

THE SERPENT RISING: A JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL SEDUCTION by
MARY GARDEN (Sid Harta Publishers, Melbourne; Second Edition 2003).
Reviewed by Ann Faraday.

When a guru's not engaged in meditation
A-reciting of his mantra for the week,
His capacity for infantile inflation
Is enough to drive disciples up the creek.
He will take the girls aside for tantric yoga
While celibacy's ordered for the chaps;
If he starts behaving like an angry ogre
He will claim it's just to make your pride collapse.
Oh, with all this yogic practice to be done,
A disciple's lot is not a happy one.”

This little poem by John Wren-Lewis was inspired by *The Policemens' Chorus* from *The Pirates of Penzance*, and the first (1988) edition of *The Serpent Rising* by Mary Garden.

Sometime in 1980, John Wren-Lewis, my daughter Fiona and I found ourselves on a crowded Indian bus, sitting next to a young Western woman dressed from top to toe in white, who seemed oblivious to the heat, noise and smells around us. “It’s a very long, tiring journey,” she said, advising us to pull our scarves over our faces and focus our minds inwardly in order to shut out the general mayhem which would be our fate for the next eight hours. I wondered if she belonged to some religious group, a Hindu nun perhaps. Anyway, we were glad to have her company, as she obviously knew her way around.

It turned out that she was a New Zealander called Mary Garden who had left home many years earlier to find her guru in India. Her first stop had been a visit to the (in)famous miracle-working guru, Sathya Sai Baba, ending after several months as she observed the rich and powerful receiving private *darshan* from the Master, while she and other impoverished but serious devotees were ignored. There were also rumours of his sexual molestation of young boys, later to be confirmed by Western ex-disciples. “At least Rajneesh and his followers were open about sex,” she said, adding that her later years at the Poona ashram had been very positive, mainly on account of all the therapies available from skilled Western group leaders.

She tells of these ashram adventures in her book, and they are lively enough. But the main story centres on her years at the Rishikesh ashram of a beautiful boy-yogi, Swami Balyogi Premvarni. I don’t recall her mentioning this on the bus, probably because she was still raw and hurting from her years as his disciple. Nor would the details of his constant sexual demands (“just raising your kundalini”) and her pregnancy and late-term abortion (“your bad karma catching up with you”), have

been suitable conversation on a crowded Indian bus – quite apart from all the weird yoga and “cleansing” rituals she had to suffer, including the ingestion of post-coital seminal fluids mixed with cream and honey (“nectar of the gods”). The first we heard about all this was in 1988, a couple of years after we settled in Australia, when we turned on the TV one morning to find Ray Martin interviewing her on The Midday Show about the newly published first edition of her book. I recall that he interrupted the interview more than once to advise about giving away too much of her story prematurely, but I suspect he was really concerned about the sensibilities of his typically conservative daytime audience! It turned out that Mary was living in Brisbane, and we’ve kept in touch, on and off, ever since.

So I was interested to compare the two editions of *The Serpent Rising*, fifteen years apart. The first was presented as fiction with no mention of Swami Balyogi’s name or her own as the heroine. The second is the autobiography it really is. Mary tells us that her main reason for the revision was that guru-abuse can now be openly admitted and discussed. Moreover, she believed her story might help all the conflicted young people who had posted their own distressing experiences of this particular yogi on the Internet. Most had been puzzled, confused and disturbed by his outlandish behavior, asking themselves the very same question as Mary had been asking herself for over two decades: *Is it him or me? Was he “testing” me or is he downright abusive?* His Yogant Foundation web site currently extolls his skills as a spiritual master and yoga teacher, adding that “The gems of wisdom and love which radiate from his heart deeply uplift the spirits of those who experience the blessings of his presence.” Mary felt it was clearly time to expose him as a dangerous and violent sex-obsessed megalomaniac.

I know, I know, I know – I can hear the \$64,000 question reverberating throughout cyberspace even as I write. It was my question too. It was Mary’s question to which she has still not found a convincing answer. *Why on earth did this highly educated and intelligent young woman allow herself to be so abused?* What’s really going on? Mary puts the blame squarely on the nature of the guru-disciple relationship itself, pointing out that it is probably the most authoritarian structure in the world, with its demand for total surrender and obedience, and hence potentially the most destructive of relationships. “We were seduced by yogis and swamis telling us what we wanted to hear: *that we were special and they were God-incarnate*,” she writes. “Our need was our downfall. In the final analysis the authority of the guru is bestowed on him by the disciple.”

Indeed! Here, I believe, Mary has hit at least one spiritual nail on the head – the desperate need of almost everyone to feel *special*. This is the subject of a recent timely piece in the magazine *What is Enlightenment? (Issue 26: Aug-Oct 2004)* entitled *Women Who Sleep with their Gurus – and why they love it.*” The author, Jessica Roemischer, interviewed ten women who had slept with their gurus, some of them now spiritual teachers themselves. “If your husband’s a doctor, then you’re special. If you’re with Mick Jagger, you’re special. If you’re sleeping with your Tibetan lama, you’re special,” said one. Another woman sleeping with a prominent American spiritual teacher explained that all the attention made her feel special “like Rhada – a spiritual goddess,” words which might have come directly from Mary’s story when she recounts how “one full moon night, I experienced a love that seemed to cross boundaries of personal love... the whole universe seemed to be dancing with

light and I truly felt as if I was Radha, the most beloved of the gopis, with whom Krishna sported in the lila of love.” Which is all very cosmically gratifying until Krishna takes a fancy to another Radha (as he invariably does), whereupon mayhem descends. Hell hath no fury like a devotee scorned, as many gurus have found to their (literal) cost!

In her fascinating and well-researched article in WIE, Jessica explores the myriad conscious and unconscious urges which lead women to sleep with powerful males. But I feel she may be more than a little simplistic in simply asking why we shouldn’t expect women to be able to take responsibility for their own personal and spiritual lives, even in the face of a corrupt spiritual teacher. “Women now have the freedom to go beyond instinct, beyond social and biological conditioning....taking responsibility for our spiritual journey beyond self-serving desires, facing directly and honestly into what we have brought to the situation, and consciously disengaging the age-old structures that no longer serve us.”

I’m sure that Mary would agree – in theory at least. But I think she’d also like to point out that there was more to her spiritual search than merely finding a father-figure or satisfying a neurotic need for attention. “I want to find out who I am and what is the meaning of life,” she had written on her application to join the ashram. “I want to find out the truths behind this universe.” Later when she became disenchanted, she constantly asked herself whether in rejecting her teacher she would be rejecting God. “If we did not believe in Swamiji and maintain our faith, then the whole structure of our dreams of becoming more spiritual would crumble around us – to leave would mean returning to the lives we were tired of, dissatisfied with. To stay would mean that, in spite of the harshness of Swamiji’s teachings, we would taste things we had never tasted before and would probably be unlikely to taste anywhere else.”

Mary subtitled her book *A Journey of Spiritual Seduction*. Is she implying that the real villain of the piece is not really her dominating swami, his needy women, or even the authoritarian structure of the guru-disciple relationship, but the very nature of the spiritual quest itself? Exploration into God is tantalizing, exciting and – dare we say it – erotic. It always was and always will be. How many of us can resist that call? And should we?

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The Serpent Rising can be ordered by emailing Mary Garden direct
marygarden@bigpond.com (see also
<http://www.users.bigpond.com/marygarden/order.htm> \$19.95 + \$5 p&p) or
internationally from Amazon.

What is Enlightenment? Local bookstores or see www.wie.org.