

# The Peacock Spring Short Guide

## The Peacock Spring by Rumer Godden

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## Social Concerns

Godden enriches seven of her novels with her judicious use of her experiences in India. *The Peacock Spring* is the most mature of these. It addresses several issues which were certainly compelling before India became independent, although they are chiefly of historic interest now. Godden describes the social superiority of the English in India, still operative in Una's and Hal's attitudes toward servants and toward most other Indians, particularly Hem, a gifted medical student. Alix's mother, a Eurasian, and Alix herself are despised as half-breeds, a degradation which the beautiful Alix strives to overcome; her mother has long since accepted her status and revels in coarse pleasures and garish taste.

Finally, in one powerful incident Godden describes the elopement of Ravi, a Brahmin working for Sir Edward as a second gardener, and Una, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the English family. They begin the long journey, mostly on foot, to Ravi's grandmother. Una, who has adopted Indian dress, becomes an Indian woman in Ravi's eyes, and he treats her as such: as an inferior who must obey him unquestioningly during the arduous trip, a great hardship for Una who is already pregnant. Una is enraged and heartbroken at the same time. To the Western reader, the vision of her future is unbearable. Fortunately she is rescued from her folly by her father and by a miscarriage. The lot of Indian women is vividly described in the sharp contrast between the position of Una before and after her elopement with Ravi. The happy ending, for which Godden is sometimes taken to task by reviewers, is a welcome relief for most readers.



## Techniques

Godden's childhood in India, where the British held semi-royal status, and her frequent later visits enrich her descriptions. The house made available to Sir Edward Gwithiam because of his diplomatic services for the United Nations owes much to Godden's memories of their homes in various Indian villages along the tributaries of the Ganges River. She fills the house with servants, Indian and Chinese, who must have awed the young Godden girls. The accuracy of her descriptions, reviewers have said, brings the reader "the sights, the sounds, the smells of India."

Hal's crush on a handsome, effete, young ex-Maharajah brings the reader into contact with Indians of enormous wealth who have no other concern than how to spend their money pleasantly.

One is fascinated by the almost photographic nicety with which Godden brings readers in contact with Ravi, who writes by the light of a lamp in the hut at the end of the garden. Most readers find the complex Ravi, despite his mistreatment of Una, to be irresistibly appealing.



## Themes/Characters

Godden's attitude toward men is somewhat ambivalent in *The Peacock Spring*. In earlier novels — and to some degree in *The Peacock Spring* — they serve to rescue women and children from insurmountable obstacles.

Their characters are hinted at rather than delineated. One is grateful, nonetheless, when they arrive. Sir Edward Gwithiam certainly fulfills this role in *The Peacock Spring*, but he is more than a rescuer. He is a noble person who, although deceived earlier by Alix's claim to a degree from the Sorbonne and by her concealment of her "raffish" Eurasian mother, nonetheless insists that his marriage to Alix will take place, chiefly one presumes because he still loves her.

Ravi, the young Brahmin poet, is dark and handsome and completely self-centered. He speedily releases Una from her troth when Sir Edward threatens him with criminal prosecution for abducting a minor. Ravi goes on to receive a coveted prize for his poetry, while Una puts together her shattered life. Hem, the young, earnest medical student and Ravi's friend, expresses his disapproval of the love affair from the beginning, but refuses to betray his friend's whereabouts when questioned.

Una and her younger sister, Hal, reflect a frequent theme of Godden's novels: the conflict between children, especially young adolescents, and the adult world around them. In this novel the battle lines are clearly drawn between Una, a gifted mathematics student preparing for university studies, and Alix, a totally inadequate governess to the girls who is appointed to this post to legitimize her presence in Sir Edward's home. Alix's position is agonizing, but the alternative — admitting her deception to Sir Edward — is unthinkable. She is relieved when the truth is finally out.



## Key Questions

The Peacock Spring is one of several books by Godden about India. It is typical of her work in its portrayal of the contrasts between English and Indian cultures and its use of India as an exotic setting for the adventures of her characters. Una's adventure is largely a bad one. Pregnant at fifteen, treated like a serf by Ravi, and not respected by the Indians, Una seems headed for misery and anguish. Her rescue by Edward comes just in time; she does look like she could bear much more pain. In an odd turn of expectations, frequently found in Godden's fiction, what would normally be a tragedy — the loss of Una's child — seems like a good event, allowing Una to separate herself from her awful experiences with Ravi. Any of this should stir emotions and generate discussion.

Other avenues for discussing the novel may be more commonplace, but are likely to be effective. The whole issue of colonialism and India can be the focus of heated debates. So too can be the issue of Western writers depicting the Indian culture and people in their works. Is Godden merely using India as an exotic backdrop for a plot that could take place anywhere? Does she make good of culture and setting?

1. Alix and her mother have different responses to their social status.

Why? Which one will manage to have the happier life?

2. What attitudes toward Indian culture are reflected in the relationship between Ravi and Una? It would be worth researching the lives of Indian women and contrasting what one finds with the depiction in *The Peacock Spring*. How would American women respond if they were treated the way Una is?

