

Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey Into Bhutan

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At age 24 Jamie Zeppa, a Canadian who had never been outside of North America, said goodbye to her fiancé and her plans for graduate school and moved to Bhutan, a remote Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas.

Beyond the Sky and the Earth is an autobiographical work that details her experiences and transformations after spending three years in Bhutan. It is as much a book about Zeppa's day-to-day life in Bhutan as it is about the personal awakenings and realizations that she had while living there.

Visitors to Bhutan, an increasingly hot tourist destination, are still few and far between, largely because of tight government restrictions on entry, visa requirements, and a law requiring tourists to spend at least \$200 a day there. There aren't many books on Bhutan, and even fewer first-hand accounts of life there. *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* stands out as both an informative introduction to the people and culture of Bhutan and as a beautiful piece of travel literature set against the backdrop of one of the most remote and unspoiled places on earth.

Zeppa recounts her experiences living abroad, such as learning to live without electricity and carrying on a forbidden affair with one of her students, in such a compelling way that even someone who has never left home will become entranced by her story and captivated by her unique experiences.

Naturally, Zeppa experienced culture shock when she arrived in Bhutan. The hardships she encountered seemed insurmountable, and at first she thought she couldn't bear it and fantasized about returning to Canada. She had to learn a new language in order to communicate with her students, she had to learn to live on her own, and she had to learn to deal with homesickness. Perhaps her biggest challenge was learning how to reconcile her growing love for Bhutan with her nostalgia for her life in Canada, her family, and her fiancé. But after living among Bhutan's Himalayan peaks, lush valleys, colorful villages, and friendly people, and after gaining an appreciation for life in a place frozen in time, Zeppa realizes that she feels at home in Bhutan and wants to stay.

Although to Zeppa Bhutan is a magical land, she cautions herself and the reader not to deem it "the last Shangri-La," as is often done by the lucky travelers who make their way through the red tape required for entry into the kingdom. Bhutan is not without its problems: it is an underdeveloped country plagued by the problems that affect many places cut off from modernity. There is infant mortality, illness, and poverty. There are also domestic and international tensions that stem from the government's stringent regulations intended to preserve the national culture. Among them are the prohibition of foreign television and a requirement that people wear the national dress, a kira for women and a gho for men.

Few of us will ever get to see the place that was Zeppa's home. But her narrative is so clear and insightful that you easily feel as though you are sharing this portion of her life with her. Even if you haven't had the experience of living abroad, or if the prospect of a trip to the furthest reaches of Asia is not in your cards, Zeppa's book is a worthy read on many levels.

From her powerful use of language to describe the superb beauty of Bhutan's landscape to her passionate description of her spellbinding relationship with her future husband, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* draws readers in and takes them on her rocky ride to self-realization.

When trying to explain to a friend what she finds appealing about Bhutan, Zeppa writes: "It takes a long time to find the true words, to put them in order, to tell the whole story. It is not just this or that, the mountains, the people, it is me and the way I can be here, the freedom to walk unafraid into the great dark night. It is a hundred thousand things and I could never trace or tell all the connections and reflections, the shadows and echoes and secret relations between them."

But, in fact, Zeppa does tell the reader about these connections and reflections in a lyrical way. After reading the book, you will have a deep understanding, appreciation, and respect for Zeppa's strength of character and for the wonders of Bhutan.

Beyond the Sky and the Earth is a delight to read in every way. Zeppa's beautiful prose, peppered alternately with funny observations and profound soul-searching, is a truly special and unique work that will leave you craving an adventure of your own.

Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey Into Bhutan Details

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Daren says

I think I set myself up for disappointment with this one. I had seen a review of it about 4 years ago, and put it on a list of books to track down. It took 4 years for me to locate a copy at a price I was happy with, and so had really been looking forward to it, despite not having read anything further about it.

I have just finished reading it, and it was a good book, but I guess I had elevated my expectations with the long wait. It is likely to effect the rating I give it.

I have always had an interest in Bhutan - a country that I think has got it right. As a Himalayan Kingdom, it is already fairly inaccessible, and wedged between India and China, (or more accurately Sikkim and Tibet - already in somewhat fractious company), Bhutan has for a long time excluded tourists except those who pay a high daily fee (something like USD250). This has the obvious effect of minimising the impact of tourism, and as the country is among the least developed in the world, this to me is a positive thing for their culture and their environment.

