

A riveting retelling of the life of Yasodhara, the Buddha's wife, who struggles with an unapologetic religious patriarchy and carves out her own spiritual identity -- one that changed Buddhism forever.

BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA

By Barbara McHugh

PRAISE FOR BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA

"This engrossing exploration of gender dynamics, identity, and the spiritual quest for meaning will appeal to Buddhists and general readers alike."

—*Publishers Weekly*

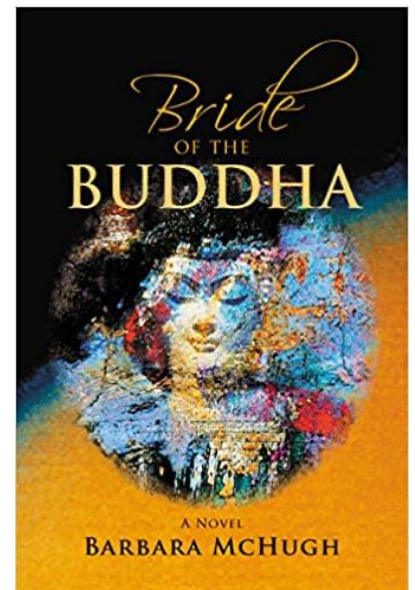
"McHugh deftly manages to vividly convey a moving drama with a message about female empowerment at its core without indulging in any heavy-handed, didactic sermonizing. This is **an impressive tapestry of history, spiritual philosophy, and literary drama and an edifying look at the patriarchal limitations of Buddhism's genesis.** An intelligently conceived and artistically executed reconsideration of religious history." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Blending new scholarship, established myth, and skillful storytelling, McHugh delivers an inspiring portrait of a woman challenging the patriarchy." —*Lion's Roar*

"A luminous, imaginative story of love, courage, and devotion." —*Foreword Reviews*

"Lovely, poetic prose illuminates this novel of the historical Buddha, his wife, and his followers. McHugh gives **elegant new voice** and form to this ancient story, telling the story from a female's unique perspective, and in doing so creates a fresh tale that will both entertain and inspire readers. Recommended." — *Historical Novels Review* (Editor's Choice)

In the tradition of Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and Elizabeth Cunningham's *The Passion of Mary Magdalen*, Barbara McHugh's **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA** (Monkfish, On Sale: January 26, 2021; ISBN: 978-1948626231; 374 Pages; \$17.95) is a vivid portrayal of the life of Yasodhara, abandoned wife of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA** depicts Yasodhara as a spiritual seeker in her own right, a woman who sought to understand the meaning of life even before her husband left their marriage, and their infant son Rahula, to seek his own enlightenment. McHugh vividly



portrays the life of the aristocratic clan into which Yasodhara and Siddhartha Gautama were born and imagines Yasodhara as an intelligent, resourceful and independent—a woman who had always sought her own spiritual path, despite the constraints placed on women at the time. Following the Siddhartha's departure, Yasodhara devotes herself to her life as a mother, but when the Buddha returns and their young son leaves his family to enter the sangha, she is devastated to learn that, as a woman, she is prohibited from joining them. Bereft, she leaves the comforts of her family to live in the wild and apprentices herself to a female holy woman. After many adventures of her own, she conceals her gender and enters the Buddha's sangha as a young monk named Ananda, who will eventually become one of the Buddha's closest confidants and ultimately the one who convinces the Buddha to allow women into their community.

In the best tradition of historical fiction, McHugh, as she states in the novel's Historical Note, mixes “fact and fiction, taking advantage of modern scholarship, while at the same time weaving in myths and symbolic narratives to express truth beyond words” in order to portray “a Buddha who is both a historical being and an evolving, collective creation of the human imagination.” McHugh has a PhD in religion and literature from UC Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union Berkeley. She has been studying Buddhism and practicing meditation for decades and has taught many introductory courses on both topics, and co-leads an ongoing sitting group in Berkeley. She is on the Board of Directors of Marin Sangha and did extensive research into the Pali Canon, as well as making several trips to India, while writing this book.

