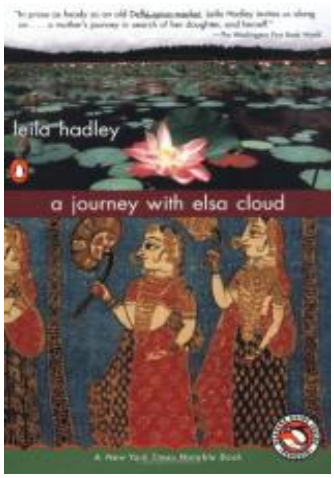
A Journey with Elsa Cloud

by Leila Hadley



About the Book

In **A Journey with Elsa Cloud**, Leila Hadley unfolds an absorbing tale of a poignant mother-daughter relationship amid the kaleidoscopic backdrop of the Indian subcontinent during the 1970s. Leila's daughter, Veronica, is among the vanguard of counterculture self-seekers who have settled in Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital-in-exile, in order to study Buddhism with the Dalai Lama's court. But while she accepts her daughter's Buddhist ideology, it's hard for Leila not to take this rejection of her home country's culture as a rejection of herself as well. She jumps at an invitation to visit Veronica, and the two go on an extended exploration of India as a means of repairing past estrangements. It is an irony of the book that what makes Leila's journey so rewarding for the reader is also at times what continues to distance the pair.

Leila's insatiable thirst for connections causes an encyclopedic storehouse of memories and ideas to be triggered in her mind by the images and objects they encounter along the way. Whether they are wandering ancient ruins, paddling over remote lagoons, shopping in crowded urban markets, learning the intricacies of local industries, attending religious festivals, or interacting with any of the dizzying cross section of Indian peoples they encounter along the way, Leila's active intelligence drives her to connect what she sees with personal memories, historic contexts, larger cultural perspectives, posited links to the West, and downright free associations.

Veronica is of an opposing temperament. Nicknamed Elsa Cloud after a childhood statement, "I'd like to be the sea, the jungle, or else a cloud," she seeks detachment rather than connections. She possesses the uncluttered state of a mind contained entirely within the present. "Don't you ever see things just as they are, now?" she asks her mother. "Why does everything always remind you of something else?" It is an admirable goal that Veronica seeks, but one that, for her mother, keeps her tantalizingly out of reach. Only over the course of their months-long exploration do the recriminations and misunderstandings of the past slowly trickle out of the closet.

Over the course of their magnificent exploration of "all the circumstances of a remote time and place," mother and

daughter engage in the equally fascinating journey back toward one another. To be allowed to participate in the process with them through the medium of Leila Hadley's sharp observation and sensual prose is a singular experience that reveals much about India, humanity, and the most essential connections between people.

Discussion Guide

1. According to Veronica's Buddhist ideology, emotions are obstacles from which to detach and float above. Leila views her daughter's "detachment" as repression. Is it possible to truly detach from emotions and achieve a state of painless, beneficent bliss? Which interpretation does Veronica's behavior favor? How about the Tibetan monks? What common ground between the two theories does Leila find in Dharamsala?

2. The ideological conflicts between Veronica and Leila can also be viewed as the archetypal struggle between mothers and daughters-the daughter asserting distance in order to maintain a separate identity; the mother seeking to close the space between the two. How does this dynamic manifest itself throughout the book?

3. One of Leila's great gifts is her ability to connect events and objects of the present with a vast internal encyclopedia of interconnected ideas, memories, and associations. Veronica, by contrast, often prefers to experience the world without seeking to understand the "Felliniesque" chaos of sensations that fly by. Is Leila's power of association a defense mechanism against living in the present?

4. In Dharamsala, we find the Tibetans engaged in an exhaustive project of recording their culture to preserve it from oblivion. Is this in conflict with their quest to become indifferent to impermanence?

5. Leila learns during the journey that Veronica's teenage sexual exploration was not mere hedonistic pleasure-seeking, but a quest to find a man worthy of loving. In what sense is Veronica's spiritual odyssey a rejection of that previous search? In what sense is it a continuation?

6. Throughout the memoir, we learn of the separate techniques used by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in order to gain cultural ascendancy in India. The Hindus and Buddhists assimilated pre-existing religions into their own, creating a mind-boggling panorama of deities under a single culture. Islam attempted to destroy all trace of the existing Hindu religion in order to impose its own. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each technique for the religion in question?

7. During India's New Year Festival of Holi, lower castes attack higher castes, wives assault husbands, children berate adults, normally servile hotel clerks splatter their guests with bright-colored dye, and sexual license reigns supreme. How does this abandonment of Hindu social restrictions paradoxically function in the service of those same strictures?

8. We learn that Tibetan Buddhists leave their dead outside for the animals and vultures to consume. How is this a reflection of their cultural and religious perspective, and why is this practice an anathema to Western values? In what sense is the practice of sealing the dead in caskets and burying them a reflection of the Judeo-Christian worldview?

9. The Tibetans also believe in the active participation of the patient in the process of overcoming sickness and of dying. What penalty does Western culture pay for denying the normality of illness and death and treating them as an aberration?

10. How reliable a witness is Leila to her own behavior and motivations? Is her perspective skewed when discussing her daughter? How would the book have appeared different to the reader if it had been presented in the form of a novel? What does the memoir genre enable the author to do that would have been more difficult in the medium of fiction?

Author Bio

Leila Hadley, born in New York in 1925, has been traveling since she was six months old. She has ventured into little-known regions of India, Tibet, North and South Africa, the Far and Middle East, Central America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Her award-winning book, **Give Me the World** (Simon & Schuster, 1958), chronicles a journey from Singapore to Naples made with her four-year-old son, four men, and a dog aboard a three-masted schooner. This book, now considered a classic of travel memoirs, was followed by **Tibet: Twenty Years After the Chinese Takeover**, the story of her travels through the occupied nation during the 1970s, along with several other books that earned her the sobriquet of "the walking Bible of family travel": **How to Travel with Children in Europe**, **Fielding's Guide to Traveling with Children in Europe**, and **Traveling with Children in the U.S.A.**

Leila Hadley is co-founder of Wings Trust, an organization dedicated to the archival preservation of women's explorations and the furtherance of women explorers. In 1992, she joined the board of **Tricycle: The Buddhist Review**, for which she is also a consulting editor. She is an elected member of PEN, the Society of Woman Geographers, and the Explorers Club. She serves on the board of directors of Tibet House, Fishers Island Conservancy, and on the guest board of the New York Academy of Medicine.

Leila Hadley is married to Henry Luce III and lives in New York and on Fishers Island.

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