



One Last Look

By Susanna Moore

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After several wretched months at sea, Eleanor Oliphant arrives in Calcutta with her brother Henry and sister Harriet. It is 1836, and her beloved Henry has just been appointed England's new Governor-General for India. Eleanor is to be his official hostess.

Despite the imported English gowns and formal soirées, India makes a mockery of Eleanor's sensibilities. Burning heat, starving people, insects as big as eggs—it is all an unreal dream, rife with tumultuous life. Harriet gives herself over to the adventure. Henry busies himself with official duties. Eleanor, though groping for bearings, slowly finds her isolation punctuated by moments of elation: her first monsoon, graceful women in vibrant sarees, Benares rising out of the mist. She discovers she likes curries and her native servants; and often dislikes her compatriots. Over the course of six years and a trek from Calcutta to Kabul and back, India manages to unsettle all of her "old, old ideas."

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Moore's captivating fifth novel takes the form of entries in the diary of Lady Eleanor, a British aristocrat who travels in 1836 to Calcutta with her sister Harriet and her brother Henry, who has been appointed Governor-general of the colony. Like the narrator in Moore's 1995 thriller *In the Cut*, eloquent but snobbish Eleanor is not especially likable—she's convinced of her own superiority, even over her own "inordinately sensitive" sister. But she's a fascinating heroine—not only because she teases readers with hints of her unusually close relationship with Henry. During her six years in India, Eleanor undergoes a striking transformation, realizing that her "life—once a fastidious nibble—has turned into an endless disorderly feast." The Eleanor who likened Calcutta to hell becomes a woman able to admire her sister (who quickly falls in love with India), appreciate her exotic surroundings and recognize the folly of her stuffy fellow Englishmen and their attempts to recreate British culture on the subcontinent. She starts to question the idea of empire and to respect Indian culture; by the time Henry's tenure is up, she mourns the loss of her "elation of toiling through isolation and wonder." In precise, elegant prose, Moore vividly evokes the country's beauty and overwhelming otherness, but her exploration of character is even more interesting. Moore spent two years studying England and India in that era, and her novel was inspired by the diaries of Emily Eden, an Englishwoman in Calcutta; as a result, her protagonist is nuanced and convincing. As Eleanor writes in her diary, "The writing of women is always read in the hope of discovering women's secrets"; Eleanor and her creator reveal just enough glimpses to keep readers transfixed.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

There is a certain kind of historical fiction which excels at evoking time and place—the dresses and the narrative voice just so, the moans of the mango bird in the tree exquisitely described—but, like this novel, Moore's fifth, fails to build into something larger. Henry Oliphant, the new British Governor-General of India, comes to Calcutta with his two sisters in 1836. They discover the country's emeralds, brocades, and phalanxes of servants, but are sheltered, at least for a time, from its grotesque poverty, and from political dynamics that will cause Henry's downfall. The narrative takes the form of a journal kept by the elder sister, and Moore has relied on contemporaneous accounts by British women in India both for factual details and for her prose style. The over-all effect, however accomplished, is so studied that it brings to mind the virtuoso performances that the narrator herself records: the snake charmer, or the monkey who climbs tall trees to pick tea leaves.

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From [Booklist](#)

Eleanor, the narrator of this novel in journal form, spends the majority of the time either sick or drugged. This gives a rather feverish and confusing view of British life in early-nineteenth-century India. When her father dies, she, her brother (with whom she has an incestuous relationship), and her sister are left in financial peril. They are minor nobility, and her brother is appointed governor-general of India. The two sisters and a cousin accompany him on the hellish journey. Despite her growing opium addiction, Eleanor slowly begins to gain an understanding of the damage the British empire is doing on the Indian subcontinent. Eleanor is mesmerizing, if not always lucid or likable. Those unfamiliar with the history of the time or place may find they need additional reading to fill in certain blanks. *Marta Segal*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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