But I digress. This book, while basically being a description of the change in thinking (eg growing up) of the 24 year old author during her three years of teaching English there, examines in some more detail some of the culture and people of Bhutan. The particular thing happening at the time the author was *The Situation* which was the governing north who imposing requirements for all the people of Bhutan to wear traditional dress - despite many of the south Bhutanese being ethnic Nepali. The southern Bhutanese (who to be clear had been in Bhutan for around 100 years at that time) were significantly under-represented in any form of senior governmental roles or decision making. The reasoning was to strengthen and maintain the culture of Bhutan. This caused some protesting and sporadic violence.

Other themes covered by the book included Buddhism, and the Buddhist way of life; gender inequality - the role of women in Bhutanese society; reincarnation and how this changes the outlook of the school children in their goals for life.

As well as these much more interesting aspects, the book largely concentrates on the authors experiences. This is things such as hating her first month or so; her change in understanding the value of material possessions; her interaction with the other teachers (many of whom were from India, and had taken the positions in Bhutan only as a last resort having no jobs at home - which puts them in a much different situation than Canadians in an 'experience of a lifetime' situation); falling out of love with her fiancée, and in love with a local. There is a lot included about her family and friends not really understanding the change in her outlook and her love for this essentially third world lifestyle.

For me there was a lot of the author being naive, being only young (24 - which to me is not young enough to be this naive - by 24Y old I had left my parents home for 6 years already and lived overseas for 3 of them) and some pretty straight forward growing up themes. The author also finds it hard to acknowledge her eventual love for Bhutan and the Bhutanese way of life (after hating it at the start she loves it after a month or two) in a short term visitor situation is much different from living this way for her whole life. There are a couple of the other teachers she is friends with who point this out to her on the way through the story. Similarly, because so many of the people are poor, they have little in the way of possessions - the author considers this a conscious choice rather than a situation of having no option, unable to see that if they had a

disposable income, their outlook would be different.

There is no doubt the author is being straight up and writing what she thought at the time, so it is honest in its nativity. For me it was just a bit simplistic.

As I said at the start, it is my own fault that this book didn't reach the heights I expected, but as such it is really a 3 star book. Very interesting for some background to Bhutan, less so for me the outlook of a 24 year old who had never left Canada before, being chunked into a remote and isolated environment.

BookSweetie says

Here is a great sense-of-place book. Beyond the Sky and Earth offers a vivid glimpse into a nation most readers will never visit: the isolated Buddhist Himalayan country of Bhutan.

Canadian Jamie Zeppa, raised by a Polish Catholic grandfather in Sault-Ste-Marie, Ontario, has written an insightful memoir about her first years in Bhutan. Roughly twenty years ago, English literature masters in hand, she answered the call from a Bhutan Canada teaching program and set off thousands of miles from home.

In addition to providing rich detail about Bhutan's people, landscapes, and culture, Zeppa writes about her own reactions and experiences as a young twenty-something adjusting to the unfamiliar day-to-day challenges of survival in the isolated kingdom.

While Zeppa does not present Bhutan as an idealized Shangri-la, she does write from the perspective of one who grew to love the place and its people at a particular time in her life.

Constance says

Consider reading instead of Eat Pray Love for a similar experience sans the egocentricity.

Ellen says

This book is a gem.

When Jamie Zeppa tires of her doctoral studies and ponders whether the world might offer something more, she spots an announcement for a teaching opportunity near Tibet. The book Zeppa creates about her experience in Bhutan represents travel writing at its best. In theory, travel provides knowledge. In reality, many people leave dumb and come home just as dumb. Zeppa's journey transforms her, and she gains wisdom in its truest sense, a combination of knowledge and humility.

Time may be the largest barrier to comprehending another culture. Zeppa, who describes her three years in Bhutan in the book, *Beyond the Sky and Earth: A Journey into Bhutan*, comments on the need for time to even start assimilating a culture. Zeppa remarks that, in contrast to rapid traveling and arriving, “Entering [a culture:] takes longer. You cross over slowly, in bits and pieces” and—after a great deal of time—“You are just *beginning* to know where you are” (emphasis added, 101). Further, voluntary travel—to use James Clifford’s distinction—whether done by members of a “shopping-mall society” or not, may be marked by scanning as its *initial* perceptual mode.

