

"Lady of the Lotus" by William E. Barrett

**Reviewed by
Jane White-Lewis**

Originally Published in 1975, *Lady of the Lotus* has recently been reissued by "The Library of Spiritual Adventure", a division of Tarcher Press which republishes "classic novels of the quest for human growth, the evolution of consciousness, and the transformation of the spirit". In this historical novel, William E. Barrett writes about Prince Siddhartha Gautama's quest for truth and final enlightenment, but the author's stated focus is on Yadohara, Siddhartha's wife and the mother of his child. According to Barrett, hundreds of books have been written about Siddhartha/ the Buddha, but this book is the only work about Yadohara.

The tale begins with the early lives of Prince Siddhartha and Yadohara, the Princess of Koli. It is a tender love story. The Prince and Princess are married; a son, Rahula, is born. Soon, however, Siddhartha becomes increasingly dissatisfied and uncomfortable with his role as prospective Raja and heir to the throne and increasingly drawn to a "spiritual" life, to seeking truth. Siddhartha eventually renounces the material world, leaves his family and his privileged status, takes up a mendicant life, and prepares for "enlightenment" as the Buddha. The Buddha and his teachings impact powerfully on Yadohara and Rahula. After struggling to find meaning in their worldly lives, both ultimately choose to follow the Way of the Buddha. They, too, elect a spiritual and ascetic life.

In the forward to his book, Barrett tells us that he spent years researching the book. As a young man in his twenties he first became interested in Buddhism, but he did not feel ready to write this book until years later. The author was, in fact, seventy-five years old when the book was finally published. In the intervening years, Barrett tells us that he talked to many Buddhist scholars and Buddhist monks, that he built a personal library of "Buddhism Hinduism-India-Nepal" of hundreds of volumes, that he "followed the trails that led outward from the beginnings to Burma, Thailand, Japan, Malaya, Hong Kong" and that he "walked where Siddhartha and Yasodhara walked, in Nepal and India".

Barrett's deep involvement and love of his material is evident throughout the book and this energy gives a certain freshness, vitality, and authenticity to the simple, engaging narrative. Furthermore, the portraits of his characters and the descriptions of their daily lives, their joys and conflicts--are unforgettable.

The dialogues, however, are less successful. Unfortunately Barrett's characters speak a curious language which is a mix of contemporary and of stilted speech. Perhaps the author was attempting to create a timeless, fairy tale quality but the net effect is

distracting and disappointing. In addition, the felt-sense of much of the dialogue is not authentic. How can a 20th century American male possibly imagine the thoughts, feelings and sensations of an Indian woman who lived many, many centuries ago? Perhaps this criticism is unfair and only reflects my own prejudice against historical novels. I think, however, that I would be more enthusiastic about an Indian woman telling Yadohara's story. I would also hope that a female author might be more sensitive and faithful to the depth and value of Yadohara's life. Although Barrett's avowed intent was to focus on Yadohara, one gets the feeling that her story becomes a vehicle for praising the Buddha. Yadohara's name means "companion to fame", and in this book one gets the sense that that is her role once again and that the main character is really the Buddha. Throughout the book there is a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, devaluation of Yadohara, of women, of relationships and of life in the world.

In any case, *Lady of the Lotus* is a very readable and engaging book. It is a memorable account of the founding and early dissemination of Buddhism.