McHugh brings the past vividly to life in **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA**, while addressing issues still debated today, including gender identity, sexuality, the role of women in religious communities, motherhood and more. She has created a book that, as Sam Keen, author of *Fire in the Belly* and *Your Mythic Journey* writes, brings “Yasodhara out of the shadows” and makes “...use of historical texts, oral traditions, and a vivid imagination, [to create] a portrait of the bride of Buddha and the world in which he lived...unforgettable.”

About the Author: [Barbara McHugh, PhD](http://www.barbaramchugh.com), is a Buddhist practitioner with a degree in Religion and Literature from the Graduate Theological Union and UC Berkeley. She is a published poet and writing coach. Her research for this book includes exhaustive study of Pali texts in translation and extensive travel in India. <http://www.barbaramchugh.com>

Praise for *Bride of the Buddha*

“A remarkable and riveting love story—I literally could not put this book down—Barbara McHugh's *Bride of the Buddha* is told in luminous and mindfully crafted prose. By reimagining the Buddha's disciple Ananda as Yasodhara, the wife Siddhartha abandoned in order to seek the Way, McHugh offers a story equally poised between transcendence and simple humanity. The reading became for me a meditation and an invitation to examine the Buddha's teaching in a new light. Highly recommended for anyone interested in living a more awakened life.”

—Mobi Warren, translator of Thich Nhat Hanh's *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*

“For the most part, the women who support and inspire great men remain anonymous. We have Barbara

McHugh to thank for bringing Yasodhara out of the shadows. Making use of historical texts, oral traditions, and a vivid imagination, she has created a portrait of the bride of Buddha and the world in which he lived. Crisp, charming, and unforgettable.”

— Sam Keen Author of *Fire in the Belly* and *Your Mythic Journey*

“How wonderful to have the feminine written back into the early Buddhist tradition. Where the Pali Canon leaves women out on the periphery, denied their place in the meditation grounds (and therefore denied a path to enlightenment), Barbara’s imaginative placement of Yasodhara as Ananda, the historical Buddha’s right hand ‘wo/man,’ is timely and welcome. As the narrative aligns so closely to the Pali texts, it is truly delightful to imagine Yasodhara / Ananda helping the female sangha become established. I shall happily consider this course of herstory from now on. Truly wonderful!”

— Ruth Phipers, author of *Dragon King’s Daughter* and *Women, Meditative Practice and the Path to Enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism, dissertation*, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

“In prose that glides like poetry, McHugh weaves the bold story of a remarkable woman. Transported to a period when women were meant to be vessels only for breeding and serving, we follow her perilous spiritual journey to enlightenment. So much of women’s truth has been lost to history, but McHugh lifts the veil to reveal Yasodhara, the Buddha’s wife.”

— Dorothy Edwards, author of *Langston’s Moon*

“*Bride of the Buddha* is a masterfully woven story that offers insights into Yashodhara and Siddhartha’s culture, community, and characters. A story of love and a yearning for freedom, both societal and spiritual. A relationship that changes and grows with time, a quest beyond the home on the path of the homeless that develops into a shared awakening. This evocatively written and moving story offers us a perspective that is not easily available to us: of a girl who is searching within herself and in relationship to others; as she grows from an inquisitive, sensitive, and playful child and sister to a rebellious daughter to a dutiful wife, a loving mother, a sincere seeker, a builder of the Sangha, a mindful attendant, and the relayer of teachings and practices that still ring true to us. Barbara McHugh’s skill in telling a moving and gripping narrative, transmuted characters into each other, weaving in facts with fiction, teachings with tales, kept me engaged and wanting to know what happened next. I very much enjoyed reading the book and will definitely recommend it to others.”