Before Jamie Zeppa travels to Bhutan to teach in a remote village, she first receives a thorough orientation on Bhutanese history, culture, customs, and language. Even when armed with quite a bit more knowledge than most travelers would possess, initially Zeppa really cannot “see” or interpret Bhutan. Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, seems small, cluttered, and old to Zeppa, and she scoffs when she is told “Thimphu will look like New York to you when you come back after a year in the east” (15). Zeppa grows impatient at a bank where people push and shove rather than forming lines, while the bank clerk, chatting idly with a guard, blithely ignores them all. Silently, Zeppa fumes, “Do these people have all the time in the world or what? (23). The food and water terrify her, and when traveling to her village, Zeppa thinks the landscape looks blank: “The country seems almost empty to me” (30). Finally, she loses her bearings entirely: “Somewhere south is Pema Gatshel. Somewhere west is Thimphu. And beyond Thimphu—but no, I am too tired to retrace the journey mentally. I want to just click my heels three times and be home” (38).

Prejudiced by her own cultural baggage, initially Zeppa sees Thimphu as unimpressive, disorganized, and inefficient. The surrounding landscape seems vacant and desolate. After spending five months in Bhutan, Zeppa re-sees her surroundings vibrantly: “The rains have turned Pema Gatshel a thousand shades of green: lime, olive, pea, apple, grass, pine, moss, malachite, emerald. The trees are full of singing insects, flowers, birds, hard green oranges, children” and then remarks: “It’s hard to believe now that I once thought this a landscape of lack” (137). Zeppa could only see the landscape after she learned *what* to see.

Provocatively, Zeppa’s culture shock occurs both arriving and “returning.” When Zeppa travels back home to visit, after having spent two years in Bhutan, she finds Toronto enervating. She views her surroundings as “glossy and polished and unreal,” and is “overwhelmed by the number of *things*” (262). Television is “incomprehensible,” the “images fly out of the screen too fast... Ten minutes of television exhausts” her for hours, she’s “shaken by the traffic, the rush, the speed at which people walk,” and she finds the “number of stores...overwhelming” (263). Zeppa’s reactions demonstrate that her inability to “interpret” her home now parallel her earlier inability to make sense of Bhutan. Significantly, Zeppa’s confusion, her sense of being too slow in the midst of so much “rush and blur,” emphasizes the steady scrim of images typifying industrialized culture (267). In short, Zeppa has lost (at least temporarily) the ability to “scan”—the mode of perception that may be necessary to decipher the contemporary “society of spectacle.”

From a negative standpoint, scanning may mark our present perceptual mode and suggests a type of seeing characterized by superficiality. In a more positive light and in the terms of travel, scanning may be inevitable. When Jamie Zeppa arrives in Bhutan, she can do no more than skim its surface and her vision, her ability to interpret her landscape is similarly compromised when she arrives in Toronto, after being away for two years. Zeppa’s and any other traveler’s ability to remember the journey may fare no better. Just as the initial perception of travel is partial at best, the journey’s recollection, i.e., the “stuff” of travel literature, becomes distorted by the degree our cultural lens blinds us to the journey initially, the amount of time we can spend within a culture, our imperfect memory of the journey itself, and the changes that will occur once our memories have been exposed to the shaping forces of narrative.

Jamie Zeppa, similarly, understands that she will always remain an outsider in Bhutan but

wishes—nonetheless—to present her fragments as honestly and completely as possible. Though Zeppa often finds Bhutan a kind of Shangri-la, she presents its political complexity unflinchingly, and never pretends to understand or agree with it. Zeppa recognizes that sight itself does not bring knowledge. What she learns most of all is that “[t:]ravel should make us more humble, not more proud. We are all tourists, I think. Whether we stay for two weeks or two years, we are still outsiders, passing through” (204-5). At best, Zeppa might feel she reaches an enlightened confusion, and perhaps this is the most that any traveler can attain.

adapated from a prior publication

Nate Parsons says

This is one of my favorite books of the last five years. Jamie Zeppa does a fantastic job exploring what it means to be an outsider in a new culture, what we gain and lose ourselves when we try to become an insider, and weaves that delicately in between the sites and sounds of an exotic and distant land. Reading this book can't help but make you want to both travel and wonder what you might be holding onto too dearly in your existing life.

