



Kingfishers Catch Fire

Rumer Godden

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Sophie, a young English woman with two children, goes to set up home in fabulous Kashmir, finding a tumbled-down house in a valley carpeted with flowers below the Himalayas. Settling down to live there she is blissfully ignorant of the turmoil that her arrival produces. Sophie's cook is finally prompted to take action and the consequences of his innocent plotting are catastrophic.

Kingfishers Catch Fire Details

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From Reader Review Kingfishers Catch Fire for online ebook

Jo says

I loved this book. Especially so knowing that it was quite autobiographical and echoed a time in the authors life. It did sweep me to the time and place and I really felt for the main character trying to do so much but failing due to a total lack of understanding of the nuances in a culture very different to her own and the damage that can be done as a result.

Linden says

Possibly my favorite book.

Judy says

In the early 1950's, an expat Brit facing boredom and penury decamps from India with her two children to a remote town in Kashmir. As the consummate romantic outsider with the best intentions, she wreaks havoc on the village and her family. This semi-autobiographical novel is beautifully written with honesty and lyrical descriptions of the Kashmiri landscape.

Sjanesimpson3 says

Lyrical descriptive, a gentle triumph-

Ali says

I do think Rumer Godden is an excellent writer – her depictions of childhood in novels such as Greengage Summer, The River and Breakfast with the Nikolides are extraordinarily vivid. While her novels of British life in India such as Coromandel Sea Change and The Peacock Spring mean I always associate her with India, although not all her novels are set there. She was a prolific writer, and so I still have many to read, I am thankful to say. Kingfishers Catch fire was obviously written in the wake of her own experience of living with her children in an isolated house in Kashmir. This book contains a few pages of Rumer Godden's winter diary from that time – her descriptions of landscape, weather and costumes finding their way wholesale into her novel.

Sophie arrives in Kashmir to live alone with her two young children, the bright, but fearful Teresa and Moo (to who Godden never gives a voice). Initially they live on a houseboat, where Sophie learns of her estranged husband's death. Almost immediately Sophie becomes ill, and the family are required to live at the Mission Hospital while Sophie recovers, a place where Dr Glenister, (Little) Dr Lochinvar and sisters Pilkington and Locke look after them making Teresa feel safe. Once when Sophie was still living with her husband the family had lived in Camberley – a place Teresa associates with safety a place a little like Finstead where The

Aunts live, who send letters, advice, a small doll and plenty of disapproval.

Sophie already has a dream of how she and the children will live in Kashmir and as soon as she is back on her feet she puts her plan into action. Taking a small ramshackle house called Dilkhush for a nominal rent (pledging to undertake repairs herself) she plans to set up home in this isolated place during the harsh Kashmiri winter. Her plan is greeted by concern and disbelief by the westerners at the Mission Hospital who regard the Pundit (whose house she has taken) and other locals Sophie has befriended with suspicion. They are not the only ones to be concerned, eight year old Teresa does not share Sophie's enthusiasm – she sees trouble ahead – understands much that her mother fails to see. For Sophie is blinded by her own enthusiasms – she is determined that they can live simply and frugally. Time and time again, Sophie shows she doesn't really appreciate the deep poverty around her, fairly penniless herself Sophie believes herself to be as one with the people of the nearby village, thinking she can live as simply as they do. Her egotism and obstinate inverted snobbery prevents her from understanding how the local people exist, and how dangerous their jealousies and rivalries could become. Sophie's arrival has caused great turmoil in the village – as the two warring families of the area compete for her attention and money.

“To the Pundit, Sophie was precisely like any other European or American, only more friendly; the friendliness alarmed him. ‘These people are poor and simple...’ he began, but Sophie interrupted him.

‘We shall be poor and simple too,’ she said with shining eyes.

‘But madam, the peasants are rapacious...’

To that Sophie would not listen. Like many people there were some words about which she was sentimental; one of these was ‘peasant’ ‘Peasants are simple and honest and kindly and quiet,’ she said. ‘They don’t want what they don’t possess. They have the wisdom to stay simple. They don’t want to change.’ In a way that was true. Here in Kashmir the boys on the mountains with the flocks looked biblical with their dark curly hair, loose robes and round caps; the ploughs were primitive as were the cooking-pots, the water jars, the fishing spears, the very boats; ‘Primitive and beautiful’ said Sophie. The women like the women of old, fetched water and pounded grain and ground it in a hand-mill and spun their flax and wool; the men smoked the same water pipes as their grandfathers. ‘How picturesque they are!’ said Sophie admiringly.”