— Shantum Seth, Dharma teacher in the lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh who has been leading pilgrimages “In the Footsteps of the Buddha” since 1988, founder of BuddhaPath Pilgrimages

“A daring reimagining of the life of Yasodhara, wife of the Buddha and mother of the infant Rahula, left by Siddhartha to pursue enlightenment. As a young girl, Yasodhara is determined to engage a spiritual quest in the midst of a suffocating patriarchal culture in which men wielded power and upheld rigidly defined gender and class roles. It is all the more shocking, therefore, when Yasodhara infiltrates the Buddha’s Sangha as the young monk Ananda and plays the pivotal role that he played in the life of the Buddha. At the heart of Yasodhara’s spiritual seeking is an unshakable love that fiercely defends her husband and son, women and young seekers, and eventually expands to include the entire Sangha and the preservation of what the Buddha taught. I finished this novel with a yearning for this story to be true.” —Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Abbot Emeritus of Zen Center of Los Angeles, author of *The Book of Householder Koans*

“In the tradition of alternate-reality novels, Barbara MuHugh spins a creative tale of intrigue and family drama as she reimagines aspects the story of the Buddha. It is engaging and inventive, and very enjoyable.”

— Phillip Moffitt, author of *Dancing with Life: Buddhist Insights for Finding Meaning and Joy in the Face of Suffering*

“A rare and captivating story, set in India some 2,600 years ago, that explores who the Buddha might have been as a husband, father, and supremely enlightened being seen from the point of view of Yasodhara, the beautiful wife he abandoned. Barbara McHugh skillfully weaves documentation of the historical lives of the Buddha, his family members, and his disciples as known from the earliest Pali texts, together with vividly imagined fictional events and characters, and the result is a gripping page-turner that deftly explores and illuminates important questions in contemporary Buddhism: the ordination of women, renunciation, ethics, the role of faith, gender, and the difficult challenges one inevitably has to face on the path to liberation. A literary delight that will be widely enjoyed by seekers of all stripes.” — Meg Gawler, Dharma teacher and author of *Voices of Early Buddhist Nuns*, thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley

“In deft prose, Barbara McHugh creates the voice of Buddha’s wife as a proto-feminist in a profoundly patriarchal culture. Yasodhara journeys from being the Buddha’s profoundly sensual spouse to becoming his valued spiritual companion and attendant, Ananda, credibly disguised as a man. *Bride of the Buddha* is first a story, not a philosophical discourse, a reimagining, not a retelling of her story that even a non-Buddhist can appreciate.” — Carol L. Gloor, author of *Gifting Death the Raspberries*

“*Bride of the Buddha* transports us to the years after Prince Siddhartha leaves his wife, Yasodhara, to seek his Dharma and become the Buddha. In this extraordinary imagining of Yasodhara’s own journey to awakening, you’ll feel you are with her every step of the way.” — James N. Frey, author of 9 novels and 7 bestselling books on the craft of writing

“The wife of Siddhartha, the man who would be Buddha, Yasodhara sees her husband’s heart and sacrifices her marriage to his quest for enlightenment, then has to face hard truths to pursue her own spiritual authenticity. *Bride of the Buddha* is a riveting tale of the nature of suffering and the journey to wisdom. Magically written, McHugh creates a world of mystic hope and earthly promise that leaves us looking more deeply into our own hearts.” — Tess Collins, author of *Shadow Mountain*

“In this unique and gripping novel of a historical figure relegated to the shadows by her famous husband, Yasodhara forges her own path, sacrificing position and privilege to undertake a perilous quest for enlightenment. *Bride of the Buddha* educates, illuminates, and captivates as it brings us into a legendary world.” — Max Tomlinson, award-winning author of *Sendero* and five other novels

“In an ambitious and brilliantly conceived historical novel that is both spiritually inspirational and heart-stopping entertainment, McHugh, a lifelong student of Buddhism and accomplished teacher of poetry, brings these gifts together in a novel with characters so well-realized that readers will be drawn into their quest and make it their own.” — John Martel, author of *The Alternate* and other bestselling novels.

