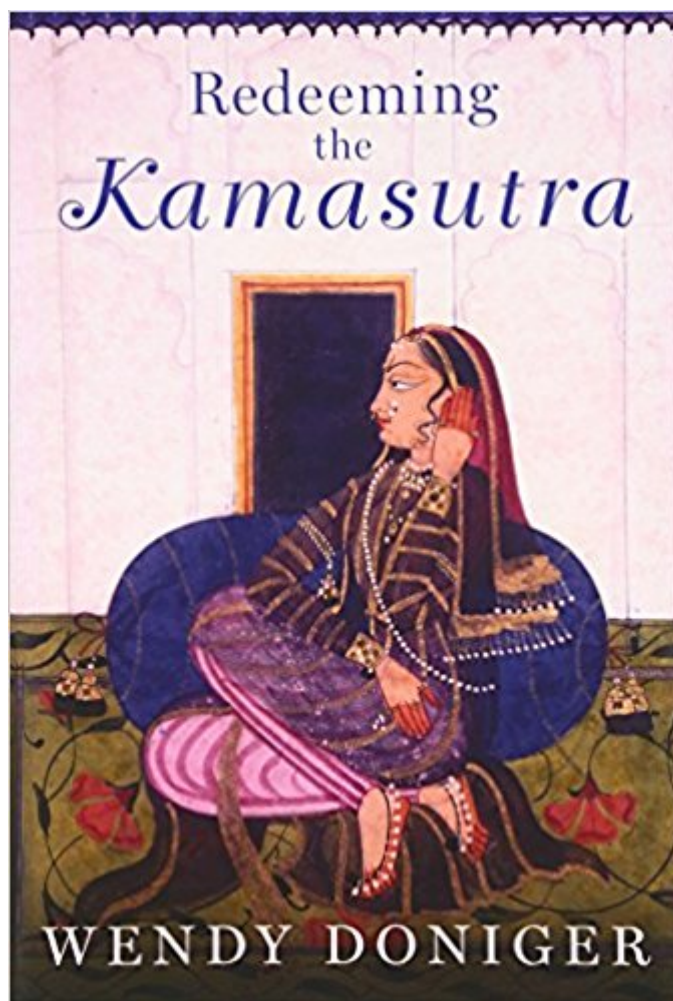


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Redeeming The Kamasutra



Synopsis

The Kamasutra, composed in the third century CE, is the world's most famous textbook of erotic love. There is nothing remotely like it even today, and for its time it was astonishingly sophisticated. Yet it is all but ignored as a serious work in its country of origin-sometimes taken as a matter of national shame rather than pride - and in the rest of the world it is a source of amused amazement and inspires magazine articles that offer "mattress-quaking sex styles" such as "the backstairs boogie" and "the spider web". In this scholarly and superbly readable book, one of the world's foremost authorities on ancient Indian texts seeks to restore the Kamasutra to its proper place in the Sanskrit canon, as a landmark of India's secular literature. She reveals fascinating aspects of the Kamasutra as a guide to the art of living for the cosmopolitan beau monde of ancient India: its emphasis on grooming and etiquette (including post-coital conversation), the study and practice of the arts (ranging from cooking and composing poetry to coloring one's teeth and mixing perfumes), and discretion and patience in conducting affairs (especially adulterous affairs). In its encyclopedic social and psychological narratives, it also displays surprisingly modern ideas about gender and role-playing, female sexuality, and homosexual desire. Even as she draws our attention to the many ways in which the Kamasutra challenges the conventions of its time (and often ours) - in dismissing procreation as the aim of sex, for instance - Doniger also shows us how it perpetuates attitudes that have continued to darken human sexuality: passages that twin passion with violence, for example, and those that explain away women's protests and exclamations of pain as ploys to excite their male partners. In these attitudes, as in its more enlightened observations on sexual love, we see the nearly two- thousand-year-old Kamasutra mirror twenty-first-century realities. In investigating and helping us understand a much celebrated but under-appreciated text, Wendy Doniger has produced a rich and compelling text of her own that will interest, delight, and surprise scholars and lay readers alike.

