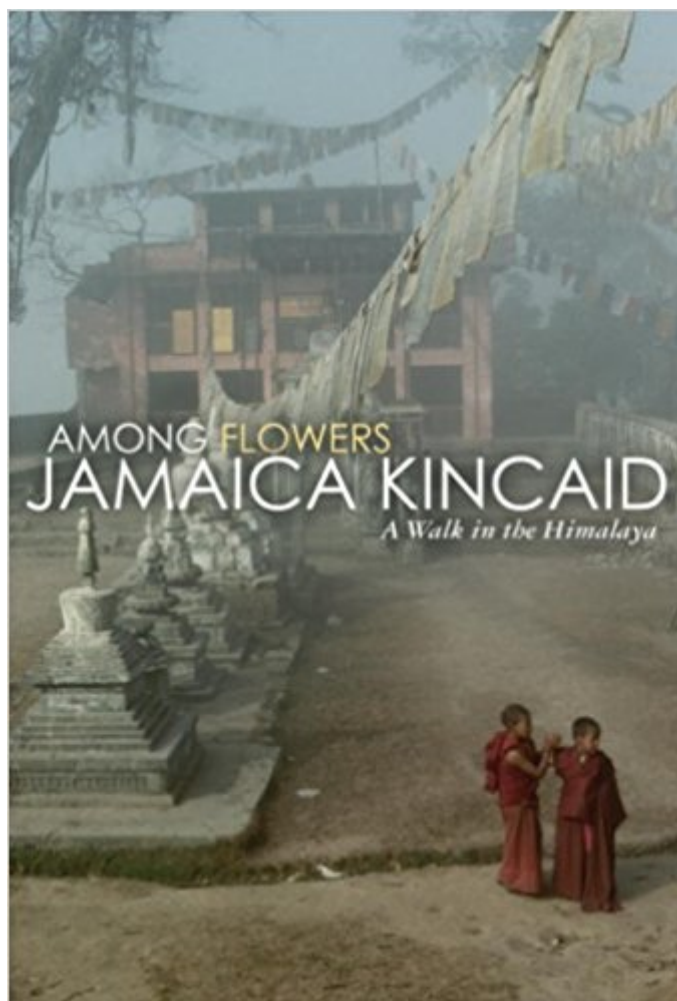


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Among Flowers: A Walk In The Himalaya



Synopsis

In this delightful hybrid of a book—part memoir and part travel journal—the bestselling author takes us deep into the mountains of Nepal with a trio of botanist friends in search of native Himalayan plants that will grow in her Vermont garden. Alighting from a plane in the dramatic Annapurna Valley, the ominous signs of Nepal's Maoist guerrillas are all around—an alarming presence that accompanies the travelers throughout their trek. Undaunted, the group sets off into the mountains with Sherpas and bearers, entering an exotic world of spectacular landscapes, vertiginous slopes, isolated villages, herds of yaks, and giant rhododendron, thirty feet tall. The landscape and flora and so much else of what Kincaid finds in the Himalaya—including fruit bats, colorful Buddhist prayer flags, and the hated leeches that plague much of the trip—are new to her, and she approaches it all with an acute sense of wonder and a deft eye for detail. In beautiful, introspective prose, Kincaid intertwines the harrowing Maoist encounters with exciting botanical discoveries, fascinating daily details, and lyrical musings on gardens, nature, home, and family. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Novelist Kincaid tells of her journey into the foothills of the Himalayas in search of rare plants to bring home to her Vermont garden. Much of the book feels repetitive, in an almost meditative way, as the author uses plain yet lyrical language to record the quotidian details of life in the wilderness. For Kincaid, everything on this trip—eating, sleeping, bathing—requires more effort than usual and sometimes even instills anxiety. Kincaid's details of meals and sleepless nights do

grow tedious, and it isn't clear if the author is glad she decided to accompany her botanist friends on their trek, considering the constant threat of leeches and, much worse, the not unlikely (as she portrays it) possibility of losing her life at the hands of anti-American Maoist guerrillas ("Nothing could be more disturbing than sleeping in a village under the control of people who may or may not let you live"). Kincaid's fear never abates: "At some point I stopped making a distinction between the Maoists and the leeches." Occasionally, however, she is overcome with the beauty of the night sky, pilgrim destinations such as a sacred lake in Topke Gola, or the abundant flora, particularly "rhododendrons that were not shrubs, but trees thirty feet tall." This book is as much about a place as it is about overcoming fears and embracing the unfamiliar. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Kincaid brings her uniquely heightened sensibility and remarkable ability to evoke with equal vividness both inner and outer worlds to a gripping and poetic account of a life-changing plant-hunting expedition in Nepal. Kincaid, whose earlier plant writings are found in *My Garden* [Book] (1999), hiked in the Himalaya in the company of American plantsman Daniel Hinkley, husband and wife botanists from Wales, Sherpas, a cook, and ornery porters. Preternaturally observant and piquantly candid, she has an extraordinary facility for capturing the moment; for describing how the sky seems domed at high altitudes; how delicious the simplest of food is when living outdoors; how she copes with the horror of a plague of leeches; how being among these mysterious mountains alters her sense of distance, time, life. To add to the physical arduousness and psychological demands of their long trek was the threat of Maoist guerrillas, and Kincaid finds herself astonished by and grateful for everything. "Nothing was as I knew it to be," she writes, and that is the sign of a truly momentous journey. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This is a lovely book which beautifully describes an extensive trek in a remote area of the Himalayas. Ms. Kincaid and her close friend, Dan Hinckley, a distinguished botanist, make the trip together. Dan Hinckley has traveled in the region extensively. It is the author's first Himalayan trek and she trains diligently to be prepared for its rigors. The author is a gifted writer who describes the feelings and emotions triggered by the beauty of the region and its warm and hospitable people. Ms. Kincaid's style is most engaging and includes wonderful description, humor, and great sensitivity. The focus of the trek is the collection of seeds for propagating Himalayan plantlife in North America. The passion of the participants for gathering the seeds of rare species is engaging to gardeners and

