



The English Governess at the Siamese Court: The True Story Behind 'The King and I'

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Anna Leonowens' memoir of her six years as a governess in the Royal Palace of Bangkok was the inspiration for the beloved Broadway musical *The King and I*, as well as two award-winning films. First published in 1870, Leonowens' memoir is the true story of a proper English governess who is hired by the King of Siam to tutor his many children. A delightful portrait of an unlikely friendship between two headstrong personalities, it is also a revealing peek at two very different cultures.

The English Governess at the Siamese Court: The True Story Behind 'The King and I' Details

Date : Published November 15th 1999 by Tor Books (first published 1870)

ISBN : 9780812570625

Author : Anna Harriette Leonowens

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Biography, Autobiography, Memoir, Classics, Historical

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From Reader Review The English Governess at the Siamese Court: The True Story Behind 'The King and I' for online ebook

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

Interestingly, this book categorized as 'History' and first published in 1870 has long since appealed to its readers and inspired the following productions: the popular book and film (Anna and the King of Siam), the hit musical (The King and I) and the new film (Anna and the King) starring Jodie Forster and Yun-Fat Chow (back cover). From its 30 chapters, we could arguably enjoy reading the whole "Recollections", chapter by chapter, and learn various do's/don'ts related to the way of life as seen in "the Siamese Court" some 150 years ago. However, While reading this memoir by Mrs. Anna Leonowens, I think, we should keep in mind that her world as perceived then would be a bit tedious for her readers in 21st century to readily understand, in a word, we should take it as a historic account in which there might be verified, if need be, by further studies or research.

From the following excerpts, I hope, her texts might help the readers get more familiar by means of setting each old Siamese scene from her observant descriptions:

We heartily enjoyed the delightful freshness of the evening air as we glided up the Meinam, though the river view at this point is somewhat marred by the wooden piers and quays that line it on either side, and the floating houses, representing elongated A's. From the deck, at a convenient height above the level of the river and the narrow serpentine canals and creeks, we looked down upon conical roofs thatched with attaps, and diversified by the pyramids and spires and fantastic turrets of the more important buildings. ... I surveyed with more and more admiration each new scene of blended luxuriance and beauty, -- plantations spreading on either hand as far as the eye could reach, and level fields of living green, billowy with crops of rice and maize, and sugar-cane and coffee, and cotton and tobacco; and the wide irregular river, a kaleidoscope of evanescent form and color, where land, water, and sky joined or parted in a thousand charming surprises of shapes and shadows. (pp. 6-7)

In any conflict related to her work at the Siamese court in 19th century Bangkok, we could not help wondering why she viewed and described straightforwardly, probably as a Victorian English governess, in terms of her critical ways of looking at Siamese people. For instance, we could realize she wrote about her first meeting tinged with ill at ease due to such an unimaginable culture/language barrier in which she did her best in front of the Prime Minister as revealed below:

As we waited, fascinated and bewildered, the Prime Minister suddenly stood before us, -- the semi-nude barbarian of last night. I lost my presence of mind, and in my embarrassment would have left the room. But he held out his hand, saying, "Good morning, sir! Take a seat, sir!" which I did somewhat shyly, but not without a smile for his comical "sir". ...

...

When this reasonable request was interpreted to him – seemingly in a few monosyllables – he stood looking at me, smiling, as if surprised and amused that I should have notions on the subject of liberty. ... Some such thought must have passed through his mind, for he said abruptly, "You not married!"

I bowed.

"Then where will you go in the evening?"

"Not anywhere, your Excellency. I simply desire to secure for myself and my child some hours of privacy and rest, when my duties do not require my presence elsewhere."

"How many years your husband has been dead?" he asked.

I replied that his Excellency had no right to pry into my domestic concerns. His business was with me as a governess only; on any other subject I declined conversing. I enjoyed the expression of blank amazement with which he regarded me on receiving this somewhat defiant reply. "Tam chai!" ("Please yourself!") he said, ... (pp. 15-17)

Having received some 'Likes' from my GR friends today (2017.02.27), I think her readers would be eager to read on her conversations, observations or what she kept in mind when she first met King Mongkut (Rama IV) who had written to offer her post as an English governess to teach his young children. And here is her observant account in an evening meeting in April, 1862:

A flood of light sweeping through the spacious Hall of Audience displayed a throng of noblemen in waiting. None turned a glance, or seemingly a thought, on us, and, my child being tired and hungry, I urged Captain B---- to present us without delay. At once we mounted the marble steps, and entered the brilliant hall unannounced. Ranged on the carpet were many prostrate, mute, and motionless forms, over whose heads to step was a temptation as drollly natural as it was dangerous. His Majesty spied us quickly, and advanced abruptly, petulantly screaming, ""Who? who? who?"