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Customer Reviews

"Doniger's prose cuts to the chase, and her book delights and informs the lay reader. Erudite, entertaining, and to the point, this work demonstrates her talent for clear thinking and clear writing."

-- Publishers Weekly, starred review "In this marvelous, well-written and engaging book, Wendy Doniger shows us how Vatyayana's famous treatise about pleasure draws on another famous treatise about politics, Kautilya's Arthashastra: the two perennial concerns of human beings, sex and politics, come together within the boundary of social duty and obligation. There has never been a book quite like this. It describes the Kamasutra's historical context, places it in relation to the early history of Sanskrit literature concerned with the purposes of life, and discusses its contemporary relevance. Written with style and verve this book is a must-read for everyone interested in the history of Indian civilization or the broader history of human desire." --Gavin Flood, Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, Oxford University "With seasoned wisdom and a heart irrepressibly young, Wendy Doniger offers us an elegant exposition of the Kamasutra. She shows it to be wide-ranging, astute about love's politics, and deeply committed not just to good sex but to all aspects of the good life. Redeeming the Kamasutra beckons modern readers to a fresh encounter with an ancient, strikingly contemporary text." --John Stratton Hawley, author of A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement "Not for nothing is Wendy Doniger widely esteemed today as a paragon among Indologists, by virtue of her wit, her learning and the accessibility of her writings. In this original work she offers striking new insights into what the Kamasutra can teach us about ancient Indian society, and how it relates to Sanskrit texts on other branches of Indian knowledge. She is a Horace of our age, finding nothing human to which she feels no kinship." --Richard Gombrich, author of What the Buddha Thought

Wendy Doniger is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago and the author of over 30 books, including On Hinduism and The Hindus: An Alternative History.

Wendy Doniger has provided a clear and concise overview of the Kamasutra's structure, themes, and historical background. She navigates the ambiguity of the text with skill, showing how on one hand, the Kamasutra was highly progressive for its time (allowing for extramarital affairs from women as well as men, not condemning homosexual relations, and even subtly acknowledging the presence of bisexuality, etc.), and on the other hand perpetuating a rape mentality (for example, taking a woman's protests and screams as an attempt at arousing her partner, rather than something genuine). She illustrates how the Kamasutra draws on older works such as the Arthashastra and the works attributed to the mythological Manu) and plays on their themes. She also looks a bit further in history, bringing the tale to the period of British imperial rule and modern day instances of puritanism and censorship. She makes a strong case for the ascetic and anti-erotic traditions having always been a part of India's history and culture, rather than as being the sole product of Muslim and British occupations; it is only in the aftermath of the latter occupation that (primarily upper class) India has privileged the ascetic and anti-erotic and sought to revise history, trying to make the erotic streams of culture and spirituality appear as aberrations (most recently caused by the West). If you're interested in seeing a tiny piece of India's erotic history, then you could do worse than Redeeming the Kamasutra. Hopefully, Doniger's work will take things at least one step further against the tides of censorship and puritanism. On the downside, do not go into this book expecting a conventionally "entertaining" book, like many popular histories. Doniger remains a scholar and despite her humor, the book remains in that mode. The text is lively, undoubtedly, but still formal to a degree. It is a short and quick read, however, so this may balance out for some readers. As a final note, you will see with many of the other reviews for this book, and others by Wendy Doniger, examples of puritanical anger in response to her illustrations of narratives alternative to the standard one preached by the upper classes of India and the Indian diaspora. The Indian culture was not always one of sanitized, ascetic spirituality - there was, and still is, flesh on the bones and a healthy appreciation of kama, or desire.

Very complicated and wordy writing- not easy to read.

Piece of junk and waste of paper. Better to feed the trees to herbivores animals than use it to print this crap. The author seems to have some sexual problems in life and they come up in the book. Can I return this s*** and get my money back?

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