As winter turns to spring and eventually to summer, the two local village families, the Dars and the Sheikhs become increasingly competitive. Using the local herbs, Sophie has taken to making her own medicine, with which she means to treat the villagers’ ailments, taking business away from the village barber. Sophie’s cook, Sultan, meanwhile is enjoying his position, creaming small amounts of money off the top Sultan now has a nice new jacket, he struts around importantly and is determined that Sophie should learn to properly appreciate him. The local herd children, who come up the mountain to tend their families’ animals, fill Teresa with fear, a fear her mother dismisses. Sophie remains blissfully unaware of all that threatens her and her children, as things take an altogether darker turn.

Sophie is not an entirely sympathetic character, her casual neglect of her children, as she exposes them to more and more danger while she pursues her unrealistic enthusiasms, make for uncomfortable reading.

Young Teresa is something of a little heroine, she is the grown up to Sophie’s petulant child. In the background there hovers a potential rescuer from home, but the reader can’t quite imagine Sophie living conventionally in Camberley or Finstead. I won’t reveal just how the story ends – but Sophie has to wake up to some harsh realities before she can decide in which direction her future lies.

This was a brilliant book; Rumer Godden brings the region to life evocatively while showing that she deeply understands her characters. I think Godden writes about childhood extraordinarily well, with great poignancy she describes the fears of childhood, and how terrible it is to be let down by the adults who should know better.

Brendan Hodge says

Set in 1950s Kashmir, the novel chronicles roughly a year in the life of a young widow and her two children, as she tries to live off the pension of her late husband (who worked in the Indian colonial civil service) by renting a cottage in a small mountain village and living as the only Europeans in the town. Godden drew on her own experiences living in Kashmir, the book has a strong sense of place and does a good job of drawing out the tensions between the various native and colonial cultures, put into clash by the heroine's idealistic determination to "live like a native". The book reminded me how delightful Godden's adult novels are, and I want to read more soon. My only complaint was that I found the mother a somewhat annoying character due to her personal flakiness, so I very much enjoyed the character of her six-year-old daughter.

Theresa says

"In India a woman alone does not go and live alone – not, at any rate, far from her own kind, not unless she is a saint or a great sinner. Sophie was not a saint, or a sinner, but she was undeniably a woman."

I was left with mixed feelings from this novel that depicted life in a small peasant village in India.

Sophie, left by the unexpected early death of her husband Denzil, has become gravely ill. Taken to a Mission hospital, her long recovery results in new friendships for her, but Sophie will be ever one to question not only her own place in the world but its unchallenged mores and principles:

"She went into the Mission chapel. It was a small whitewashed room with deal pews, a strip of blue carpet, a carved lectern, and an altar; on the altar were brass vases filled with holly, and, between them, a brass cross. It was a little refuge of holiness and quiet in the press and hurry and alarms of the hospital."

"God is here,' said the printed text on the wall. "Yes," said Sophie. 'But,' she asked, 'isn't He everywhere? Then why do they make Him little?'"

Sophie has two young children to provide for; Teresa and Moo. Teresa, the eldest child, needs a home; a place to put down roots, and Sophie decides to take up residence with her two young children in a small chalet-type dwelling near a remote Kashmiri village. However all is not well in the village. *"There were two chief families in the village, the Dars and the Sheikhs; almost every villager bore one of those names, and there was bitter rivalry between them."* A misunderstanding that arises with Sophie's hired help is the catalyst for further upheaval that will have lasting repercussions on Sophie's family.

I loved the author's descriptions of India in the Spring!

"The wind and the cold had gone. Now spring came with a rush startling in its quickness. There were lines of yellow under the almond trees, yellow of mustard; the edge of the lake was a fuzz of green from the willows. Sometimes a warm wind blew that beat the water into shallow waves, but usually the lake was still and it had blue and white reflections, pale blue from the sky, deeper blue from the mountains, and white from the clouds and from the snow that still streaked and hid the peaks. The orchards were thick with flowers, and the air was filled with the bleating of lambs and the lowing of cattle, with the herd children's cries and pipings and in the Dhilkusha garden, the song of birds."

In Sophie's yearning to establish a home among a people whom she does not yet understand nor totally empathise with, she finds herself wondering who she really is and whether she truly is capable of being as independently self-sufficient as she hopes to be.

I have to admit I did not appreciate Sophie's character or have much sympathy for her. She does not seem to have much sympathy for her daughter Teresa and her needs and I had a hard time deciding if Sophie is simply naïve, or just overwhelmingly stubborn and idealistic. In her headstrong refusal to listen to any advice, Sophie courts danger not only to herself and her children, but also results in upheaval among the village itself.

