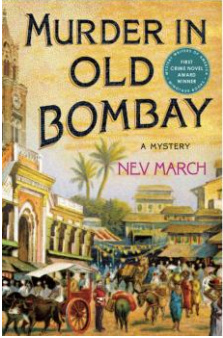


Murder in Old Bombay Discussion Guide July 8, 2024



AUTHOR

Biography (from author's website)

After a long career in business analysis, in 2015 Nev returned to her passion, writing fiction and now teaches fun courses on creative writing at Rutgers University, Osher Institute. A Parsee Zoroastrian herself, she lives in New Jersey with her family. She is President of the NY chapter board of the Mystery Writers of America. She also writes screenplays for TV and film.

Nev's books deal with issues of identity, race and moral boundaries.

Books – Captain Jim and Lady Diana Mysteries

- 1 -- Murder in Old Bombay (2020)
- 2 – Peril at the [1893 Chicago] Exposition (2022)
- 3 – The Spanish Diplomat's Secret (2023)
- 4 -- working on a 4th in the series

Story that Inspired the Book

“In the 1970s, as a teen in Mumbai I chafed against the restrictions my parents imposed: not allowed to travel alone, either walking or by public transport, nor visit new places with friends. I was told, “Remember the Godrej girls!” No-one said exactly what happened to the Godrej sisters, but I knew they'd fallen to their deaths from a clock-tower.

In the '70s, my parents referred to this tragedy as though it had just happened. Only years later did I realize that these events occurred a century ago, in 1891! Yet the unsolved mystery remained in our collective memory, a wound that would not heal. As I researched the events in old newspapers and articles, I found a tragic love story and a mystery.

Born in the late 1800s, the well-to-do Godrej girls were sisters-in-law. The older, Bacha Godrej, was the 20-year-old bride of 22-year-old law student, Ardeshir Godrej. His 16-year-old sister, Pilloo Kamdin was already married, but had not been sent to her *sasuraal* (her husband's home). These two young women had gone to the University that afternoon, climbed the 200 odd steps to the clock tower gallery, and first one, then the other, dropped to their deaths. Witnesses had seen an altercation between some young men in the hour before their women's death, which led to an investigation and arrest.

Doubt tugged at me, germinating the idea of writing a fiction novel to ‘solve’ this age-old mystery. Just so, my sleuth would discover these incongruities and be motivated to explore them.

For the survivors of that real-life tragedy, life was never the same. Devastated by the loss of his bride, that youth, Ardeshir Godrej threw himself into his work, and is now famous as the inventor-founder of the enormous conglomerate, Godrej Enterprises. He did not re-marry. Despite enormous pressure from the wealthy Parsi community—two petitions to the high court, each with tens of thousands of signatures—the mystery of his wife and sister’s deaths was never solved.

So what *did* happen to the Godrej girls? My novel explores what could have happened. Fact is, we will never know for certain. After their deaths, The Rajabai clock tower was permanently closed to the public. Within the Parsi community, the ever-present threat of harm to women became codified in that simple phrase, “Remember the Godrej girls!” which resonates even today.”

The Character of Chutki:

The girl Chutki is based on a young woman I saw begging on the road near Bandra Station, Mumbai. Having been trained to avoid eye-contact, I walked past, ignoring her, but as I waited for the bus I could not help watching her.

Looking barely fifteen years old, she sat cross-legged before a pillar wearing an old cotton sari whose pullu covered the infant in her lap. Her gaze rose, dull, unseeing, and caught mine--what despair it revealed! Agonizing over the little cash I carried, I felt a kinship with that bedraggled girl. Then her chin rose, and with it, a sense of composure, of dignity. She would not give up on herself yet.

The bus arrived while I debated leaving my place in line to hand her some money, and I was jostled up the stairs to cram into a seat. That child-mother passed from my sight but has stayed in my memory to become Chutki, a minor character who became the fulcrum of my novel as she demonstrates the true meaning of courage in a world that does not value her.