Captain B---- (who, by the by, is a titled nobleman of Siam) introduced me as the English governess, engaged for the royal family. The king shook hands with us, and immediately proceeded to march up and down in quick step, putting one foot before the other with mathematical precision, as if under drill. "Forewarned, forearmed!" my friend whispered that I should prepare myself for a sharp cross-questioning as to my age, my husband, children, and other strictly personal concerns. Suddenly his Majesty, having cogitated sufficiently in his peculiar manner, with one long final stride halted in front of us, and, pointing straight at me with his forefinger, asked, "How old shall you be?"

... (p. 57)

Reading this memoir, I think, should be a delight to those keen on observing how people in the past acted, queried, answered, etc. since there would be something different from how we do in the modern world. A reason is that we should, more or less, learn from history keeping that in mind and trying to understand them in their contexts.

Christopher Sumpter says

I think I remember hearing that *Anna and the King* was written, because this original version was not really suited to a popular audience. I think I can understand that view. This book is good when it is a memoir, not so good when it digresses into being a travelogue, a history primer or a political treatise. The memoir has a fine middle, but no beginning whatsoever. The reader is simply dumped into the middle of the story without any hint of who the characters are. The story does come to a logical conclusion, but then several chapters are tagged on after the ending--a travel account of a visit to a Cambodian temple and a myth explaining the origins of that temple. The writing is a bit stiff at points, but the greater issue is a lack of organization integrity and solid editing.

LadySabrina says

Leonowens, Anna. The English Governess at the Siam Court. Tom Doherty and Associates. New York. 1999.

Ana Leonowens' autobiographical book The English Governess and the Siamese Court, reveals her experience during her six years as governess to the King of Siam's family in the Royal Palace at Bangkok. It is the true story and inspiration behind the hit musical, "The King and I". Based on Leonowen's experience in Thailand and the many offenses and cultural challenges she endured as a governess novel. The exotic locale of Thailand make the novel read more as travel literature than predictable governess novel set in rigidly status conscious England. Leonowens has the ability to transport you to Siam during the years between 1870-1876. Her descriptions of her environment, in sensual and sophisticated language gives the reader a tactile and accessible lens with which to experience her life as an English woman in a foreign land. I enjoyed reading this book.

Samantha says

Bleh~~! I had high hopes for this audio book! I felt like I was listening to an encyclopedic version of the history of Siam..... ZzZzZz!

Julie says

I enjoyed reading about the true story of "Anna and the King" or "The King and I", from the actual Anna. It was historically fascinating. And although her racism and closed mindedness is somewhat disappointing by our modern standards, it gives true insight into the perceptions of the west towards the cultures of the east in the 1800s. It is also going to be at least somewhat of a disappointment if you are a fan of the movie "The King & I", as the real story isn't nearly as romantic.

Tony says

THE ENGLISH GOVERNESS AT THE SIAMESE COURT. (1870). Anna Harriette Leonowens. ***. We all know the story of how the author was engaged by the king of Siam (Thailand) to act as a tutor in English and governess for his children and any of his wives who were interested. In this memoir – which

later examination showed it to be highly inflated in many of its assertions – Anna tells the story of her engagement and her subsequent experiences in this foreign land. The story we really know is that told by subsequent author Margaret Landon, in her novel, “Anna and the King of Siam” (1944). It was that novelization that was subsequently taken up by Rodgers and Hammerstein and turned into their classic Broadway hit, “The King and I,” and, subsequently, into three different films. The king of this story was Somdet Phra Paramindr Maha Mongkut. He was known, for short, as King Mongkut. His palace was in Bangkok, the City of the Angels. This was a relatively new city since the destruction of the old capital, Ayuthis, by the Burmese. Anna had a potentially large group to teach: King Mongkut had, by the end of his life, sired thirty-nine sons and forty-three daughters. These were the issue of twenty-seven royal mothers. The author goes into detail about the life in the palace, the history of the country, the harem system, and her treatment while she was there. Anna’s party as she arrived at Bangkok consisted of her son (called Boy throughout the book), Moonshee, her Persian teacher, and Beebee, her Hindostanee nurse. The writing style used was florid – typical for the times – and she managed to stretch the facts so that more exciting incidents could be included to attract a larger readership. She led an active life both before and after her experiences in Thailand, and it is worth reading about it in several articles on the web. If you are looking for “The King and I,” this isn’t it – but it was the basis for that story.