Although I had empathy for Sophie in her situation, (and she certainly was courageous although it could be argued that she 'caused her own problems'), her seeming neglect of her children was just over the top for me. Although Sophie ends up remorseful and suffering the consequences of a bad decision, I have a hard time forgiving her in this book! When ultimately Sophie is rescued in her distress, she stubbornly persists in pursuing her unrealistic 'dream', turning her back on the very person(s) who rushed to her aid. Although I would like to believe that Sophie has learned from her experiences, I also wonder if she were doomed to repeat them.

I did find in reading interviews with the author's daughter, Jane, that incidents in this book were often autobiographical.

Rumer Godden seems to be a popular author and I will be reading more of her!

Christine Dolan says

This is a book to treasure. It tells the story of Sophie, a British woman who goes to live in a remote village in pre-partition Kashmir. She is living in relative poverty, but, to the villagers, she is a rich outsider who deserves to be cheated and exploited. She is well-meaning, but naive in wanting to help the people. Her lack of cultural understanding brings disaster to her family. At times she seems to be wantonly unkind to her daughter, which often makes it hard for the reader to sympathise with her. But her naivety is an essential part of the theme of the book, and is also important to the plot.

But the outstanding part of the book lies in its breathtaking descriptions of Kashmir in those days. I felt as though I was drowning in the beauty, sights, sounds and smells of the place. However, it is not sentimental. The harsh lives and grinding poverty of the people are described in vivid detail, including infant deaths, violence and cruelty.

I will re-read this book, because it is heartbreakingly beautiful. Now I am off to read the other books that she wrote about India. They cannot beat this one. It is a gem.

Martin says

I could not believe this was written sixty years ago. To me, it read like contemporary fiction: an independent woman takes on a vainglorious project and has endless miscommunications due to her lack of cultural

awareness. I first heard about the book in a BBC documentary about the author where she discussed the real life drama that inspired the book. So I knew where it was going.

I don't know if I've ever read a novel with an omniscient narrator who is as unlimited as this one. There is a lot of "Toby later said," and "When it was all over," which flash us forward to the end (or what we anticipate will be the end). But there are also moments where the narrator tells us what Theresa would have said if she were an adult instead of a child, which give us a feeling for what her overall relationship with Sophie will probably be like. At one point we are privy to Sophie's thoughts, and her internal monologue is presented wryly with, "Sophie said to Sophie." We are also told what someone not present would have said if they had been there, such as Prophet David, who would have commented that "A queen has her favorites," when Nabir's relationship with Sophie is dissembling. The narrator occasionally editorializes on Sophie's decision making process, saying that no sooner had she figured out what she was going to do this year than she had moved on to the next. It is amazing since the narrator is Rumer Godden the writer, and Sophie is based on Rumer Godden. So perhaps "Sophie said to Sophie" is apt throughout. That Godden is primarily concerned with Sophie's inability to comprehend the poverty around her or to navigate the social nuance of the various types of people is to me Godden performing a searching and fearless inventory on her own impulses and choices during the time which inspired the novel.

I think it's criminal that Godden is so underrated, although I have only read this one book. I shall certainly read more soon.

Hope says

"In India a woman alone does not go and live alone – not, at any rate, far from her own kind, not unless she is a saint or a great sinner. Sophie was not a saint, or a sinner, but she was undeniably a woman."

So begins the novel, Kingfishers Catch Fire, by British author Rumer Godden (1907-1998). Godden grew up in India and used her experiences as a background for this novel. Kingfishers is the story of Sophie Barrington Ward who takes her two children to live in Kashmir. Her husband, a British officer stationed in India, has passed away and she refuses to return to England to live a conventional life.

Instead she moves to a remote Indian village and rents a small house, hoping to live simply on her husband's pension. But what passes for simplicity to an English woman is luxurious extravagance to the villagers. From the beginning the people question the strangeness of her ways and her motives for coming. There are two rival clans in the town, but Sophie is completely oblivious to their quarrels. She seems strangely unaware of cultural differences between the villagers and herself, assuming that common sense will win out in every disagreement. She wants to help them, but her western ideas of justice and fairness fall on bewildered ears. Eventually her disregard for the villagers' beliefs leads to tragedy for herself and her children.

Two men are put in prison, but although they have caused trouble for Sophie, she knows that they are not guilty of the accusations leveled against them. In the end, Sophie does what she can to make amends. Some issues are resolved and others are not. When I finished the book I was left scratching my head over what exactly she had accomplished with her self-imposed exile in Kashmir.

Reading Gerard Manley Hopkin's poem from which the book takes its title, cleared up the mystery to some degree. In the poem Hopkins writes that just as kingfishers and dragonflies reflect glorious color as the sun

hits their wings, so mortal men reflect God's glory when they are expressing grace and justice to their fellow men. When they do that, they are "being Christ in a thousand places".

