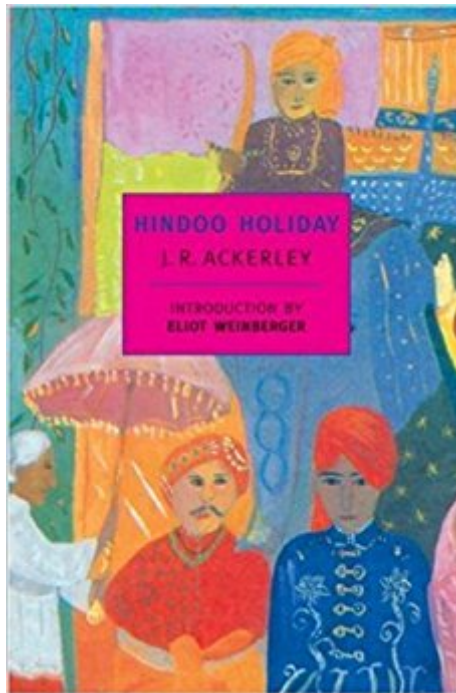


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Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

In the 1920s, the young J. R. Ackerley spent several months in India as the personal secretary to the maharajah of a small Indian principality. In his journals, Ackerley recorded the Maharajah's fantastically eccentric habits and riddling conversations, and the odd shambling day-to-day life of his court. *Hindoo Holiday* is an intimate and very funny account of an exceedingly strange place, and one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century travel literature.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Hindoo Holiday sweeps the reader into a Firbankian world of total absurdity, in which the wildest fantasies of superstition and of sexual variety and experiment are the daily routines of the palace." -- Stuart Hampshire
"His humour is the humour of pity and love. He is an artist of the understanding." -- V.S. Pritchett
"One of those books of rare occurrence which stands upon a superior and totally distinct plane of artistic achievement...It is a work of high literary skill and very delicate aesthetic perception and it deals with characters and a milieu which are novel and radiantly delightful. What more, in an imperfect world, has one the right to expect?" -- Evelyn Waugh

J.R Ackerley (1896-1967) was for many years the literary editor of the BBC magazine *The Listener*. A respected mentor to such younger writers as Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden, he was also a longtime friend and literary associate of E.M. Forster. His works include three memoirs, *Hindoo Holiday*, *My Dog Tulip*, and *My Father and Myself*, and a novel, *We Think the World of You*.

I really liked the subtle humor, but also appreciated the perspective on Indian society under the British Rule era.

A journal of Ackerley's stay in the Indian province of Chhatarpur during the 1920s, "Hindoo Holiday" records and mocks the muddled morality and intellectual immaturity of both slothful Indian rulers and equally pampered British colonialists. After Ackerley returned from India, he spent several years touching up his diary for publication; he changed the names, toned down the sexual content, and removed passages that might be considered libelous. This recently published version is the first unexpurgated American edition, with all the cuts restored. Ackerley's intent was to be mischievous and outrageous and comic; and his book became both a critical hit and, to everyone's surprise, his most commercially successful work. The book is at its best in its humorous depictions of the Maharajah, his private secretary Babaji Rao, and the contingent of valets, including the endearingly sweet Sharma and Narayan. For the most part, Ackerley's portraits are nonjudgmental and fond; he reserves his venom for the British guests and, to a lesser extent, for his sycophantic tutor, Abdul, and clumsy servant-child, Habib. Throughout "Hindoo Holiday" there is a disconcerting, even creepy, undercurrent that revolves around the sexual despotism of the Maharajah, whose predatory advances are directed towards the "Gods"--his name for the boys in his employ. "Boys" is Ackerley's term; at least one is identified as being twenty and several are married, so it's possibly more accurate to call most of them young men. But, whatever their age, these youngsters are compelled to have sexual relations with the Maharajah--and with his wife while he's watching. Complicating this issue is the subtly hinted possibility that the ruler is suffering from the advanced stages of syphilis. (The paternity of the palace's heirs is a great mystery, as well.) Only a few of the youths seem able to withstand his advances, and Ackerley often must come to the defense of Narayan, one of the "Gods" who refuses to comply. Ackerley reports these incidents with disquieting aplomb. His own role in these matters is rather innocent; according to biographer Peter Parker, he limited his affections to kissing and holding hands: "If he had sexual relations whilst in India, he left no record of the fact." (And Ackerley was not known for being shy about such matters in either his journals or correspondence.) Nevertheless, intentionally or not, the goings-on in the palace are emblematic of the corruption, indolence, and decadence of the British Raj. Most modern readers, then, will find much of the tone and material and humor in "Hindoo Holiday" a bit dated. Yet Ackerley's memoir is still an accurate portrait of the time--and there are moments of brilliant hilarity.

