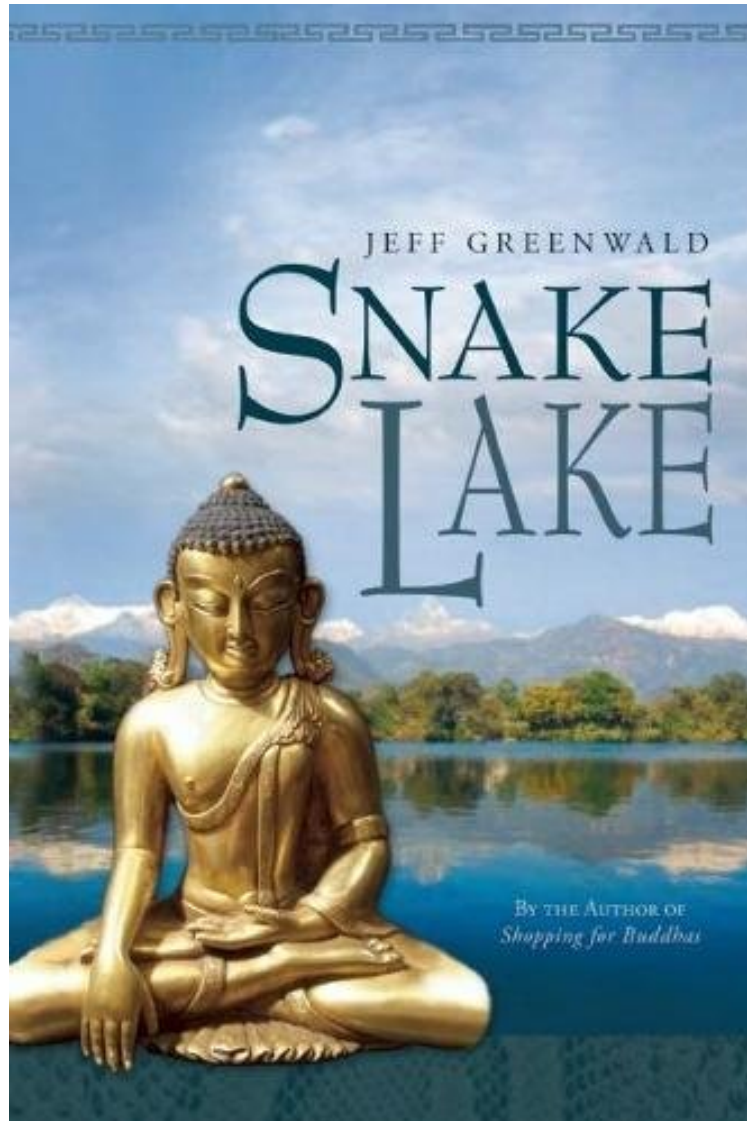


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Snake Lake

Jeff Greenwald

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Jeff Greenwald : Snake Lake before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Snake Lake:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Poignant and Insightful Memoir That Is Also Loads of FunBy PublicProfileNo.1With Snake Lake, Mr. Greenwald has created a dish that is boldly and unapologetically spicy but still retains the raw and bloody mess that makes up the human experience - the meat is rare and it bleeds; yet, there's so much added flavor that you wonder at not only the dish in front of you or the master chef behind it but also at your