non-gardeners alike. All who have journeyed to this special part of the world, or intend to, will enjoy this charming book.

Delightful adventuring

Stay away from this book! Jamaica Kincaid's book is filled with pseudo-philosophy and hollow observations towards life which reads artificial. As someone who has trekked the Himalaya, I can only surmise that Kincaid was on some shallow, self-absorbed trip of her own. Don't just take my word for it, read just one of her own passages (pages 27-28): "One group was from Austria but we decided to call them the Germans, because we didn't like them from the look of them, they were so professional-looking with all kinds of hiking gear, all meant to make the act of hiking easier, I think. But we didn't like them, and Germans seem to be the one group of people left that can not be liked just because you feel like it." She can't even be bothered to learn the name of one of the Sherpas who helped carry her provisions, and instead refers to him as "Table" since he was also responsible for setting up the table where her and the other hikers ate. Giving him this demeaning nickname as you would a dog gives you some idea as to the type of person Kincaid is. Save yourself a few bucks, there are far, far better books to read about the Himalayas.

A wonderful book: I'm reviewing it because I'm astounded by the other reviewers' complaints. I've just read it and it's now on the list to assign next time I teach an intro-to-college-lit course called "Literary Journeys". But don't let that put you off. Read it for sheer pleasure. Kincaid's style is sassy, clear, and carries just a whiff of Gertrude Stein--lucid, witty, and delicious. Her alleged whining is not only admirable self-mockery, it's a subtle and effective rhetorical move. (We sympathize, we laugh, we are won over by her honesty, we learn some things about perseverance and about human nature.) And I'm struck by the way she intertwines a savvy awareness of the political issues travel writing labors under in this nutty century with an as-if-innocent enactment of those very problems. I mean: she knows, and makes sure we know, that she is an outsider come to gaze and sample and enjoy, while the people she is staring at carry on their sometimes-difficult lives. But she pulls it off without preaching, and persuasively. Be warned: the book may require you to think beyond superficial impressions. (For example: when the author lays out before us some less-than-ideal behavior of her own, do we pounce and cry "aha" or do we admire the artful and, well, educational self-critique?) But *Among Flowers* will reward you with the beauty of its language, the skill and interest of its narrative voice, and the way you'll learn--right, not about what an anthropological report

might teach you but--about what what it is that travel writers (and their readers) do.

How can a book about a fervent gardener going to Nepal NOT be interesting? When so much of a modern person's life is focused on enhancing their level of coziness it's surely a delight to see someone like the author endure deprivations and take on extraordinary physical challenges towards a lovely goal. Really, who among us wouldn't prefer reading about tent-camping in a soggy field filled with leeches than experiencing it? The goal is to acquire seeds for plants that will survive and thrive in a Vermont garden. The reader feels the author's delight in seeing a flower that's humdrum at home come to full, enormous, technicolor life in a tiny, remote Nepalese village. Even a person whose interest in gardens plummets after sniffs of basil can understand the author's tremendous joy. Which leaves us with the odd, starting with the stilted syntax. It's part eighteenth century, part Hemingway, part Book of Genesis rewritten into the first person singular. She seems to take contrarian pride in being rather a pill on the trip--continually asking the others in the group, "What is this?", losing interest completely if the answer involves a plant that wouldn't cope in Vermont, and--why not?--a fair amount of whining. If the author regrets taxing her companions so on an already arduous journey she stoically keeps that sorrow to herself. Then there are the perplexing Where Was the Editor? bits. Once you establish that you're using Fahrenheit there's really no need to add it to every following temperature. She'll repeatedly describe what was for dinner and quickly tell us she didn't eat. And did every night's trip to the bathroom need to be recorded? Lastly, it isn't a moral stain that the author refers to the Nepalese man who cooks for the group as Cook, or the man who lugs the table and chairs as Table, but man, it sure would have been nice if she could have remembered their names. And as the author doesn't hear the porters' names is she really, truly seeing the Nepalese girls, each one of which she declares beautiful? None of the apparent cross-cultural hiccups would mind if the trip in and of itself didn't scream of First World class privilege. Despite the loveliness of the idea, aspects of the book come across as just another example of the West's determination to Get What it Wants--be it South American bananas, Iraqi oil, or perhaps the seeds is a lovely flower in the Himalaya.

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