J. says

'Thank you very much' in Dzongkha the Bhutanese dialect is 'name same kadin chhe' which means 'thanks beyond the sky and the earth'. In the late 1980's Jamie Zeppa had just graduated after a masters in English Literature in Canada and decides to sign up with WUSC and go to Bhutan to teach English.

In the 1960's a Canadian Jesuit named Father Mackey founded some secular education initiatives in Bhutan. The lessons were taught through the medium of English, so they needed to recruit foreign teachers. WUSC. World University Service of Canada provided successful applicants with two year contracts, free accommodation and a local salary. Jamie challenges her own education and asks what she really knows. She feels trapped. "I wanted to throw myself into an experience that was too big for me and learn in a way that cost me something". Jamie's grandfather who's education was cut short by the depression argues with Jamie about finishing her P.H.D. "He wouldn't understand if I told him that my future seemed to be closing in, getting smaller and narrower and more rigidly fixed with each essay I completed".

She is posted to a school in the remote village of Pema Gatshel. She feels harassed at first, her small dwelling is flooded, she can't use the pressure cooker, she lives on biscuits terrified of the local food but little smiling faces appear and show 'Miss Jaymee' the way. She lets the spirit of the place and the Arra (Rice based alcohol) flow.

There are some immediate cultural differences. The people believe in karmic retribution. If you become ill it is surely because you have committed some crime or another. Shakespeare's Macbeth takes on a new meaning in a land where omens and superstition are common place. Her cultural misunderstandings lead to some problems. She pays for vegetables given to her by her pupils and then an army of kids arrive at her door, she is very circumspect when it comes to these misunderstandings "the same imperfect self immersed in a completely new and incompletely understood setting, the same desires and longings clouding judgment,

the same old heedless mind, leaping from impulse to action". She holds a mirror up to the naivety of western thought on idyllic landscapes, "You can love this landscape because your life does not depend on it".

Bhutan was a Buddhist monarchical system, the Nepalese settlers felt they were second class citizens. There were calls for a democracy in 1960's and 1970's. In 1975 the 334 year rule of the Sillimese Buddhist kings came to and end. In 1958 citizenship awarded to those who lived in Bhutan for more than 10 years and owned land. Jamie witnesses the tension between these co-habitors which boils to the surface because of national dress codes and language rules being enforced. The Southern want their human rights to be respected the Northern want their culture and traditions to survive. Jamie feels caught in the middle. Jamie doesn't mention it but today Bhutan seems to have moved forward considerably, in 1999 the ban on television and the internet was lifted. In 2005 a new constitution was put in place. In 2007 and 2008 there were parliamentary elections.

She certainly captures the atmosphere of this time in Bhutan. My favourite part of the book concerned her time teaching in Pema Gatshel. *'Today, I hand back spelling tests and Sonam Tshering promptly stuffs his in his mouth and swallows it. For a moment, I am too surprised to speak. Karma Dorji says, "That boy is very hungry", and everyone laughs..... My announcements and queries are growing more absurd daily. ... Tshewang Tshering, you cannot write your test with a cat in your gho. ... Class II C, who is gassing? Class II C, why is there a bottle of pee in our room?'*

Speaking now in 2006 our author is more the wiser. I wonder how much of the insight in the book was from her younger self or her perspective from an older point of view. There was a nice description of the Tashigang tsechu series of masked dances representing Buddhist stories preformed at temples. There are lovely descriptions of the landscape and lots of humour. It's wonderful to witness her transformation from bungling culturally inept foreigner to savvy ex-pat. Some readers have noted some moral objections to her behaviour but I can't help but think that given the circumstances I wouldn't be able to condemn her so harshly.

I found this travel memoir absorbing and a well written piece of journalism.

Akshay says

The Bhutanese phrase 'Name same kadin che', translates into 'I thank you beyond the sky and the earth'. Quite a poetic way to say thank you, I must say.

