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Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi

By Katherine Frank



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Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi By Katherine Frank

On the morning of October 31, 1984, as she walked through her garden, smiling, with hands raised and palms pressed together in the traditional Indian namaste greeting, Indira Nehru Gandhi was assassinated by her own bodyguards. She died as she had lived, surrounded by men, yet isolated. It was a violent end to a life of epic drama.

Here is the first popular biography of one of the world's most influential leaders, India's third prime minister. Brought up during an era that saw the rise of Indian nationalism, Indira was raised to be what her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, called "a child of revolution" - destined to play a political role in the creation and governing of an independent India. Despite her early reluctance to embrace this role, Indira eventually presided over a huge, complex, religiously riven, and male-dominated country. She was born to a wealthy, westernized family, but she had a gift for connecting with the poor of the countryside and the urban slums, the illiterate, the dispossessed - so much so that "Indira is India" became a familiar slogan. Throughout childhood, love, marriage, imprisonment, motherhood, and a sequence of personal and family tragedies, her personal hopes and desires were continually subsumed by the historical and political imperatives of her country.

In this beautifully written book, the acclaimed biographer Katherine Frank draws on unpublished sources and more than a hundred interviews to create a rich, balanced portrait. INDIRA captures in full color the personal and political fate of the leader of the world's largest democracy - the woman who played a dominant role in the history of the twentieth century and who, when it ended, was voted Woman of the Millennium by the BBC.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The veteran author of critically praised books about Emily Brontë and Lucie Duff Gordon has written an exemplary popular biography of the powerful, controversial prime minister who indelibly shaped the world's largest democracy. Katherine Frank's solidly researched narrative is particularly good on the early years of Indira Gandhi (1917-84), cogently delineating her complex relationship with her father, nationalist hero Jawaharlal Nehru, which was intimate when they were pouring out their feelings in letters, but strained when they were actually together. We see an intelligent, strong-minded woman coming of age in a turbulent time marked by her relatives' frequent stays in prison as India struggled for freedom from Great Britain. After independence, when Nehru became prime minister, Gandhi was politically active but for many years resisted seeking power in her own right. Following the deaths of her husband (Feroze Gandhi, no relation to the Mahatma) in 1960 and Nehru in 1964, she moved into the top spot, aided by the Congress Party bosses' mistaken impression that she would be a figurehead they could manipulate. On the contrary, Frank shows Prime Minister Gandhi prompted by her deep fear of disorder toward increasingly authoritarian acts, most notoriously the state of emergency declared in 1975, when she authorized the arrest of many opposition leaders. Frank depicts Gandhi as having more faith in her personal bond with the Indian people than in the messy workings of democracy. But the religious and political divisions inflamed by her policies came home to roost in 1984, when she was assassinated by her own bodyguard, a Sikh enraged by the massacre of militant Sikhs in the Golden Temple. This sympathetic but unsparing portrait makes it clear that Gandhi was a flawed leader but evinces compassion for a woman striving with a difficult personal and political legacy. - *Wendy Smith*

From Publishers Weekly

The most striking aspects of Frank's readable, well-wrought biography are Gandhi's sad childhood and her reluctance to enter politics. She attended upwards of seven schools in Switzerland, England and India and was often separated from her family her tubercular mother died when Indira was 19; her father and many family members were in and out of jail during the Independence Movement. Indira herself was sickly (she spent 10 months in a sanatorium in Switzerland during WWII), and, at 37, she wrote to a friend, "I am doing a tremendous amount of work these days but I have not discovered my m,tier yet." Schoolmate Iris Murdoch remembered Gandhi as "very unhappy, very lonely, intensely worried about her father and her country and thoroughly uncertain about the future." Only after the deaths of her husband, Feroze Gandhi; her father; Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first leader; and Lal Bahadur Shastri, his successor, did she come into her own politically. Not a political biography, Frank's book (via letters and conversations with close confidants) comes closest to showing the human Indira who joined politics because she felt duty-bound to uphold her father's secular, inclusive vision of her homeland. Frank (A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon; etc.) shows that Gandhi's increasing isolation, loss of confidence and closeness to her son, Sanjay, caused her later to impose the Emergency (suspending civil liberties and jailing opponents) and play castes, religions and political groups against one another contrary to her father's ideals. But she is far less knowable in the book's second and third sections, when she becomes the paranoid, ruthless leader remembered for her despotism. 12 pages b&w photos not seen by PW. Agent, Virginia Barber. (Aug. 14)Forecast: As the first biography of the late Indian leader, this will surely receive review attention and should sell well among those interested in India and in the life of an extraordinary woman.

From Library Journal

Hailed for *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Gordon Duff*, Frank continues her exploration of interesting women.

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