3. Why does Alix lie? How good is she at it? Should Edward trust her?

What are the consequences of her lying? Does she get off too easily?

4. What is the status of the English characters in India? How do they behave toward the Indians? Is there any social criticism here?

5. What makes Ravi appealing? Is he not a cruel, even abusive, man?

6. Godden has written several novels about India. Part of their appeal for American readers may be their depiction of an exotic — to Western eyes — landscape and people. How much does *The Peacock Spring* tell us about India in the time of the English occupation?

What makes the depiction interesting?

7. Godden's fiction often bridges the gap between writings for youngsters and writings for adults. What about *The Peacock Spring* might appeal to young readers? What might



appeal to grownups? The novel depicts some nasty aspects of human behavior. Does this make it a book for adults only, or does it add to its value for teen-age readers?

8. An almost inevitable question about any book written by a Western author about India is its fairness in depicting the culture and people of India. What about *The Peacock Spring* could prove objectionable to Indian readers? Is the novel honest in its portrayals, so that what objections there may be should be ignored, or is the novel dishonest in some way? Is it racist?

9. How well do the English come off in the novel? Do they help or harm India? How do the Indians in *The Peacock Spring* regard the English? Are these attitudes realistic? Are they romanticized?

10. The novel could be a tragedy, yet it seems to end happily. Is the ending true to the themes of the book, or it inappropriate?

Consuelo M, Aherne, S.S.J.



## Related Titles

Godden has written six other novels about India: *The Lady and the Unicorn* (1937), *Black Narcissus* (1939), *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942), *The River* (1946), *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953), and *The Dark Horse* (1982). *The Lady and the Unicorn* centers on a dilapidated old house in Calcutta which is residence to a lovely little lady who comes and goes in an ancient carriage. *Black Narcissus* describes the struggle and ultimate failure of a group of Anglican nuns to establish a hospital in the foothills of the Himalayas. The eternal, brooding, imponderable nature of the Himalayas sets the tone for the novel. *Breakfast with the Nikolides* combines an Indian setting with the struggle of children in an adult world. It tells of a mother's decision to kill her children's dog, suspected of rabies, while they are safely at breakfast with friends. *The River* describes a vacation along a river through the Indian jungles. *Kingfishers Catch Fire* recounts an Englishwoman's attempt at acculturation, a dangerous experiment rejected by the natives, which almost costs her young son his life. She is rescued in the nick of time by the appearance of Toby, a former admirer and *deus ex machina*. *The Dark Horse* is an improbable story about *Dark Invader*, a racehorse who flees a cruel jockey, ends up in the barn of a convent which needs a horse to carry food to the poor, and is exchanged by the shrewd superior for a good workhorse. When *Dark Invader* goes on to win the coveted Viceroy Cup Race in India of the 1930s, one yawns at the improbability of it all, only to read that it is based on a true story.

Godden's preoccupation with the nature of time, evident in *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*, also plays a significant role in three of her other novels. *Chinese Puzzle* (1936), her first novel, concerns a Chinese gentleman who is reincarnated as a small dog. In *Take Three Tenses: A Fugue in Time* (1945), she describes her grandmother's London house through its ninety-nine year history. Also, *China Court: The Hours of a Country House* addresses the relationship of the past to the present. The novel recounts the life of the Quin family through five generations, each corresponding to the hours of the monastic day described in a medieval *Book of Hours*, which is, in fact, the most valued of the family's possessions.

*A Candle for St. Jude* (1948) and *Thursday's Children* (1984) are set in the world of ballet, so familiar to Godden because of her experience of ballet training as a young woman and her success in opening the first ballet school in Calcutta in 1925. At one time she had more than one hundred students. Her knowledge of ballet and her experience of ballet schools enriches *A Candle for St. Jude's* description of Madame Holbein's tiny school in a suburb of London. The school reopens after World War II and Madame insists on excellence. As one crisis follows another, her assistant and devoted friend, Ilse, rushes over to the nearby Catholic Church to light a candle to St. Jude, patron of desperate cases. "Ollways," says Madame Holbein, in her inimitable English, "ollways at the eleventh minute, something saves me." *Thursday's Children* describes principally the anguish and ecstasy of Crystal, beautiful, spoiled daughter of a local greengrocer, and her despised but gifted younger brother, Doone, in their struggle upward in the world of ballet. They both are admitted into the Royal Ballet school in





London, and finally Doone, to Crystal's dismay, is chosen to perform for the Queen, as the Cygnet in "Leda and the Swan," a symbol and promise of his future.

In three novels children are the primary characters: *An Episode of Sparrows* (1955), which added enormously to Godden's fame on both sides of the Atlantic, is a simple story of a forlorn, neglected child, tragically named Love joy, who finds comfort in planting a little garden in the yard of a bombedout church. *The Greengage Summer* (1958) describes the adventure of five English children left to their own devices in Les Oeillets, while their mother recovers in the local hospital. Protected by Mr. Eliot, a mysterious Englishman, they pass an unsupervised holiday. The three older girls brush with evil and finally are rescued by their Uncle William Bullock. *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* (1963) describes the struggle of two English children to reunite their mother, who ran off with a charming actor, with their father.



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