3/18/2021

Dear Editor/Producer:

Described by *Publishers Weekly* as “an engrossing exploration of gender dynamics, identity, and the spiritual quest for meaning” Barbara McHugh’s debut novel **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA** (Monkfish; ISBN: 978-1948626231; 374 Pages; \$17.95) is a vivid retelling of the life of Yasodhara, the Buddha’s wife, who carves out her own spiritual identity and ultimately changes Buddhism forever. McHugh reimagines Yasodhara as an independent woman who seeks her own spiritual path after Siddhartha abandons her and takes their young son to join his community; ultimately, she disguises herself as the monk Ananda and joins the Buddha’s sangha. According to history, Ananda was the monk who convinced the Buddha to admit women to their community, and McHugh deftly weaves fact and fiction to create a riveting historical drama.

McHugh has a PhD in religion and literature from UC Berkeley and has been studying Buddhism and practicing meditation for decades. Her interest in delving into Yasodhara’s story arose partly from her conversations with women who were turned off by Buddhism because its founder abandoned his wife and child. She also addresses the misogyny in Buddhism’s scriptures and myths, which she feels conflicts with their overall message, especially in the West, where many women practice and teach the Dharma. In **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA**, McHugh uses a historical lens to delve into issues debated today, including gender identity, sexuality, and the role of women in religious communities. In an interview, she can discuss:

- Her extensive research for the book, which included delving into the Pali Canon, the oldest body of Buddhist scripture, and her many trips to India, the first of which she took as a young woman and spiritual seeker in the 1970s
- How she combines her Buddhist practice with Christianity as the member of both a Buddhist Sanga and a progressive Christian Church, where she leads an ongoing meditation group
- Why she chose to write a female character who disguises her gender
- The challenges and opportunities of writing historical fiction
- Problems that arise when writing about highly mythologized founders of world religions
- The surprises she encountered while doing research for the book
- The importance of revisioning women’s stories

Other early reviews: "This is an impressive tapestry of history, spiritual philosophy, and literary drama and an edifying look at the patriarchal limitations of Buddhism's genesis. An intelligently conceived and artistically executed reconsideration of religious history." —*Kirkus Reviews*, "Blending new scholarship, established myth, and skillful storytelling, McHugh delivers an inspiring portrait of a woman challenging the patriarchy." —*Lion's Roar*, "A luminous, imaginative story of love, courage, and devotion." —*Foreword Reviews*. More reviews and other media can be found at www.BarbaraMcHugh.com. **BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA** is a novel that will entertain, sustain, and inspire.

Barbara McHugh is based in Berkeley, CA, and will be doing select events via Zoom in 2021. Please let me know if you’d like a copy of the book and/or to schedule an interview with her.

Thank you,
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Publishers Weekly

10/28/2020

Bride of the Buddha

Barbara McHugh. Monkfish, \$17.95 trade paper (360p) ISBN 978-1-948626-23-1

In this fine debut, poet McHugh imagines the life of the Buddha's abandoned wife, Yasodhara, as she's torn between the spiritual path and the impositions of patriarchal society. After the death of her sister Deepa, Yasodhara is driven to find her sister's lost spirit so that her soul does not wander endlessly, as she believes it would. Political machinations push her into a marriage with Prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, and after he abandons her, she deepens her spiritual practice as the palace demands she give up prayer to pursue a purely domestic life. In traditional accounts, the Buddha abandoned Yasodhara to undertake the quest for enlightenment, and Yasodhara is ordained only after the Buddha's devoted attendant, Ananda, pushes the teacher to establish an order of nuns. In McHugh's smart retelling, Yasodhara, after a period of intensive ascetic practice, hides her identity and joins the Buddha's order as the male monk Ananda to practice the Dharma and to persuade the Buddha to let women ordain. Though sometimes the exposition on the Dharma can feel forced, McHugh combines scholarship with intriguing fictionalizations. This engrossing exploration of gender dynamics, identity, and the spiritual quest for meaning will appeal to Buddhists and general readers alike. (Jan.)