own taste buds, the ambience around you, the roof over your head, and the ever-present (if not always visible) countless stars in the heavens above. Snake Lake bursts in your consciousness like a supernova. Mr. Greenwald deftly minces the meat of the dish - the death of his brother - with the garlicky experience of slowly losing one's closest family member to a vampiric and unfathomable demon. Then he takes exquisite care in selecting the right ingredients and spices - the heated mustard oil (the 1990 People's Movement in Nepal) that binds the dish together, the fenugreek seeds of hopes of Nepali democracy browning on the hot mustard oil, the gingery Grace, the understated and underrated chili-like fiery determination within the narrator himself that carries the entire dish, the salt of the earth people he meets, and the turmeric-like healing properties embodied by Chokyi Nyima, the Tibetan lama. Best of all, Mr. Greenwald garnishes all of this with something green, something hopeful, something that remains in your spiritual palate even after you close the book: Buddhist equanimity in the face of philosophic existential threats. The green onions of Tibetan Buddhism are liberally sprinkled all over the dish. They provide a much-needed balance to the equation. The result of all this is a masterpiece. The book captures the social and cultural realms of two very different places, halfway across the globe from each other. And yet it brings the binding force of humanity to the table. Humanity. With all its foibles, with all its glory. I am equally impressed by Mr. Greenwald's technical skills as a writer as by the way he shows his own vulnerable self, his willingness to share his humanity. Our lives, to be cliché about it, is as funny as it is sad. There's wit and charm in it all but there's also dread and despair. Mr. Greenwald captures both and does a great job weaving them into a fine tapestry, although I must confess that at times the artwork seems more like a tableau vivant, as if Mr. Greenwald is merely capturing a carefully crafted image where costumed actors are forced to play their parts. But that's to be expected in a memoir, especially one that has to bring such disparate experiences together in a meaningful way. The reason why I stretch the analogy, i.e., Snake Lake as the dish described above, is because of Kathmandu. The titular "lake" in the book is a small pond of sorts in Kathmandu. Mr. Greenwald makes much of this pond and the myth behind its existence. The pond morphs into a lake. The snakes grow into mythical proportions. The metaphor becomes an allegory. And he does this so deftly and elegantly that one wonders if he was born and raised in Nepal. All of this clearly shows that Kathmandu, and by that extension Nepal, is very dear to Mr. Greenwald. In Newari culture, which is the bedrock of Kathmandu culture, there's a famous and nutritious dish called Kachila that somehow manages to take raw water buffalo meat and mix it with the right type and amount of spices. That dish is and has been a source of great sustenance to countless people who have farmed the Kathmandu valley for ages and assuaged the wrath of many a fickle snakes, many a rulers. Mr. Greenwald's book, to bite and swallow (or constrict?) the analogy to death, manages to take raw emotions - his own - and deftly cover them up with spicy and distracting anecdotes. The reader is left wondering. Wondering if there can ever be any other way to serve an experience as raw as losing one's brother to suicide while witnessing the brewing of a historical revolution. Snake Lake is a full-bodied and earthy memoir that tackles a brawny topic with delicate wit and charm. It is rich and yet is tender. A lesser writer would probably have served a broth full of bromide salts. - A Nepali Writer

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Greenwald's best book

By Dave Going on three decades, Oakland, CA, travel writer Jeff Greenwald has spent good portions of each year in Nepal. If you've read Greenwald's 1996 "Shopping for Buddhas" -- until "Snake Lake" the best book ever written about this magical mountain kingdom -- you know what a talent Greenwald is: He balances humor with sharp observation like no one else. But whereas "Shopping" was more Jeff's Nepal map to the wondrous process of discovery, "Snake Lake" is ominous. In it Jeff balances his account of the violent collapse of Nepal's royalty with an account much more personal: the collapse of his extremely strange, brilliant brother. "Snake" is woven with the kind of keen insight and jocularity found in "Shopping," but it comes with the heft of a great novel as Jeff pursues his twin threads with the precision of a mystery writer and the cultural voracity of someone like Philip Roth. Truly a book you can't put down. At least I couldn't.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A prerequisite for your travels.

By Brian F For anyone who wants to be a well informed first time traveler to Nepal, this book is a must read before you go. Jeff sets the political stage of the people's revolution perfectly in addition to whetting your appetite to the colorful culture spiritual practices of the Nepalese. It made my trip immensely more enjoyable as I felt I was returning to a city I already knew. Plus Jeff's writing style is so captivating, you feel you are there with him and won't want to put it down.