TIMELINE

deaths occurred on October 25, 1891

first interview with Adi in March, 1892

Jim and Diana leave in September, 1892

CHARACTERS

Name	Description
Captain Jim Agnihotri – (narrator) mother’s last name unknown father	30 yo, Holmes fan, no family anglo-indian “mixed blood” English father, pale skin tall, arms and shoulders of a boxer 12 years in 14 th Light Dragoons, previous 3 years as a groom for them, then reporter for Chronicle, now Private Investigator working for Framji family

(mother) Agnihotri	mother died of consumption when Jim age two he carries her last name, not his unknown father's
Major Stephen Smith	Jim's oldest friend, like a brother mutton chop sideburns 14 th Light Cavalry Regiment
Colonel Bryan Sutton	Jim's army commander; Diana says he is Jim's "father"; has educated Jim untrustworthy?
Adi Framji	20 yo, studied law in England apprenticed to Brown and Batliwala solicitors Jim's employer Staunch supporter of British Rule
Bacha (wife)	19yo, married one year to Adi unusual, could read books needed spectacles full time orphan, raised by uncle coffee heiress
Burjor Framji (father)	wealthy Parsee landowner, businessman, patriarch rotund, open face, apple-cheeked, laugh lines family home on Malabar Hill
Mrs. Framji (mother)	sharp features like Adi's unassuming, but Burjor reports to her runs a large household, managing tradesmen, servants, and her children's education based on author's mother
Piloo (cousin)	16yo, married, will go to husband when 18 brother's child – parents dead age 7; from Lahore dark-skinned in a house of light-skinned people very unusual, wearing trousers changed in recent years from outgoing to shy
Diana (sister)	school in London, was there 4 years "impossibly narrow waist" "you need an assistant, don't you? Holmes had Watson after all." Nev March: "inspired by real-life lady lawyer Cornelia Sorabji, who wrote five books including <i>Memories</i> , published in 1934. Diana's use of her social connections and understanding of state politics are also inspired by Ms. Sorabji's adventures."
Tehmtan (Tom) Byram (honorary "uncle")	editor of the newspaper "The Chronicle of India" a man accustomed to power === based on Behramji Malabari, a Parsi reformer who advocated later marriages, was against infant marriage and lobbied to allow widows to remarry"
Patrick Jameson	Medical Examiner doctors Captain Jim
Bhimsa	Tower guard, a Havildar

Police Superintendent Robert MacIntyre	in charge of investigation
Francis Enty	bank clerk – saw each woman fall prosecution’s key witness, entire case against Maneck rested on his account
Mrs. Entry	at her sisters?
Mr. Apte	librarian
“Greencoat” aka ?	link to Batcha?
Maneck Fitter	one of accused, also Parsee known to Diana and Pilloo, an adolescent was he protecting or assailing the women? (cab) resides in Matheran
Alice	landlady; older Christian woman; forbidden romance with Maneck
Two Khoja men	Mohammedans, arguing w/ Maneck, who says he didn’t know them
---- Seth Akbar	who?
---- Saapir Behg	who?
Gurung	Nepalese gateman; batman, servant to Jim when stays at Framji house
Kasim aka ?	boy servant used to be in Framji’s house; had come with Pilloo from Lahore; sent back to Lahore when turned 18, died in Lahore trying to return to Pilloo; per Diana he acted like he owned Pilloo
Rani Sahiba	Queen of Ranjpoot
Prince Nour Suleman aka?	nephew of Rani why hates Framjis?
Chutki “little one”	12yo girl bought by Jim to rescue her “a tragic waif who’s been bartered from hand to hand yet still maintains an odd sort of self-composure”
Dr. Aziz	tended to Kasim when he died
Father Thomas	Jim’s beloved priest who raised him at the Mission orphanage from where he had run away; finally returns to visit him;
Father Thomas Watson	Jim’s disguise in Ranjpoot

PLACES, HISTORY, RELIGION

Rajabai Tower – attached to University library and public reading room. Near the High Court. Son built it for his blind mother so she would always know what time it was. The time rings on the quarter hour.