KIRKUS

REVIEWS

November 2, 2020

BRIDE OF THE BUDDHA

A Novel

Barbara McHugh

Monkfish Book Publishing (360 pp.) \$17.95 paperback, \$11.49 e-book ISBN: 978-1-948626-23-1

January 5, 2021

BOOK REVIEW

A novel reimagines the life of the Buddha's wife, a powerful spiritual figure in her own right.

As Yasodhara, the daughter of the “village oligarch,” mourns the accidental death of her younger sister, Deepa, she is thrown into confusion and despair. She vows to find and rescue her sister's spirit one day, a commitment poignantly depicted by McHugh: “Under the white misshapen moon, I knelt down and promised my sister that if at all possible I would find her soul so she could be with her family again and not have to travel through realms of samsara, lonely forever.” But years later, when her older sister, Kisa, on the cusp of marriage, dies as well, she offers to take her place and marry Siddhartha, hoping to lift the weight of her mother's grief. Siddhartha has a reputation for frivolously enjoying sensuous pleasures but becomes a devoted husband, though he is plagued by the suffering of the world and tired of therapeutically creating “false paradises” to avoid it. He abandons Yasodhara and their son, Rahula, only days old, to seek spiritual enlightenment; he's gone for so long she considers remarriage. Siddhartha eventually finds both spiritual awakening and a considerable following, but when Yasodhara decides to join his order, she is prohibited because she is a woman, a problem thoughtfully portrayed by the author. Refusing to be daunted, Yasodhara disguises herself as a male aspirant and assumes the name Ananda. She not only attempts to become a monk, but also persuades Siddhartha, now the Buddha, to open his ranks to women, a possibility some consider “preposterous.” McHugh deftly manages to vividly convey a moving drama with a message about female empowerment at its core without indulging in any heavy-handed, didactic sermonizing. This is an impressive tapestry of history, spiritual philosophy, and literary drama and an edifying look at the patriarchal limitations of Buddhism's genesis.

An intelligently conceived and artistically executed reconsideration of religious history.



FOREWORD
REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Bride of the Buddha - Barbara McHugh

Monkfish Book Publishing Company (Jan 5, 2021) Softcover \$17.95 (360pp)
978-1-948626-23-1

HISTORICAL

Bride of the Buddha is a luminous, imaginative story of love, courage, and devotion that brings the turbulent times around the birth of Buddhism to life as they were lived by the wife whom Siddhartha abandoned to follow his spiritual path.

In a time when women were expected to marry, have children, serve their husbands in silence, and hope to be reborn as a man, Yasodhara, traumatized by the death of her younger sister, vows never to marry. Her greatest desire is to become a homeless spiritual seeker and wander in search of meaning and truth. When treachery causes the death of her older sister just as she is about to wed Siddhartha, fifteen year-old Yasodhara agrees to take her place, sacrificing her quest for enlightenment for the sake of her family. Two days after the birth of their son, Siddhartha tells her that he is leaving. It is he who will wander, seek, and find the truth.

Locked into the women's quarters, Yasodhara learns of Siddhartha's enlightenment, and of the many women who desire to follow the master. Left desolate when her small son determines to follow his father and become a monk, Yasodhara escapes to undertake her own spiritual journey. Disguised as a monk, she takes the name "Ananda," meaning "bliss," and marshalls all her courage and devotion to engage in a quest that involves life-threatening challenges and rebellion against a society entrenched in patriarchy. Infiltrating the all-male sangha, she works for women's ordination and learns of hidden intrigues and dangers that threaten the Buddha's life and teachings.

Blending fact, fiction, symbolism, and creative imagination, *Bride of the Buddha* is an immersive novel about the founding of Buddhism, told in the voice of a woman who would not be excluded from the spiritual quest, nor from the presence of the man whom she loved.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January / February 2021)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the author for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.