Ebookwormy1 says

I read this book a few years ago. I enjoyed it, though i had some reservations about it's accuracy. It is a well written memoir, but such work is only as accurate as the perception of the individual writing it. I talked with a friend from Thailand (formerly Siam), and she told me about the controversy surrounding Anna and that this book and all films from it, were banned in Thailand. At the same time, she said she was thrilled that I was interested and reading about Thailand! :) She was a wonderful, intelligent woman, I miss her and wish I'd gotten to know her better.

For a concise examination of disparities, read:

http://members.tripod.com/king_anna/l...

When I read the book, I found myself respecting the King as presented. What he accomplished in Siam/Thailand, resisting British colonial ambition, is quite amazing. He is presented as a strong leader, facing difficult challenges in the life of his nation who has to make some daring and courageous choices, yet still has an affection for his children and wives (within the context of a harem, which remains somewhat unfathomable to me). I wanted to read more about Thai history, but as it's not easy to find, I haven't... yet.

As for Anna, she is, as one would expect from her personal account, presented favorably and appears to have considerable influence. I am not willing to quite dismiss her as readily as some within Thailand, as my experience has been that only those present can really say what the relationships were like. Either way, Anna was a pretty plucky single mom in a time that wasn't favorable to her status. She was probably a flawed human being (aren't we all!), yet she did manage to make a life for her and her son. I may not agree with everything she did to accomplish that, but my assertions remain hypothetical, as I was not given her shoes to walk.

In conclusion, I found the writing a good record of one person's perspective. But given questions about Anna, it should be taken more as a story of historical fiction, than history. There is much to admire about Anna and the King. There is also some material (particularly pertaining to relationships within the harem)

that will be uncomfortable. Recommended, probably high school and above.

Ivan says

Unfortunately for the modern reader the womens' literature of the time, especially traveller's notes, was excessively wordy, filled with outrageous amount of pompous adjectives, rhetoric ensuring the reader about the awfulness of Siam and the goodness of the West, and other unnecessary flowery language. Underneath it all would be a quaint day-to-day description of the life and actions of a king, who tried to deter Western colonizers from gaining too much influence or subvert the most intransigent among them, and articulated why the Christian ideology was a poorly thought-out subset of Buddhist values, which the Europeans themselves did not follow. Overall, I would not recommend reading this book in its original edition (Gutenberg project), as at times it is difficult to force oneself to read on, because of the repetitive nature of the 'flowery prose' within.

Mel says

In 2004 I read Siamese Harem Life, the second book written by Anna Leonowens about her life in Siam and loved it. That book, which is largely considered to be almost entirely fictional, nevertheless told a story focusing entirely on the role of women in the court. Leonowens was able to focus on issues that were interesting, whether or not her examples were real or not. I enjoyed it greatly. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for this book. It's the first book in a long time that I decided not to bother finishing. I read about two thirds and just couldn't bring myself to finish it with so many other books waiting to be read on my bookshelf. I'm not sure why I enjoyed one so much and didn't care for this one at all. In the intervening three years I have learned a great deal about travel writing but I think the difference is greater than this. The issues in Siamese Harem Life seemed more real, the stories more cohesive and the author a lot less judgemental. In this book the chapters were very short and jumped all over the place. The author came across as terribly judgemental, and I found myself not liking her at all. I felt like I was wasting my time reading it, learning nothing much about Siam or the colonisers. So I stopped. I may go back to it at some point. But not for a while, it was very disappointing.

Pearl says

My mother had the edition of this book that was printed in Thailand and now out of print because it is banned due to all of the controversy of the story it self. (or just because the edition is 20 years old)

Well, I'm half Thai and open to the outside world (not saying that Thai people aren't open, I just happen to be more open in ways, thanks to my mom) and I must say I enjoyed this book very much indeed! just the historical facts or events that happened in the royal Thai court during the reign of King Rama IV interested me very much

So yes, rather your Thai or not or just interested in Thai history (its an epic one) you will enjoy this book, I recommend it.

Karin says

All I can say is, what a disappointment. While I found parts of this interesting, I did not care for Leonowens' writing style. Also, I was interested in her years as a governess, but much of this deals with other things, including lengthy descriptions of what we can now easily see with photos and videos (not that I never like long descriptions). I was annoyed when she called her son Boy as if it were his name, and since she used his given name a couple of times, wondered what the point was. As it is, it's not even certain that Leonowens was her real surname.

That said, after reading criticisms of her racism and intolerance, I was surprised to read that given her time and nationality, she was fairly tolerant of a number of things. True, she was a Christian and to her that was the only correct religion, but she still managed to see many good principals in the Buddhist fate. Granted, there are lines that would be offensive now, such as "handsome for a Siamese," but she readily pointed out how bright a number of her students were and had many kind observations about women.

But I still didn't like the book. I didn't hate it, so gave it 2 stars.

