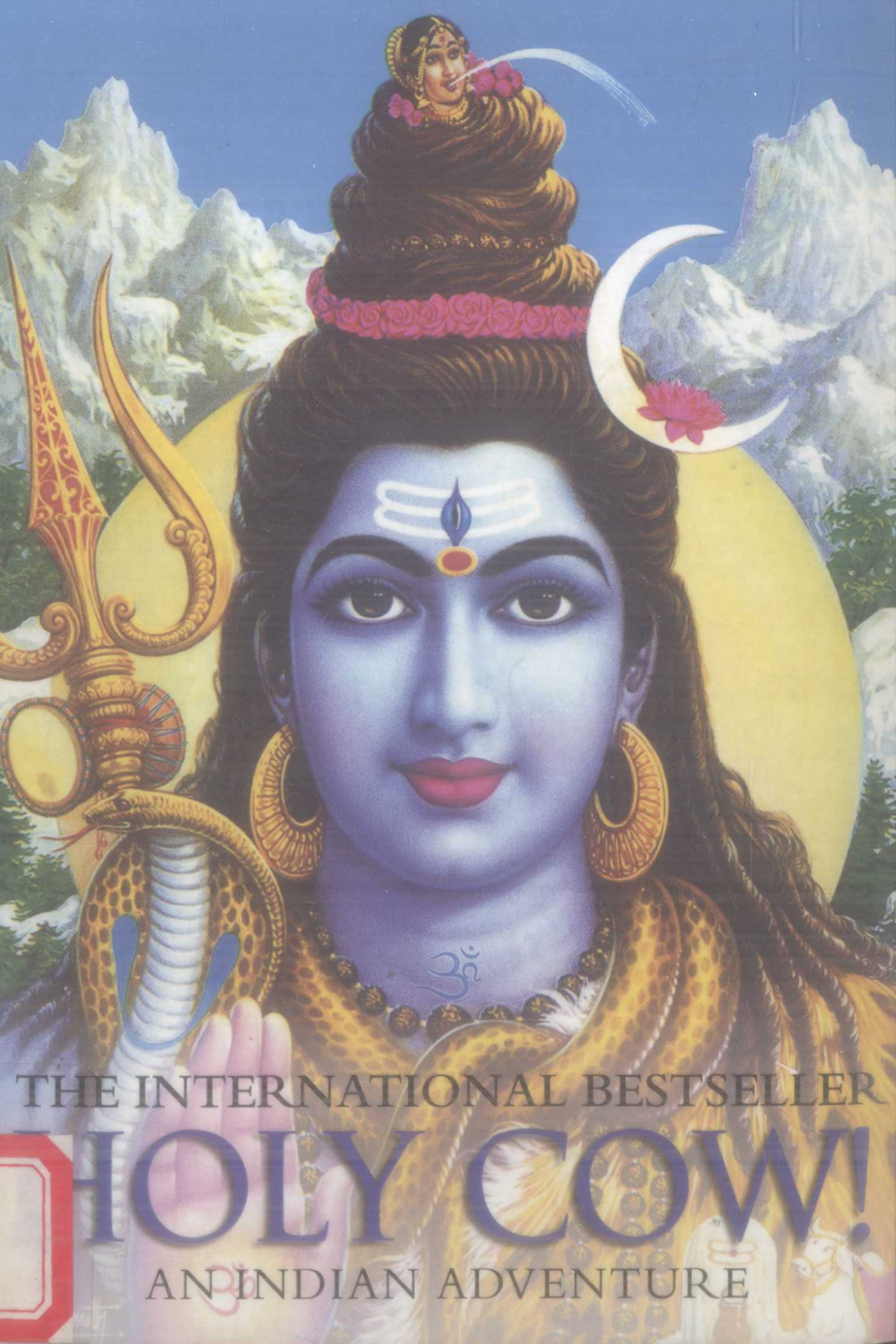


SARAH MACDONALD



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
HOLY COW!
AN INDIAN ADVENTURE

Sarah Macdonald grew up in Sydney and studied psychology at university. Rejecting the idea of ever practising as a shrink, she travelled for a year hoping that a few months in India at the end of the journey would give her a vision of her destiny. It didn't, although a soothsayer predicted that she would return.

After completing a traineeship at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sarah worked for Triple J, Australia's most influential music and youth affairs radio station, as their political correspondent in Canberra. Along with some work on television productions such as *Recovery*, *Race Around the World* and *Two Shot*, Sarah presented Triple J's *Art Show* and was the voice of the *Morning Show* until the end of the century when she left to join her partner Jonathan Harley in India. And then the true adventure began. Sarah is now a presenter on Radio National and lives in Sydney.

Acclaim for *Holy Cow!*

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'Hilarious and incredible'

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HOLY COW!