I was in Bhutan recently, and on my last afternoon in that beautiful country I had visited this really cozy bookstore in Thimphu, aptly named Junction Bookstore. I had gone in hoping to pick up a book about Bhutan. I'd been recommended a few by various people I met there, from books on the Royal Dynasty (The Raven Crown) to books on practical everyday Buddhism (What makes you not a Buddhist). What I wanted was a book which talked about how people lived in Bhutan, what they believed in, what their customs were. I wanted a book about the common man's everyday life, rather than the life of the elite. It is not easy to find such a book, considering how the publishing industry in Bhutan is still in a very nascent stage. I ended up picking up this book, at the kind recommendation from one of the girls who work/chill there(if you are reading this, thank you, I loved the book, and it was exactly what I was looking for).

Jamie Zeppa leaves her comfortable academic life in Canada at the age of 22, to become a teacher in the remote Bhutan. In this autobiography, she wonderfully presents life in rural eastern Bhutan and how she

adapts to a completely different society than her own. Set against the backdrop of the a mystical land where demons, ghosts and karma dictate everyday life, Zeppa brings to life a society where the spiritual trumps the material.

A fascinating read, recommended for anyone who wants a glimpse into the last shangrilla.

Debbie Zapata says

You are 22 years old, uncertain about your future. You know the proper thing would be to continue your university studies, but Life beckons. You feel the need to Do Something Real with your life, to have an adventure, to face your fears. So what do you do?

If you are Jamie Zeppa, you apply for a teaching position in Bhutan. This book relates her experiences there, from the first awkward days of being afraid of everything to the realization that the word **home** can mean something besides that place you lived in all of your life.

At first I was annoyed with our Jamie. I thought she was so nervous, so scared, so full of complaints. But as the book progressed, so did Jamie. She learned to cope with the situations life gave her, she learned to truly appreciate the country she had landed herself in, and she learned important things about her own character. She grew up.

I did not expect to learn many details of the country in this book, it is a personal journey. But Zeppa did weave into her story some history, some political issues, and many customs which made the book extra fascinating. She also expressed insights about any person living in a country other than the one they were raised in. Do you ever truly understand the culture? Can you ever truly be a part of the fabric of the society? No matter how much you may love the country, the land, the people, you are always going to be an outsider. That is a given in any country, but especially in one as complex as Bhutan.

The book ends in 1996, and I was very curious about what happened to Zeppa's life after that. Did the choices she made last? Does she still live in or at least visit the country she fell in love with? Or did it all become one of those magic phases in her life, the kind you can look back on and be happy that you experienced? I Googled Zeppa but I won't say what I learned, only that from what I can see, she seems happy. And good for her, not only to have the courage to fly in the first place, but also for the courage to soar where the winds took her.

Donna says

This might be my favorite book--EVER. Jamie Zeppa creates Bhutan in such an accessible way I feel like I've lived there. Her heartbreaks became my own. She becomes a broader person in Bhutan. She says (not a direct quote), when I lived in Canada, I didn't really think about the consequences of my actions. When I put the garbage out, it was taken away. Here in Bhutan, I am forced to contemplate what will happen to something when I am done with it.

This book also asks, am I doing more harm than good? I think every person who has lived overseas has contemplated this exact thought.

Jamie shows us that we are all connected--that our actions here in North America have a far-reaching impact that we may never see or hear about. She also shows us that one decision can forever alter our life path. It's the journey that's important--and those we love!

Darcy says

3.5, really. I warmed to this slowly, sort of like the author warming to her new surroundings, but ultimately really enjoyed her reflections on culture, language, religion, and more. Very thought-provoking and full of beautiful landscape descriptions.