A.K. Lindsay says

This is one book I will happily never read again.

To begin with, the author was extremely racist and bigoted. She starts off on a bad foot by describing how the Siamese people, as a race, are inferior not only because of their pedigree but also because of their religion. She even goes so far as to call them bigoted when she displays an even worse prejudice against those not American/English/European/Christian.

The book begins with a meandering look into a village she never stops at during her journey to the palace of Siam and that, essentially, sets the tone for the whole book. What begins like it might in some way hold the semblance of a plot of events is abandoned after the first few chapters. Chapters which, I'm afraid to say, have no coherent organization that I can find. In some, she will delve into matters in detail (such as Siamese literature or topography) which she devotes whole chapters to later in the book. In these chapters, she jumps back and forth in time (Fa-ying's death, then a few chapters which seem to go forward in time, then back to Fa-ying's death) with no care for if the reader is attempting to piece together the events which might actually have happened. For the most part, this book is a dissertation on her limited view and understanding of Siamese culture. I have read from multiple sources that she spreads misinformation in here, and unfortunately it isn't plain enough to tell which parts those might be.

For those unfamiliar with Siamese culture in the 1860s, the tome might hold some interest, but the information is delivered in such a dull manner that I had to put it down several times just to avoid a looming headache.

If you're looking for "The True Story Behind The King And I" don't bother. The movie is clearly a romanticized version of the title, because that's where all similarities end. Without a plot, it's hard to distill a book like this without making it up -- which, given the scarcity of information of Leonowens' actual life in

Siam, is exactly what the producers of said movie had to do.

Renee M says

I very much enjoyed this collection of memoir, observation, history, and travel journal from the pen of a late 1800s Englishwoman plucky enough to take a position as governess and translator in the court of Siam. There is some level of disjoint if the "chapters" are viewed as a sequence; however, if viewed as a collection or even as a series of articles, they hang together better and the charm and spirit come through.

While a clash of cultures was evident, it was also fascinating to me since it gave an unvarnished impression of the type of prejudices which made international communication so difficult. I also found Leonowens to have an enormous affection for the land and its people, even as she struggled with cultural differences.

My favorite bit, though, came near the end as she described the ruins of Angkor in Cambodia. I can say from personal experience that these are truly amazing almost beyond imagination. There is nothing like them, and few Westerners seem to know they exist. The unexpected pleasure of seeing them described by an 1800s visitor was like experiencing a "tesseract" or folding of time. I'm still grinning from the effect.

Natalie says

The English Governess at the Siamese Court is actually quite interesting and beautiful in some unexpected ways (and troubling in **exactly** the way one would expect of a 19th-c. Western author writing about someplace other than Britain.) I would not recommend this book for anyone without at least a cursory knowledge of 18th/19th-c. travel Literature (even the Goodreads description of this book is misleading,) and it does take some stamina to wade through, since Leonowens does address some history and politics of the Siam of her day. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the vivid descriptions of 19th-c. Siam and surrounding areas, and by the author's palpable internal conflicts brought about by her own political foibles during her tenure as a teacher and translator. Despite the subdued 19th-c. diction, I could still sense her panic and fear when a misunderstanding threatened her position as an employed single mother in an environment so different from Britain (although, interestingly, I did get the sense that she was well-travelled and much better equipped for such a venture than one would expect.) Overall, an intriguing read for travel Lit/history nerds, but not so much if you're looking for something easy and novelistic.

Deborah says

This book does not read like a movie because it isn't a movie, and it doesn't read like a novel because it isn't a novel. It doesn't even read like your typical memoirs because Anna Leonowens does not portray herself as the central character throughout her story. Rather, she is our narrator through a history of the then-kingdom of Siam, a critic of the country's art and culture, and a bit of a travel journalist respecting her account of the broader region's plant and animal life, agriculture and industry, trade relationships, etc., etc.

My main (yet ultimately surmountable) grievance with this book is that it feels overtly Western-centric. Art, music, religion, and various other points of Siamese culture are judged not in accordance with local norms and aesthetics, but in the context of their Western counterparts. While numerous culture-biased passages

jump out of the text like daggers, I feel they must be forgiven, considering they relate the personal impressions of Leonowens—herself, a product of 19th Century Western culture, and one who exceeded her contemporaries in the understanding of and appreciation for Eastern cultures.

This has the potential to be an interesting and educational read for those who are ready to feel the liberation of casting aside their cinematic expectations and cultural inhibitions. “Once you begin to feel that,” says Leonowens (wearing the hat of a travel journalist this time), “you will be happy, whether on an elephant or in a buffalo cart,—the very privations and perils including a charm of excitement all unknown to the formal European tourist.”
