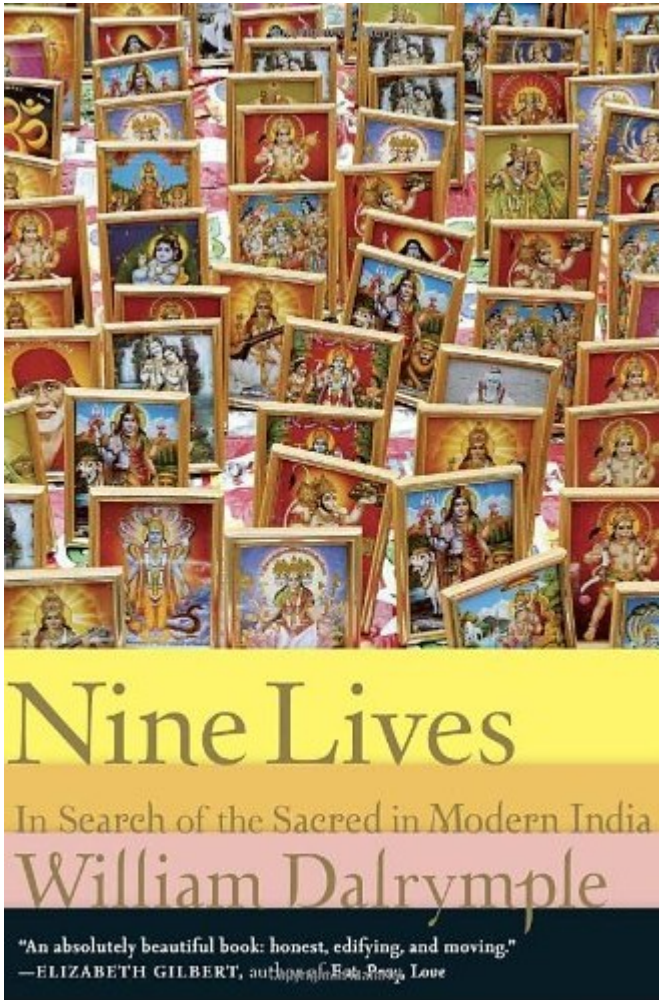


Nine Lives

By [Debra Bendis](#)

August 25, 2010

In Review



Nine Lives

by William Dalrymple

Knopf

"Today, we live with this illusion that we know the world," says William Dalrymple. "The reality, of course, is. . .that there's huge parts of the world which we know absolutely nothing about, particularly in areas of religion and philosophy." For most of us, India is one of those places. With the third largest population in the world, and an economy that's growing almost as fast as China's, one can understand why old ways are being snuffed out.

But Dalrymple sought out "places suspended between modernity and tradition" where religion is in "a state of fascinating and unpredictable flux."

In villages or small towns, he interviewed people whose religions are expressed in what seem—to Westerners at least—rash, dangerous and peculiar ways. Here are some of the people he found:

- In a lifelong effort to become unencumbered and reach for "liberation," a 38-year-old Jain monk renounces nearly everything: hair, relationship attachments, meat and all but one meal a day.
- For most of the year, Hari Das is scorned as an untouchable member of the Dalit caste, but for three months every year he dons makeup and heavy headdresses and becomes a respected Hindi theyyam dancer, who performs elaborate dances when he is possessed by the god God Vishnu. For those three months, he is worshiped by Brahmins who scorn him during the rest of the year.
- In the northernmost tip of India, an old Tibetan tells of how he gave up his Buddhist monastic vows to fight the invading Chinese. Overwhelmed by the enemy, he fled to Dharamsala, where he took up his vows and is spending his last days anxiously repenting of his participation in war.

Dalrymple is a keen observer, reporting on what he's seen and heard, then adding

religious context to help the reader place each person's story into the larger story of India. I was intrigued by these snapshots, even though I realized I'd had only a glimpse of this vast, complex, crowded and enigmatic country.