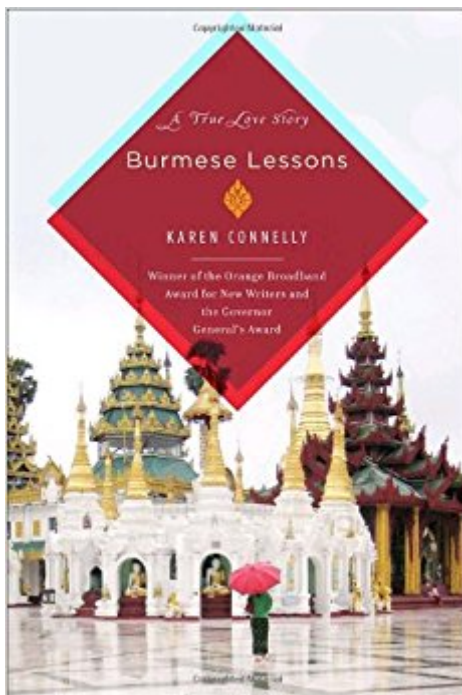


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Burmese Lessons: A True Love Story



Synopsis

Orange Prize winner Karen Connelly's compelling memoir about her journey to Burma, where she fell in love with a leader of the Burmese rebel army. When Karen Connelly goes to Burma in 1996 to gather information for a series of articles, she discovers a place of unexpected beauty and generosity. She also encounters a country ruled by a brutal military dictatorship that imposes a code of censorship and terror. Carefully seeking out the regime's critics, she witnesses mass demonstrations, attends protests, interviews detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and flees from police. When it gets too risky for her to stay, Connelly flies back to Thailand, but she cannot leave Burma behind. Connelly's interest in the political turns more personal on the Thai-Burmese border, where she falls in love with Maung, the handsome and charismatic leader of one of Burma's many resistance groups. After visiting Maung's military camp in the jungle, she faces an agonizing decision: Maung wants to marry Connelly and have a family with her, but if she marries this man she also weds his world and his lifelong cause. Struggling to weigh the idealism of her convictions against the harsh realities of life on the border, Connelly transports the reader into a world as dangerous as it is enchanting. In radiant prose layered with passion, regret, sensuality and wry humor, *Burmese Lessons* tells the captivating story of how one woman came to love a wounded, beautiful country and a gifted man who has given his life to the struggle for political change.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Weaving a poignant personal love story within a larger cultural tapestry of Myanmar circa 1996,

Canadian poet, memoirist, and novelist Connelly (*The Lizard Cage*) delivers a lyrical look at a country in the throes of a deeply pernicious military dictatorship. Although she is based in Greece, Connelly's various trips to Burma and Thailand are sponsored by PEN Canada in order to gather information on Burmese political prisoners such as short story author Ma Thida; consequently, Connelly, then in her late 20s, is easily accepted within Burmese artistic circles, gets caught up in violent street demonstrations, and even interviews the revered opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, now under strict house arrest. At a Christmas party, she meets and falls for Maung, a sexy Burmese revolutionary leader who shares his not uncommon story of becoming politicized after the unrest of 1988 and being forced underground. However, she comes to the wrenching realization that her lover belongs to the national struggle for Burmese democracy, and not to her. Connelly writes eloquently of having given her heart to Asia, yet her portrait is dated as the country has changed much since then, considering the recent devastation by Cyclone Nargis, well chronicled in Emma Larkin's *Everything Is Broken*. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Finalist for the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction! "Karen Connelly's passionate and poetic memoir begins with her arrival in Burma in 1996 at the age of 27. Brash, naïve and bubbling with confidence, she is enchanted by the country, but also determined to catch at least a glimpse of the truth—something beyond the beautiful images that are so readily available to the foreign eye. . . . *Burmese Lessons* is an intimate account of a country, a relationship and a man—all three of which remain elusive. •The New York Times Book Review "Burmese Lessons is a polished, literary memoir that includes, along the way, an account Burma's turbulent history. . . . Ms. Connelly is a hugely engaging writer. Burma itself—as Ms. Connelly well knows—is rather more complicated than one difficult love affair. •The Wall Street Journal "Connelly isn't a hard-nosed journalistic observer. She's intelligent and curious, also emotional, self-deprecating, openhearted. When she meets Maung, a handsome Burmese dissident, at a Christmas party in Chiang Mai, she begins a passionate and complicated cross-cultural romance. We know things can't end well, but we're with Connelly all the way on this journey. There's no resisting. •Newsday "[A] heartbreaking romance set among the temples and verdure of Southeast Asia." •The Seattle Times "A generous dollop of poetic chick lit combines surprisingly well with criticism of Burma's half-century of bloody dictatorship in Canadian Karen Connelly's *Burmese Lessons*." •San Francisco Chronicle "A

