on the *Ramayana*. She was an amateur Orientalist in her own way, and was crazy about Angkor Vat; she cherished her copy of the great four-volume work on the temple of Angkor published in 1930 by the École Française



Wendy Doniger during her keynote address at the 2007 Conference (Photo by Irv Epstein)

de l’Extrême Orient. All her life she wanted to visit Angkor, and she finally did. When I went to India, she came to visit me and went on by herself to visit the temples of Angkor despite the rumbles of war (it was 1964), and when she was dying, thirty years later, she told me (only then) that that had been the high point of her whole life. That old French book about Angkor Vat remained a kind of icon to me throughout my youth; when she died, it came to me, and it still holds for me the mystery and glamour that it had then. I passed it on (together with my mother’s politics) to my son, Michael O’Flaherty, who began his graduate study of the history of Southeast Asia at Cornell in 1995. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Outstanding Teachers

In high school I fled from what I had come to regard as the excessive reality of the real world (the world of Communist politics and the Cold War and McCarthy) by studying Latin and, in unofficial sessions with my devoted Latin teacher, Anita Lilienfeld (now Seligson), ancient

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Greek. She casually mentioned to me that Sanskrit was the language of ancient India, which meant to me the language of *A Passage to India* (and, by extension, Angkor Vat). I was hooked, and I chose to go to Radcliffe, rather than Swarthmore, largely because I could learn Sanskrit at Harvard. And so I did, as a 17-year-old freshman, in 1958. But I never studied religion at Radcliffe; what would my parents have said? I did take one course in comparative religion and several classes with Albert Lord, who taught me most of what I know about oral epics and comparative folklore.

I recognized even then my mother's influence in this flight from religion (I sometimes regard myself as a recovering atheist), but oddly enough I did not until quite recently acknowledge her equally great influence in what I fled *to*. For surely the long shadow of Angkor Vat fell over me as I sat in the dusty little room in the top of Widener Library, studying Sanskrit with Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls. A charismatic teacher and old-fashioned Virginia gentleman—who owned and ran the “restricted” (i.e. anti-Semitic) Homestead resort, in West Virginia, in his spare time—he was the formative intellectual influence of my university years. He taught me not only Sanskrit but Indian literature, Indian history, Indian religion, and something else, harder to define: something about the pleasure of scholarship, the elegance of the written word, the luxury of the world of the mind. I also, in the manner of old-fashioned Sanskritists and “Orientalists,” studied Greek.

Mircea Eliade

In 1968, Mircea Eliade provided the bridge, what Hindus call a *tirtha*, on which I walked across from Sanskrit studies to the history of religions. When I finished my Harvard dissertation in 1968 and sent it, all 950 pages of it, to Ingalls, he read it and asked Mircea Eliade to serve as the other reader, since my dissertation was about *yoga* and the mythology of the Hindu god Shiva, and Eliade was the world's greatest mythologist and had published, in 1958, the very year I entered Radcliffe, a definitive work on *yoga*. (Ingalls believed in having the best of everything). Eliade

liked the dissertation well enough (“Il y’a des longueurs,” is one phrase from his long, hand-written French evaluation that still makes me wince as I recall it) and published two parts of it in two issues of the journal, *History of Religions*, which he had founded just two years previously; this was my first publication. Eliade and I began to correspond, and he published another article of mine, the seed of my 1973 Oxford dissertation, in 1971. But we never met in person until 1978, when I moved to Chicago to take up my post as professor of the history of religions and as an editor of the journal that had first published my work. But again, I am getting ahead of my story.

Russian Formalism and Lévi-Strauss

By the time I started teaching at S.O.A.S. in 1968, I had begun to write books, based on Sanskrit texts, all right,

Lévi-Strauss taught me that a myth is an always doomed attempt to solve an insoluble contradiction, and that the inevitable failure of that enterprise is what drives a culture to tell the same story over and over again, finding ever new ways to show how the square peg does not fit into the round hole (or, perhaps, whole).

but also books about myths. When I was living in Moscow, in 1970-71 (serendipity: I was there only because my husband, a Russian historian, had a grant to study there, and I went along for the ride), with nothing to do but plot with Jewish dissidents, ride horses, and conceive my child, I turned my Harvard dissertation into a book.

The major challenge was to find a way to refer to all the different versions of the central myths without retelling each one in its entirety as I had done in the 950 page dissertation with its “longueurs.” I just happened to meet, at the Oriental Institute (the Institut Vostokovedina), on Armyanski Periolek, a group of Russian Sanskritists who also happened to be Russian formalists and structuralists, and who introduced me to the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss. This gave me the key I needed, the principle of the mytheme, a unit of symbolic meaning that could be identified in several different

versions. It meant that I did not have to discuss each version in detail, but could begin to make statements that applied not only to the structures but to the meanings of a whole corpus of variants. A related, but less mechanical and more philosophical, tool that Lévi-Strauss gave me was the idea of the paradox at the heart of myth, certainly at the heart of the erotic/ascetic conflict that was the subject of my dissertation. Lévi-Strauss taught me that a myth is an always doomed attempt to solve an insoluble contradiction, and that the inevitable failure of that enterprise is what drives a culture to tell the same story over and over again, finding ever new ways to show how the square peg does *not* fit into the round hole (or, perhaps, whole). This was the key to what other scholars regarded as the inexplicable contradiction embodied by Shiva, simultaneously a chaste yogi and the god of the erect phallus. In 1973 I published the book, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*.