Caren says

I get weekly emails about jobs for librarians in other places, both in this country and abroad. Recently, a job opening was listed in Bhutan. I remembered that Bhutan is the country with a Gross National Happiness Index (I kid you not), and into my imagination came an image of working in a library in the Himalayas. Hmmm...When I searched for books about Bhutan, this one popped up. The author had put her life in Canada (which included a fiance and plans for getting a PhD) on hold to take a two-year teaching assignment in Bhutan back in the 1980s, when she was in her early twenties. The original position would have been as a lecturer in the university there, but at the last minute she was told they considered her too young for the position, and she was sent to a remote village to teach second-graders. Her primitive housing had no electricity and was sometimes shared with rats. The teaching methods were questionable to her, as children were beaten for just about anything, including asking questions. The lifestyle was communal, with her students and other villagers popping into her home at any time to bring her vegetables or just to see what she was doing. At first she was crushingly homesick. Little by little though, as she kept telling herself that "anyone can live anywhere", she grew to love the people and the place. She was eventually transferred to the university position for which she had first applied. It was in a bigger town with nicer accommodations and the students were the best in the country, with many near her age. This is a beautifully written book. Perhaps because the author has a masters degree in English, she is so able to perfectly capture the feel of the place, and of her own perceptions of it, with her well-chosen words. It is not only a memoir of travel, but an introspective comparison of cultural values and a philosophical look at aspects of Buddhism, which she embraced. There is a beautiful love story too in the last quarter or so of the book. I just couldn't put this down. I may never get to Bhutan in this life, but I have experienced a little bit of it in the pages of this book. The title, by the way, comes from a Bhutanese saying: Name same kadin chhe. (Beyond the sky and the earth, thank you.)

eva says

A wonderful book about living in another (extremely remote) culture as a young person. This is Zeppa's true story about the years she spent teaching English in remote villages of Bhutan in the early 70s when Bhutan was just opening its borders to foreigners. The descriptions of the landscape are lush and Zeppa takes you along with her as she struggles against isolation, hardship and the process of falling in love with with a

culture and also a young Bhutanese man. An enjoyable read.

Chrissie says

The author speaks of her personal experiences as a teacher in Bhutan and how this changed who she was and what she did with her life. I have never run into someone who had such a hard time with change, even those changes she herself chose! There is an awful lot of worrying and whining in these chapters! Nevertheless, you do learn about life in Bhutan at the end of the 1980s, about Buddhism and occasionally she just so perfectly expresses her thoughts. She will take a complicated idea and say it in a few simple words. And I loved hearing about her experiences teaching small children. I fell in love with some of those kids.

Just remember, this is not the book to choose if you want a thorough book about the country. It is a book about one woman's personal experiences. This is about how Bhutan changed [her/u>](#).

Wendy Jackson says

Definitely a five-star book for me: I had houseguests this week and it nearly killed me to socialise with them and not read this book instead. You know the feeling. I should note that I am heavily biased on two fronts: first is that I have been to Bhutan and think it is one of the best places on Earth; and second, I had one of my first formative overseas experiences with the organisation that sent the author to Bhutan (World University Service of Canada), so related to that aspect. Even without the bias, this book is wonderful, and the author beautifully and accurately (sometimes painfully) describes experiences like: the wonder of being somewhere completely foreign; the evolutionary process of settling into a new country; that feeling of having multiple homes; the sheer gratitude and love and relief that comes when you are overseas on your own and your other foreign friends or your new friends get you out of jam. So much - too much to list here. I cannot think of many people to whom I would not recommend this book.

Terri ducaay says

I didn't know whether to give this a rating of 3 or 4, but decided on the later based on how well the author blended together her experiences of travel, description of landscape, history, political landscape and personal changes. The vivid scenes she created not only informed how a place looked but the emotion and personality of a location.

It's a good book to read before going to Bhutan.

Eleanor says

I absolutely loved this book; it felt like a story I've been waiting for, and I think anyone else who has considered dropping all their plans for a safe, solid life in favour of the unknown will feel the same. When Jamie Zeppa decides to leave behind her marriage plans and graduate school applications behind to teach English in a remote corner of Bhutan she is not entirely sure of her motivations or whether she has what it takes, but she does know that she is determined to try. At first it all seems like a horrible mistake. She is

horrified by her living and working conditions, lives in terror of a plethora of tropical diseases, subsists on a diet of crackers and biscuits and cannot communicate at all with her students, let alone teach them anything. Yet slowly she learns how to cope and eventually thrive, discovering that "anyone can live anywhere. You think you can't in the beginning, but then you do".