AN INDIAN ADVENTURE

SARAH MACDONALD



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*To my mum and dad for having me
To Jonathan for taking me
and
To India for making me.*



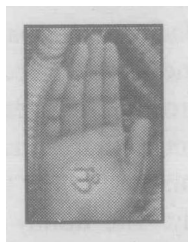
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PREFACE

A Good Hand Job



New Delhi airport 1988

‘Madam, pleazzzzzzzzzzze.’

A high-pitched wheezy whine in my ear.

‘For the final time, fuuuuuuuck off.’

My low growl through clenched teeth is a shamefully unoriginal, pathetic response, but it’s all I’m capable of at two on Christmas morning. For three days my friend Nic and I have been sitting on plastic airport chairs waiting for the stifling, stinky smog to lift. For three nights I’ve lain on a bed in an airport hotel listening to Nic bounce the sounds of violent double-ender projectile vomits and diarrhoea explosions off the bathroom walls.

India is Hotel California: you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.

Tonight, in such a lovely place, the voices down my ear corridor belong to the airport toilet cleaner. He has abandoned his post at the urinal to pursue his part-time job as a

professional beggar. Shuffling in a stooped circle, he hovers around us as patient and persistent as a vulture waiting for death. He can smell our exhaustion and weakness, and we can smell him – his blue overalls are stained with urine and stink of mothballs; his breath reeks of *paan*, the red chewing tobacco that smells like a mix of overripe fruit and fluoride.

At long last a nasal voice calls our flight. The beggar shuffles forward to make his final swoop.

‘Madaaamz, sweet ladies, any spare rupees, please give, please, no wife, many cheeldren, you reesh, me poor, pleeeaze.’

His pitiful eyes pierce consciences swollen with western guilt. His prey surrenders. With her final energy, Nic digs in her pocket and gives the man our last few filthy notes, saved for an emergency toilet supply. The dunny beggar straightens up, grabs her hand and smiles – his teeth a rainbow of green, yellow and red stains.

‘Good money, madamz, so I give you good hand job.’

Taking the horrified look on Nic’s face to be one of acceptance, he bows his head over her palm, looks up and drones, ‘Oh madam, very soon marriage, very soon babies, two babies. Oh dear, only girls.’

He shakes his head and stifles a tear of sympathy.

‘But nice girls, good girls. And madam, goodbye, never India again, goodbye.’

Despite my exhaustion and exasperation, I somehow find the energy to laugh. Nic doesn’t believe in marriage, never wants kids and, despite having shed half her body weight down India’s toilets, is vowing to return.

The old beggar bugger startles, stiffens and wheels around to face me. He grabs my hand in his claw, smooths its lines with his thick thumb, spits a volley of red *paan* at my feet and perverts at my palm. Raising his bloodshot eyes to mine he whispers ominously, ‘You, you, late marriage, old marriage, very sad. You get great jobbing, happy jobbing, meeting big people jobbing, but late loving.’

I yank my hand from his, pick up my backpack and storm towards the plane.

He yells after me, 'You, madam, you come back to India, you come for love, you love it, you love us again.'

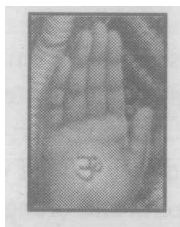
I break into a run, push onto the plane and sink into my seat. As we take off I give smog-swirled New Delhi the finger.

'Goodbye and good riddance, India, I hate you and I'm never, never, ever coming back.'



CHAPTER ONE

Through the Looking Glass



I have a dreadful long-term memory. I only remember two traumatic events of my childhood – my brother's near-death by drowning and my own near-death by humiliation when I was rescued by a lifeguard while attempting my first lap of butterfly in the local pool. I vaguely remember truth or dare kisses in the back of a bus, aged about twelve, dancing to 'My Sharona' at thirteen, behaving like an absolute arsehole in my adolescence, and having a hideous hippie phase involving dreadlocks and tie-dye when I was at university.

For my twenty-first birthday my parents gave me a plane ticket and a blessing to leave home and Australia for a year. This middle-class rite of passage had become a family tradition – my mother had hitchhiked around Europe in the fifties and wanted us all to experience the joy of travel before we settled into careers. My trip through Europe, Egypt and Turkey is a bit of a blur and recollections of the two-month tour of India on the way home are vague. I can see myself roadside squatting and

peeing with women in wonderful saris, sunset games of beach cricket with a trinity of fat Goan men named Jesus, Joseph and Jude, and the white bright teeth of a child rickshaw driver wearing a t-shirt printed with 'Come on Aussie Come on'. I recall angst, incredible anger, deep depression and a love-hate relationship with the country, but I can't remember why. I'd filed the soothsayer, his prophecies and my vow never to return under 'young stupid rubbish' and let it fall deep into the black hole of my brain.