sensually acute writer, Connelly describes the lush pleasures of losing oneself in a romantic, foreign place, but also details the bitter act of renunciation involved in realizing that her lover belonged not to her but to the larger struggle for Burmese democracy.

• Vogue "Karen Connelly has given her heart to Asia. I bow in gratitude to this writer whose love story is personal and political • and true."

• Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Fifth Book of Peace* "Burmese Lessons is a tour de force. At once beautiful literature, an intimate account of a moving journey, a nuanced portrait of another country, a complex yet quietly honest reportage, this book is also a page turner. It will, I believe, become a classic in the new genre that mixes personal memory with public events."

• Susan Griffin, author of *A Chorus of Stones and Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* "Weaving a poignant personal love story within a larger cultural tapestry of Myanmar circa 1996, Canadian poet, memoirist, and novelist Connelly delivers a lyrical look at a country in the throes of a deeply pernicious military dictatorship.... Connelly writes eloquently of having given her heart to Asia."

• Publishers Weekly "Putting both her safety and heart on the line, Connelly renders deft passages on sexual longing and satiation that help anchor the book's harsh sociopolitical themes. *Burmese Lessons* examines Burma's tumultuous climate and nuanced cultural ethos with colorful prose and gritty self-reflection."

• Kirkus Reviews "Treading the boundary between romance and politics, Connelly presents an evocative account of passionately living the revolution, shedding light on those who give everything to the cause, and those who love them. Piercing and raw."

• Booklist "Burmese Lessons shows us more than a place, or a person in a place: it shows us a way to be in the world: open, seeing, breathing, awake.... In virtually every encounter, Connelly shows us that there is no escaping the political: the reach of the regime is pervasive and poisonous. The political is there in the personal.... This is the greatest lesson in *Burmese Lessons*, and the most important moment: the realization that the whole history of Burma is reflected in every individual life. The small story is the Bigger Picture."

• Literary Review of Canada "Haunting and poetic.... Connelly fans will be enthralled."

• Quill & Quire "The recounting, re-imagining, of Connelly's immersion in the mid-90s [in Burma and Thailand] reveals a brave, even foolhardy, idealistic, beautiful young woman utterly seduced, co-opted, transformed by Burmese culture."

• Globe and Mail "Connelly compels admiration for her brave intrusions into dangerous and awkward situations, and above all for her candour."

• National Post

I am a big fan of Connelly's "Touch the Dragon" (or, by its other title, "Dream of a Thousand Lives")

and so I was happy to see she'd written another memoir. This book is deeply, intimately personal, and at times I admit I squirmed during the descriptions of Connelly's sexual relationship with her Burmese lover. However, I think by telling her story in such a close, subjective way she has given us (the readers) a visceral experience of what it's like to be a person caught up in political and personal currents that are overwhelming and dangerous. I learned a lot about Burma and its brutally sad recent history--I would have loved the book if it had been "just" a political account of the Burmese resistance fighters because Connelly is such a vivid, gripping writer--and, more surprisingly, I learned a lot about what it means to be a privileged Westerner whose relationship to the rest of the world is always complicated and fraught with shame, fascination, and envy. (Just before I read "Burmese Lessons" I finished "The Places In Between" by Rory Stewart; it's similar to Connelly's book in that it details a Westerner's immersion in a troubled Asian country--Afghanistan, in Stewart's case; I liked Stewart's memoir very much, but he never explored his interior life and its reaction to the turbulent world around him. I hate to stereotype, but it was a very male account in its focus on movement and historical details. He did bond with a wonderful dog on his journey; it's the one thing that elevates his story into something touching and human. Connelly's book is not stereotypically female [I'm getting in trouble here!]; it's androgynous in that it embraces the internal and external world with gusto and humor and poignant sadness). I write too much. I loved this book. I look forward to more from Karen Connelly!

loved it as much as i loved the Lizard Cage. Really an engaging read and great story. Connelly puts her heart and soul and leaves nothing out.