Bombay (now Mumbai) – “a much touted city, under British Law & Order” A densely populated city on India’s west coast. A financial center, it’s India’s largest city. On the Mumbai Harbour waterfront stands the iconic Gateway of India stone arch, built by the British Raj in 1924.

Ranjpoot – Not a real place, but based on the princely state of Balasinor near Ahmedabad, which had Muslim rulers and a female regent till 1882. The capital-city is based on Hyderabad. The princely states have unique cultures and history, but were hotbeds of intrigue and political maneuvering.

Malabar Hill - an upscale residential area known for the Hanging Gardens, a hillside park with sea views and hedges sculpted into animal shapes.

Parsee / Parsi – “affably pro-British” Descendants of medieval refugees from Persia ; prevalent in Bombay. Adhere to Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrians do Not convert people to their religion, so “excommunicated” if marry out of their Parsi faith. The Parsi tradition of marrying within the community is very real, although in recent decades there are many more marriages of Parsi youth to non-Parsi spouses. In India, Parsi women who marry out still suffer disadvantages—their children aren’t considered Parsi. (In other parts of the world they are accepted.) Nev March: “Many of my aunts and uncles did not marry at all, because of this taboo. “

Sepoy Mutiny of 1857– By 1858 was over, East India Company (who had run India) was no more, and The Crown then ruled India. Nev March: “These events occurred three decades after the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, India’s first disorganized bid for Independence from Great Britain, when Indian soldiers rebelled, killing their

white officers. In response, Bombay Regiments marched north to quell the rebellion. In the 1890s, the Mutiny would still have been vivid in people's memory, from the burn of defeat to a confusion of divided loyalties."

Sepoy - an Indian soldier serving under British or other European orders.

Karachi – wasn't able to find any info on a battle there 1890 or 1891. Jim: "Grisly history of Karachi etched into my skin."

Princely States – not under the British Raj, but a British representative in residence. Approximately 400. "held by local Rajas (princes) who must obtain British approval to inherit the throne. If succession was disputed the British Raj could take control."

Lahore – where Pilloo and Kasim came from. Where Kasim died. A northern town in the Punjab province. Two train-days north of Bombay. 150 miles west of Shimla.

Matheran – where Maneck resides

Shimla – the capital of the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, in the Himalayan foothills. Was once the summer capital of British India.

Pathancot – where soldiers and Dr. Aziz need to be rescued from

CLUES?

1. the two women did not fall at the same time – Batcha, then 2-3 minutes later Puli ; if suicide would have fallen at same time
2. 300-400 rupees for household accounts missing from Batcha's room
3. Batcha's maid didn't enthusiastically vouch for Pilloo
4. event occurred in year before Adi's marriage that changed Pilloo from a sociable teenage girl to a nervous recluse
5. attacked after visited Ripon club, asking about Behg and Seth
6. eyeglasses not found with Batcha's body, nowhere on roofs or university grounds
7. why didn't Tower Guard stay with the two women? why didn't he know what time he took them up?
8. in weeks before death, argument with man, held her wrist, he wore a green coat
9. two men in library (one wearing a green coat) did not go out when all the commotion
10. old black clothes, ragged and torn, left under reading table day of death, given to rag-picker
11. found on tower a few dark-colored threads lodged in a door frame (but so long afterwards?)
12. and found a single white bead
13. ladies would have been heard if they had screamed over the outside of the parapet, but nothing heard
14. layout of tower required at least two assailants to keep the two women from escaping, but no more than two since more would have been noticed going up there
15. Injuries on bodies not explained by projections from the tower, experiments showed that bodies thrown from tower did Not hit anything on the way down.
16. a few pages of the Medical Examiner's report were missing from Adi's copy (showed that both women were virgins)

17. Is Enty's wife being held hostage to keep his silence in not identifying the two Mohammedans. Note found from sister saying could not have his wife visit her in Poona.
18. what was burglar looking for at the Framji's
19. Maneck: Akhbar the Raj, has letter of Pilloo's and using to blackmail.