Until now – a month short of eleven years later.

As I walk into the plane in Singapore, a seed starts to sprout in the blocked sewer of my memory; a seed watered by the essence of stale urine and the whiff of vomit coming from my window seat (where the pink and orange paisley wallpaper artfully camouflages the spew). The high-pitched, highly excited jumble of Indian voices almost germinates a recollection. But after too many going-away parties, involving too much indulgence, I'm too wasted to let the bud bloom. I fall asleep.

Somewhere over Chennai I become aware of an increasingly rhythmic prodding of my inner thigh by something long, thin and hard. I open my eyes to see a brown finger with a long curved nail closing in on my crotch. The digit is attached to a scrawny old Sikh in a turban sitting beside me. He is slobbering and shaking with excitement. I'm too sleepy, shocked and, for some reason, too embarrassed to scream, so I buzz for sisterly assistance.

An airhostess with big hair, long nails and drag-queen makeup, slowly strolls over. She looks cranky.

'What?'

'This man is touching me when I sleep,' I bleat indignantly.

The hostess rolls her eyes and waggles her finger.

At me.

'Well, stay awake and don't let it happen again, madam.'

She wheels on the spot and strides off, swishing her nylon sari.

Months later a friend will tell me that many Indian trolley dollies are rich girls whose parents pay a massive bribe to get them a job involving travel and five-star hotels. These brats view passengers as pesky intrusions way beneath their status, and detest doing the job of a high-flying servant. But right now, I'm floored, abandoned and angry.

I stay wide-awake and alert until the hostess with the mostest sprays the cabin with foul-smelling insecticide. She aims an extra jet directly at my head. I can almost hear her thinking, *Slut germs no returns.*

It's now that I remember that India is like Wonderland. In this other universe everyone seems mad and everything is upside down, back to front and infuriatingly bizarre. I'm Alice: fuzzy with feelings about my previous trip down the rabbit hole, I'm now flying straight back through the looking glass to a place where women are blamed for sleazy men and planes are sprayed when they fly from a clean city to a dirty one. In this world we applaud a dreadful landing that's as fast and steep as a take-off, we jump up and tackle fellow passengers in a scrum at the door while the plane is still moving, and the airhostess gets off first.

I get off last to be embraced by the cold and clammy smog. The cocktail of damp diesel, swirling dust, burning cow dung, toxic chemicals, spicy sweat and sandalwood wraps me in memories. The soothsayer and his prophecies of a decade ago boil to the surface of my brain.

For the old bloke *did* give a good hand job.

My friend Nic got married soon after we came home; she then quickly popped out two gorgeous girls and has never come back to India. I'm still single and at thirty-three, by Indian standards, I'm a spinster to be pitied. I've had good jobbing – only days ago I finished my last 'Morning Show' on the Triple J network. I've interviewed famous actors, crazed celebrities and brilliant musicians; I've talked with an audience I admire; and I've enjoyed a lifestyle of travelling, film

premieres, theatre opening nights, music gigs and festivals. I've left the best job in the world for a country that I now remember hating with a passion. And I've done it for love. My boyfriend, Jonathan, is the ABC's South Asia correspondent based in New Delhi, and after a year of yearning, soppy love songs and pathetic phone calls, we've decided we can't live apart. I look to see if the toilet cleaner is here to gloat.

A different tarmac welcoming committee emerges from the mist – five men with massive moustaches, machine guns and moronic stares, each of them clutching his own penis.

I then spend hours inching along an impossibly slow passport queue comprised of harassed foreigners, while Indians swan past smiling. It takes half an hour to find my bags in the midst of a screaming and jumping porter mosh-pit and another twenty minutes to have my luggage X-rayed again. By the time I am near the exit I'm frantic that I'm late for my most important date. I rush down a long exit ramp that gets steeper and steeper, pulling my trolley deeper and faster into India. I hit the bottom with a bump and fall over. Dazed, disoriented and dusty, I sense a strange sight and sound emerging from the smog. A huge hurricane fence appears to be alive. It's rocking and writhing – fingers, toes and small arms reach through wire gaps; heads poke over the barbed wire, and mouths pressed to the steel groan and moan.

'Taxieeee, taxieeee, madam, taxiee, *baksheesh*, money.'

Before I can pick myself up, an arm breaks through a hole in the fence, grabs my bags and starts to disappear back into the misty melee. I begin a tug of war with a person I can't see. I start to scream, 'Stop, come back, I'm getting picked up.'

'No, no, you are too late, your car not coming, I am taking you,' yells a voice from the end of the arm.

Could he be right? Could Jonathan have come and gone? Or been held up on a story? My doubt weakens me and I lose my grip on my bags and fall flat on my back.

Then, through the smog, a tall being with a familiar grin