The Importance of Translation

Then, in 1975, I published the first of three Penguin Classics, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook, translated from the Sanskrit*.¹ The editor of the Penguin Classics at that time was a wonderful woman named Betty Radice, who taught me a great deal about writing and translating and rescued me from the Groucho Marx paradox (“I don’t want to be a member of any club that would have me for a member”) as applied to translation: “I don’t want to write a translation for anyone stupid/lazy/uneducated enough to make use of a translation.” It was Betty Radice who provided, *in her own person*, the ideal audience for a translation from the Sanskrit: an intelligent, educated, intellectually curious person who did not claim to know very much about Indian literature. And it was she who, in her optimism and modesty, taught me that there were thousands of people like her who would buy such translations. My father had also been such a person, but he had died in 1971, before I published my first book. Betty Radice also replaced my father in another essential role, one that I have always tried to play for my students: that of a presumed or implied reader who is *on your side*, who has both the intelligence and the good will to give you the benefit of the doubt when you dare to take a chance, to

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stretch your knowledge and your intelligence beyond what you have done before. I continued to learn from Betty Radice when I worked on *The Rig Veda* (in 1981)² and though she had died by the time I did the last Penguin publication, *The Laws of Manu*, ten years later,³ her friendly ghost still hovered over the work, as it continues to hover over my subsequent translations. The translations balance the more interpretive books, filling me up with a world of knowledge gleaned from an intimate and detailed response to a particular author, in contrast with the more diffuse and more self-generated conversation that drives me when I write the other sort of book. It troubles me that many departments do not regard translations as “real” works, that they will not count them toward tenure; for I have

learned most from my works of translation, and certainly contributed something that will be more useful to other scholars for a longer period of time, than my “original” works of scholarship.

While I was working on the first Penguin book, I was also working with R. C. Zaehner at All Souls College on my Oxford dissertation, which I did simply because I happened to be in Oxford (because my husband went to Oxford and I came along for the ride: serendipity) and because I had taken out of that 950 page Harvard dissertation another 500 pages (in addition to the original 950) that now supplied the material for a second work, first the Oxford D Phil. dissertation (in 1973) and then a book, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (in 1976)⁴ Zaehner was working at that time on his wild book about Charles Manson (*Our Savage God*), and I benefited enormously from long, boozy dinners with him at the Elizabethan restaurant next door to the Sheep’s Shop immortalized by Lewis Carroll; we talked about Manson and the Pope and Aristotle and cabbages and kings. I also realized, years later, that writing that book, which is in large part about the evil of death, was a way of trying to make sense of my father’s death, my first major experience of inexplicable and unjust evil. In 1978, Eliade invited me to join the faculty in Chicago, and I did. And the rest, as they say, is history (of religions).

The lives of many women are, I think, inspired by their desire to be unlike their

mothers; but so often, like Alice in Looking-Glass Land, the farther we try to run away from that house of mirrors, the quicker we find ourselves walking back in at the door. This is part of my story, surely. And the accidents of marriage and professional opportunities landed me in a role that I had never dreamt of, indeed had never known the existence of, before I accepted it—the role of a professor of the History of Religions at the University widely regarded as the *axis mundi* of that discipline. Indeed, the discipline itself is now changing in new directions that render rather *vieux jeux* the approaches that were regarded as radical when I first tried them out. Somehow, like a Kafka character, I went to bed one night an *enfant terrible* and woke up the next morning an old fuddy duddy. But I don’t regret missing my fifteen-minute allotment of, if not fame, at least trendiness. Non, je ne regrette rien.

Endnotes

1. *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook*, translated from the Sanskrit (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975); reprinted 1976; second edition, 1979; reprinted 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1990, etc.). Translated into Italian by Mario Piantelli and Alberto Pelissero, and published under the title of *Dall’Ordine il Caos* (Biblioteca della Fenice, Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1898).
2. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology, 108 Hymns Translated from the Sanskrit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1981).
3. *The Laws of Manu*, with Brian K. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991).
4. *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

But it has Some Good Songs (continued from page 12)

of space as well as time, link episodes within a respective film, heighten the emotional content of the unfolding drama and situate the scenes in one film within an established repertoire of conventions from earlier films and more historical forms of entertainment.⁷ Students’ ability to recognize how song-and-dance sequences define the aesthetics of popular Hindi films as a genre invariably corresponds to their ability to grasp a sense of the aesthetics of South Asian culture as whole.

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Footnotes

¹Teri Skillman, “The Bombay Hindi Film Song Genre: A Historical Survey,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, no. 18 (1986): 133.

²Kobita Sarkar, *Indian Cinema Today* (New

Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1975), 1. Cited in Biswarup Sen, *Of the People: Essays on Indian Popular Culture* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2006), 160-61.

³Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.

⁴Ibid., 80.

⁵David Martin-Jones, “Kabhi India Kabhie Scotland,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 4, no. 1 (2006): 52.

⁶See Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 19. Cited in Sen, *Of the People*, 166.

⁷Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions*, 19.