In a circular valley beneath the looming peaks of the Himalaya lies Kathmandu, Nepal. Its a city of shimmering prayer flags, sacred cows, lavish festivals, and violent political turbulence and a world that journalist Jeff Greenwald has come to call home. Snake Lake unfolds during 1990s dramatic people power uprising against Nepal's long-entrenched monarchy. The story follows Greenwald as he wins the friendship of a high lama who reveals the pillars of Tibetan Buddhism; embarks on a passionate romance with a spunky but curiously unlucky news photographer; and discovers what democracy means to rural Nepali citizens all while covering the revolution for a major American newspaper. Meanwhile, back in the U.S., Greenwald's brilliant but troubled younger brother descends into a deepening depression. The author is forced to choose between witnessing Nepal's long-overdue revolution and reconnecting with an alienated brother in desperate need of help. Snake Lake is primarily a memoir (though the roles of several characters have been recast). Focused on the life-changing events that unfolded during one calamitous spring, the book weaves a vivid

tapestry of Buddhism, revolution, and the often serpentine paths to personal liberation.

From Publishers Weekly Political drama in exotic Nepal is intruded upon by personal psychodrama in this feckless memoir. Journalist Greenwald (*Shopping for Buddhas*) spent the spring of 1990 reporting from Kathmandu as opposition to Nepal's repressive monarchy boiled over into violence. The setting offered Greenwald political adrenaline, lush atmospherics, romance and spirituality as he began a torrid affair with an expat photojournalist and took instruction from a Buddhist sage. (Sample teaching: "the cause of samsara, of rebirth and suffering, is ego.") But the meltdown of his depressed brother Jordan drags him away just as the Nepalese revolution is heating up--and shunts the memoir into an odd portrait of American neurosis. Jordan is a mannered, haughty figure, a brilliant linguist who disdains popular culture, speaks in antique diction--"No man; no beast; no creature of the sea is as wretched as I"--and infuriates people by mimicking them; his hidden sexual dysfunction is the uninvolved mystery at the book's heart. Greenwald tells the story in novelistic style, with reams of verbatim dialogue, but the narrative's moving parts clash instead of resonating; they are like random detours on the author's rather callow spiritual journey. (Nov.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

From Booklist Raised in the Bronx and outside Boston, adventurous journalist Greenwald has felt more at peace in Nepal than anywhere else. There he fell in love; acquired a mentor, the lama Chogyi Nyima; and witnessed the beginning of the 1990 revolution. Greenwald was learning about the worship of snake gods, or nagas; the critical mass needed to overturn a corrupt government; the complexities of attraction; what it means to be a journalist; and how meditation and prayer shape experience when he became seriously alarmed about his troubled brother, Jordan, and realized that family and home can be every bit as mysterious as a foreign land. From his struggle to learn about the dharma to the tale of guilt and exile confided by photojournalist Grace, his getting trampled when soldiers attack demonstrators, and the kaleidoscopic whirl of Kathmandu, Greenwald has a gift for electrifying descriptions of the profound intricacy of the world and the mind. His portrait of his erudite, inscrutable, and doomed brother and keenly illuminating memoir of place, spirit, love, and brotherhood are unforgettable. --Donna Seaman Praise for *Snake Lake* "[*Snake Lake*] rips into revolution and romance, death, and dharma." Shambhala Sun "*Snake Lake* is not only an exploration of the depths of loss and a tender portrait of different kinds of love, it's the fruit of many years of coming to know Nepal with an intimacy few travelers attain. A beautiful and moving book." Henry Shukman, author of *The Lost City and Mortimer of the Maghreb* Greenwald's tale is masterfully multi-layered . . . As events political and personal unfold, Greenwald interweaves the evolving tale of the [Kathmandu] revolution with his own emotional odyssey through death and love toward enlightenment. In the end, his arduous journey deeply illumines our own. National Geographic (Book of the Month for October) "Absorbing." Kirkus "Travel writer Jeff Greenwald's most compelling journey yet. Set against a backdrop of revolution in Nepal, twin narratives the author's introduction to Buddhism and his brother's suicide form a compelling caduceus (note clever snake symbolism) of deepening mystery. This is a brave, honest, vivid, and thoughtful book." Mary Roach Jeff Greenwald has always been a great travel writer, but in *Snake Lake* he transcends the genre by taking us on a perilous journey through the human heart. By turns poignant and hilarious, Greenwald molds the dramas of his life into teaching stories, filled with both passion and wisdom. Wes Nisker, author of *The Essential Crazy Wisdom* Funny, informative, sad and precise, this is the best new travel narrative I've read in years. Tim Cahill, author of *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh* and *Hold the Enlightenment*