A very interesting book!

Tania says

I gave this one 5* for the ending. All the way through, I thought it was going to end in a certain way, but it didn't. This both surprised and pleased me.

Jeanette says

Having read about 7 or 8 of her fiction novels, this one is, for me, rather below the high bar. It held some scrumptious description and nailed the locale. But Sophia is highly, highly autobiographical in the exact time, placement, situation, and outcome sense, despite this being fiction. And that is odd for most of Rumer Godden's fiction. In other words, this held far less imaginary personality of the principles for that highest degree which I find so superb in her novels.

Sophia (main character) is a widow, while Rumer was separated on the way to divorce. But the facts for being totally broke and with two children and unable to get home under war circumstances were all across the board quite identical.

This idyll in Kashmir was a perfect frame for the personality of the daughter in the story, Teresa. That I thought was 4 star. It certainly was a time when life or circumstances or activity did not AT ALL surround the druthers or needs of the children over the onus and purpose of the adults. Moving, moving, moving was certainly not what the children desired.

I love how she, probably without realizing how accurately, captures the exact dichotomy that Rumer had for this situation. It reflects the highest parallel in the Sophia character more than in any other Rumer Godden fiction character. She wants to be a "peasant" so she has determined that she is, and that's the end of the discussion. Despite all the cultural disagreements and different treatments she experiences while living "as one of the peasants". Regardless of her version of "peasant" having two full time servants (instead of the 7 she had previously) and occasion and the association pulls for her getting such a house virtually rent free (7 rupees) per month for 5 years.

Her sense of awe and who owns her own time- it's never for a minute diminished despite all circumstances of reality that try to contain it. HOW unusual she was! Even if adventure, means getting typhoid and having your kids eat nothing but lentils, rice, and assortments of rare vegetables and little else. With a couple of fish a month for any "meat" or protein category whatsoever.

It certainly was an adventure and she was her own boss in this exceptionally stunning place. In Kashmir, at that time, a white woman more than a pundit! Makes you really, really wonder the shock those kids must have gotten when they eventually in their teens had to go to a school with subjects like math in England or Scotland. But they certainly- though pale, wan and undersized and having experienced successive infecting illnesses- sure knew their geography.

Can you tell, I really felt for those kids reading this one. For Sophia, in all her waiting for Toby to save her-not as much.

Dorcas says

While reading this I was thinking how much it reads like a memoir even though it is a novel. However, after reading the author's note it all makes sense. While this is fiction, the author draws much of the story from her own life experiences as a mother on her own with two young children as she attempts to live a peasant's life in India.

In the story, the woman Sophie is a widow (but not a sad one; in real life the author was divorced) and her husband leaves her destitute. She could go home to England but she loves India. So instead, she rents a "fixer upper" in Kashmir and thinks she and the children will just blend in and be happy.

But while reasonably fluent in Urdu, she is ignorant of station, caste and religion and this will have ramifications that leave no one untouched; consequences that almost cost them their life.

Another must read for India lovers.

Suitable for all readers

Jessica says

Quasi-autobiographical, Kingfishers Catch Fire is strange, moving, and terrifying in parts. It's slighter than some of her novels, recounting the eighteen months Godden spent in near-total poverty in a house in Kashmir, but bracingly honest when it comes to describing the relationship between the British, post-Raj, and the independent State. She also doesn't hold back in describing the cruelty that children can visit upon each other, something I've always appreciated about her work.

Astonishingly, most of the plot points that seem melodramatic are rooted in fact; Teresa and Moo are almost perfect doppelgängers of Godden's daughters Jane and Paula, and it's only Sophie's isolation that's exaggerated for effect. (Though not exaggerated by much.) This same period is documented in Godden's memoir, but Kingfishers has an austerity and elegance to it that makes it worthy of its own space on the shelf.

Arlene says

This is my least favorite of the Rumor Godden novels I have read. I suppose that most people can be categorized as a Sophie or a Teresa. Sophies are the people who are adventurous and heedless to the advice of others. Then there are Teresas who want the ordinary creature comforts that come with the predictability that drive the Sophies of the world mad. I am a Teresa so I understood the young Teresa's dismay with her mother. As a mother myself, I cannot imagine living in a place that put myself and my children at risk. The Sophies of the world can live their lives in abandon knowing the Teresas of the world will take care of things when they fall apart. I see that many reviewers see Sophie as a feminist who dared to break with convention

but I find her childish and immature. I also see this book as a cultural dialogue. Cultures are different as much as we would like to think we are all alike deep down inside. The Indian people found Sophie just as strange as she found them when she lived in the village. I had a hard time understanding why she wanted to live in that remote village when she did have other choices, but then I am a Teresa.