QUESTIONS

1. Was this a good book with some bad parts or a bad book with some good parts?
2. Will the group let Theda choose a book again that she hasn't read before?
3. How well were the dead women portrayed? Did they come alive to you? or were they merely a newspaper story?
4. How well did March address her theme "the plight of women, who, regardless of wealth, are imprisoned by social attitudes", and the ways in which women are devalued?
5. March said one of her themes in this book was: race and belonging. How well did she present this theme, especially regarding Captain Jim?
Nev March: "A good detective must be able to search for the truth in every dark corner. Therefore, I chose to make Captain Jim an Anglo-Indian; this mixed heritage allows him to enter both worlds, the upper crust elite world of British and Parsi society as well as the more humble world of villages, farmers, laborers, and dock-workers. However, Anglo-Indians faced enormous discrimination because both Indian and British society frowned upon the mixing of races. And this led to the deeper theme in my book: race, and belonging."
6. Through the first half of the novel "Karachi" was a big burden and secret to Jim and the cause of his PTSD – when revealed, was it such a big deal?
7. The Framjis all seem too good to be true. What do you think?
8. What do you think of Jim's immediate attraction to Diana? does she match what he envisions for his wife?
9. Do you understand why Diana's acquaintance with Suleman/Akhbar in England was such a shameful secret? Why was Jim so upset that Diana knew Akhbar, seeing it as a 'betrayal'?
10. Parallels with Holmes – Jim had little to read, basically memorized A Study in Scarlet (1887) and kept referencing The Sign of the Four (1890). What did you think about this as a plot device? (some notes:)
 - a. disguises and makeup, "bolt hole"
 - b. "fingers steepled, I considered what I'd learned, much as I imagined Holmes might do."
 - c. "explored the (watch tower) space with Holmes-like thoroughness. Holmes would have found a dozen clues."
 - d. "Holmes always wanted to be first at the scene. I was months behind."
 - e. "We mustn't theorize before we have all the evidence."
 - f. "When you remove the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth"
 - g. "Holmes would not have shared details of his investigation [with Watson], but I was not Holmes."
11. Was Jim's decision to take Diana as his Watson a good one?
12. Batcha threw self over tower parapet so that no-one could use the letter to harm the Frangis without being suspected of her murder. She thought the letter could be purchased until the last few minutes. Is it credible / plausible that she thought all this before she jumped?

13. What do you think they should have been done with the letter? Why? Do you think **they made the right choice?**
14. Were you happy with the ending? or did it seem contrived?
15. And for future books in the series:
 - a. one reviewer says there were some clues in this book as to who Jim's father was – did you pick up on them?
 - b. the series is titled "Captain Jim and Lady Diana" – thoughts as to where the Lady title comes from?
 - c. do you think the blackmail subject will come back to haunt them?

QUOTES

Do you have others??

1. Adi: "You'd like to be...Sherlock Holmes" Jim: "To use his methods. To investigate what the police...might have missed."
2. "Anglo-Indian is rarely welcomed, and finding a wife would be difficult" Jim
3. Jim: "Perhaps Adi could help me. I need a Watson after all."
4. Diana to Jim "In a Study in Scarlet Watson made a list of Holmes' areas of knowledge and lack thereof. I warn you, I shall do the same.
5. "You're the sort who dives into rivers when people are drowning, aren't you? Diana to Jim
6. Diana to Jim "You've left the army, but the army hasn't left you."
7. Jim "I liked the sense of slipping in and out undetected. If one fit into the picture, few people looked closer."
8. "I'd been taken by a band of children!" Jim "I'd accumulated three boys, an injured girl, and a baby."