

Amy Willesee and Mark Whittaker. *Love and Death in Kathmandu*. Pan Macmillan Australia, 2003.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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You tend to think of mass murderers as people pushed to extremes by some kind of disadvantage or marginalisation. They've been fired, or failed at school, or are deprived in some terrible way. So it was astonishing to hear of the murder of the royal family of Nepal by the Crown Prince in 2001. Like many interesting stories you hear on the news, though, there was scanty follow-up, and a tantalising snippet of news became one of those many half-forgotten facts floating in one's memory.

So it was with great interest that I saw that two Australian writers had gone to Nepal to investigate the background, and to try and find out what had really happened. Amy Willesee and Mark Whittaker have now published their book, titled *Love and Death in Kathmandu*. They have produced not only a well-research and readable biography of Crown Prince Dipendra – known to his friends as Dippy or CP for short – but have also provided a solid historical and social account of the Nepalese monarchy, the only Hindu monarchy in existence.

The Hindus have no qualms about investing humans with divine status, and in Nepal the king and his heirs are worshipped as gods. Willisee and Whittaker neither scoff at these beliefs, or indulge in fatuous new age admiration. They maintain an even, sympathetic and conversational tone while they explore some of the odd consequences of thinking this way in the contemporary world.

They don't pretend to solve the case beyond reasonable doubt. There would have been a tricky legal problem in the Prince had survived – how do you try a god for murdering other gods? But Crown Prince Dipendra shot himself once he had killed ten of his relatives, including mother, father, sister and brother. He left his uncle Gyanendra, the king's brother, to take over as king.

The authors visited Nepal early in 2002, and met as many people as possible. They had their horoscopes cast by astrologers, wanting “to know how it felt ... when love was left up to someone else to decide.” The royal astrologer told them what they wanted to hear, but his nephew, a more serious practitioner, told them that “compatibility is not good.” This they found sobering: “No matter how much we dismissed astrology as mere superstition, it felt like he’d diagnosed a terminal illness. ... We had entered the world of the cosmically unsynchronised. Thank God,” they concluded, “we were already married.”

They wanted to have an audience with the new King, but he was still in his 12-month period of mourning and was seeing nobody. But they spoke to many survivors - relatives and friends, ADCs – who were the inevitable scapegoats, although it is hard to see how they could have prevented the murders – and the father of Devyana Rana, the woman who it seems was at the centre of the affair.

Crown Prince Dipendra wanted to marry Devyana, but, though she was a close relative and the daughter of a senior member of the government, the Queen was implacably opposed to the marriage. This is the stuff of romance, but Willisee and Whittaker don’t gloss over the awkward facts. The Crown Prince wasn’t particularly faithful to Devyani, and appeared to be keeping his options open to revive the royal custom of polygamy which had fallen into disuse over the past few generations. The couple fought in public, and some of his friends disliked her and thought he had made the wrong choice. But he had decided that Devyani was to be his Senior Queen, and the affair dragged on so long – he was nearly thirty and unmarried, unheard of in Nepal – that his frustration at being allowed everything he wanted except Devyani as his wife finally led this over-indulged young man to breaking point.

This book satisfies much of the morbid curiosity aroused by such cases, but leaves, as it must, a mystery at the heart of this unbelievable act of a man of wealth, power and education. In spite of all that, it seems that it was after all a kind of deprivation which brought about this calamity.