What an absolute charmer this journal is. This is one of those books that I've been meaning to read for a number of years, but for one reason or another had never got around to. I'm so happy I finally did. Not at all what I expected. I've enjoyed a number of books covering the theme of East meets West culture clashes such as Orwell's brilliant "Burmese Days," Ruth Jhabvala's "Heat and Dust" and Forster's "A Passage to India" and "The Hill of Devi." Still, I think it is Ackerley's whimsical reminiscence I like best. Published in 1932, I know that some will find this book dated and politically incorrect. I prefer to accept it as a product of its time. The journal covers the six months that Ackerley served as a private secretary to a Maharajah. The author pokes fun at the many arcane traditions and myths of the Hindu culture, without ever becoming malicious. The Indian King is somewhat of an incorrigible lech and maker of mischief as depicted by Ackerley. The stuffy British aren't spared the barb either. I particularly loved this exchange: "... 'Do you like India?' Mrs. Bristow asked me. 'Oh, yes. I think it's marvelous.' 'And what do you think of the people?' 'I like them very much, and think them most interesting.' 'Oo, aren't you a fibber! What was it you said the other day about "awful Anglo-Indian chatter"?' 'But I thought you were speaking of the Indians just now, not the Anglo-Indians.' 'The Indians! I never think of them.' 'Well, you said "the people," you know.' 'I meant us people, stupid.' 'I see. Well now, let's start again.'" Openly homosexual, Ackerley has great fun documenting his flirtatious encounters with a number of the Maharajah's servants - "....And in the dark roadway, overshadowed by trees, he put up his face and kissed me on the cheek. I returned his kiss: but he at once drew back, crying out: 'Not the mouth! You eat meat! You eat meat!' 'Yes, and I will eat you in a minute,' I said, and kissed him on the lips again, and this time he did not draw away." Altogether disarming and delightful (and not at all exploitive). Highly recommended.

E. M. Forster, whom Ackerley emulated in going to India in the 20s to work as private secretary for a maharajah, has a character in A PASSAGE TO INDIA named Miss Derek, who is private secretary to a rani and who "regarded the entire peninsula as if it were a comic opera." That basically describes the attitude Ackerley adopts in HINDOO HOLIDAY, which treats an Indian princely state as if it were wildly wacky. No doubt that might have been true to Ackerley when he visited in the 20s, but this book's humor has worn somewhat over the years and seems at times a bit condescending. What has remained interesting and vital are Ackerley's observations about Indian (particularly Hindu) customs and manners, and his deft sensitivity and understatement in his portrayal of the maharajah's (and his own) homoerotic desires: Ackerley's keen observational intelligence, fortunately, outweighs the dated cross-cultural comic aspects of the narrative. While

this isn't nearly at the level of one of his later works like MY FATHER AND MYSELF, it's an intriguing read for anyone interested in India during the raj or early 20th-century homosexuality.

Loved this period piece showing a vanished way of life in a country which no longer exists. Offers extraordinary insights into Hindu India: social customs, caste issues and simpatico characters. Written with great affection, wit and charm.

Completely fascinating and humorous. This writer is not for everybody, but I really enjoyed his description of his time in India working for a maharaja during the raj. I hated to see the book end.

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