As with other reviewers, my response is complicated. The first half of the book was un-put-downable -- Burma in the 1990s -- but then something sagged in her writing when she moves into the love story, which I found not that compelling. I was alas reminded of Woody Allen's Bananas: falling in love with a hot revolutionary leader. More to the point, the love story underscored the uneasiness about the whole narrative of this white chick with her Canadian passport swanning around Burma and the camps. A passport out of it all gives you, whether you like it or not, a magic escape machine that everyone else around you doesn't have. You are just different. Obviously Connelly was not your ordinary tourist: she paid her dues, and was where the action was in very difficult times. And she talks a lot about the ambivalence of her role. But there is something not likeable about her in the end, a kind of narcissism that one feels should have been rubbed away in the face of the hard lives everyone around her is leading. Maybe Connelly knows this: it is, after all, a portrayal of her

younger, more naive, self. I would have liked an introduction or epilogue where she criticizes or at least reflects on this. In the meantime, as the book went on, I became more and more irritated with her naivete. On the other hand, *Burmese Lessons* is among the best portrayals of what that kind of journalistic/vagabond life is in SouthEast Asia I can think of, having had some experience of it myself. I was constantly reminded of the sordid trashheaped villages of the poor, the endless waiting around for officialdom, and the strange mixture of saintliness and sniping that is the whole international NGO milieu. I would recommend it to anyone who thinks that that kind of life is liberating and glamorous.

Karen Connelly is a brilliant writer, one who makes me want to set down my keyboard and weep because I don't think I'll ever be as good. I can't wait to dive into her Orange Prize winner, *The Lizard Cage*, and her debut *Touch of the Dragon: A Thai Journal*. I'm less keen to meet her face to face though, at least not the 28 year old version narrating this book. For one, she seems dismissive of most of the women she writes about in this memoir. In her beautifully written memoir, *Burmese Lessons: A True Love Story*, the word "bitch" comes up 6 times, once in reference to herself, once in reference to a Thai woman on a jeepney, once in reference to a friend trying to warn her about her lover, and 3 times describing another woman. And it is not just women she rages about. Her lover is a bastard, twice! She's a wild hungry woman, who recklessly gives herself over to lust and love for a people and a man she barely knows, ranting, crying and exulting through the whole experience. But one doesn't read a memoir to like a writer, or to approve of his or her choices. One reads for the subjective experience of a particular time, place and events, seen from a specific writer's perspective. I wanted to enter the mind of a North American woman, perhaps Asian-American, seeing the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border for the first time and trying to live as one of them. Seen that way, *Burmese Lessons: A True Love Story*, was an entirely satisfactory read from which I emerged sated from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. Karen Connelly is a poet, accustomed to suggesting multiple layers of meaning with just a few words. This memoir is not just a record of a love affair between the author and a leading Burmese dissident sometime in the second half of the 1990's. I take the book to be a record of the lessons Ms. Connelly learnt after becoming captivated by Burma and the Burmese. Ms. Connelly is an acute observer, with a piercing intelligence and a sensitive heart. She sees through herself and writes about her own dilemmas with acuity. "My emotions for him are tangled up with my thoughts and feelings about his country... Am I just a parasite, falling in love with this man because he brings me closer to his country?" Regardless, she does fall for him, despite her friends and acquaintances

warnings that he is not quite who he seems and a cross-cultural relationship between a North American woman and an Asian man is fraught with difficulties. On the way to resolution, these are the Burmese lessons Ms. Connelly learns: What it means to wait for "a man who comes to me from no fixed address and who will depart from me, in all likelihood, for an equally unspecified location".... To understand that in a refugee camp "making a home safe enough for a child is the ordinary miracle" because among refugees and exiles "it's no small act to make a home." She learns "Tragedy is a climate" and believes she has "acclimatized" like the displaced who "forced to live in a prison, under a piece of tarpaulin, in one place then another, and another" learn to build their lives "on a fracture

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