Zeppa's memoir is many things. It is a vivid love letter to Bhutan, and her descriptions of the spectacular landscapes make it easy to fall for the country as well, despite having never laid eyes on it. There are some wonderfully touching moments with the people she meets as well, especially her first class of eight year olds, who bang on her door at all hours asking to be let in, teach her how to cook and "roam" with her in the nearby forest after school. She does not shy away from the harsher aspects of reality though; accepting that whilst Bhutan may be beautiful in many ways it is still no "Shangri-la-di-da". It is also an account of her own personal development and whilst some may view this as overly self-absorbed, it didn't seem that way to me at all. Zeppa's self-reflection is well-balanced and does not take away from the exploration of Bhutan, its people and its culture. In particular I loved following her exploration of Buddhism, especially her struggles to come to grasp with mindfulness and the concept of impermanence. In fact, I think there are some really nice explanations of the basic tenets of Buddhism scattered throughout the book.

My copy of this is riddled with highlights; there were so many lines which resonated with me, especially as I am on the brink of my own teaching stint in Cambodia, and have been agonising over whether or not I have what it takes to live overseas long-term after that. *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* is not a sugar-coated version of that experience. It is honest about the challenges faced by both Zeppa and Bhutan and the ending is bittersweet, supporting a message woven throughout the book, in Buddhist doctrine as well as warnings from friends. Nothing lasts forever. Yet that is not necessarily a bad thing. And even taking the bad with the good, finishing this book has left me even more eager to "throw myself into an experience that's too big for me and learn in a way that costs me something".

Anita Shirreffs says

Several years ago I was walking down an aisle of book shelves in my local library, looking for something to read, when all of a sudden, "*Beyond the Sky and the Earth*" by Jamie Zeppa, leapt off the shelf and fell into my hands like a gift. At least that is how I remember finding this book, or it finding me!

Since then I have given, "*Beyond the Sky and the Earth*", as a gift a number of times, smiling, knowing what a wonderful treat the recipient of the book was in for. Judging by the feedback I have received, on every occasion, I have been right! "*Beyond the Sky and the Earth*" is Ms. Zeppa's true life account of her time spent working as an English teacher in Bhutan in the 1980's, a time when virtually nobody had heard of this remote, and beautiful Vajrayana kingdom.

Ms Zeppa's portrayal of her life in Bhutan is written with such insight and care for the world around her, that even the most jaded world traveler would find enchantment in its pages and be captivated by her story. Obviously the subject matter of the book lends itself to a special story, but in Ms Zeppa's hands, we are the recipient of a something very memorable.

Reading reviews on the internet for the book, I was not surprised to find that there are many people out there who like me, feel so fortunate to have found "*Beyond the Sky and the Earth*" – and those were just the reviews in English! The book has been translated into five languages German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Korean.

Andrea says

It's not a unique story, but it's well-told and the setting is far eastern Bhutan, a remote region that I didn't know much about. At the start, Zeppa had me so convinced that she'd made a mistake in accepting her posting to teach in Bhutan, that I fully expected her to jump on a plane, return to Canada, and spend the rest of the book kicking herself for her lack of resilience. But no, within a fairly short time she fell in love with it all; the children (of course), the school, her village, her simple life, and of course with Bhutan itself. I was with her all the way.

Christopher says

What coulda been: travel memoir of Bhutan comes woefully undone by a writer seemingly incapable of distinguishing between self reflection and self absorption.

Nicole says

Jamie is young, sheltered woman with a well-constructed plan for her life when she experiences something of an epiphany and decides to embark on a two year teaching commitment to Bhutan in February of 1989. A Canadian who for the most part had never left her native country, this decision shocks her family, friends, and fiancé but off she goes to a country few have heard of, never mind find on a map.

The novel succeeds at introducing Bhutan through Jamie's eyes as she adapts to a vastly different culture, environment, and religious norms. There is a multi-layered aspect to the tensions that exist amongst different ethnic fractions of the country and Jamie struggles to understand both sides as she grows to love her adopted country. It also is a wonderful depiction of her journey of self-awareness and theological questioning. Where the novel falters is depictions of Jamie's new found relationship towards the end of her stay in Bhutan - what was a great travelogue becomes unfortunately like a teenager's love journal ramblings. The novel initially coasts along, unfolding in stages as the country reveals itself to Jamie; however, the ending arrives rather abruptly once Jamie decides not to extend her teaching contract and you only know what became of her life for approximately the next six months. Since this novel depicts events that took place over twenty years ago, it would be interesting to learn what became of the author since this literary foray. For those interested in an outsider's view of the country, it is a nice introduction and worth a preview.
