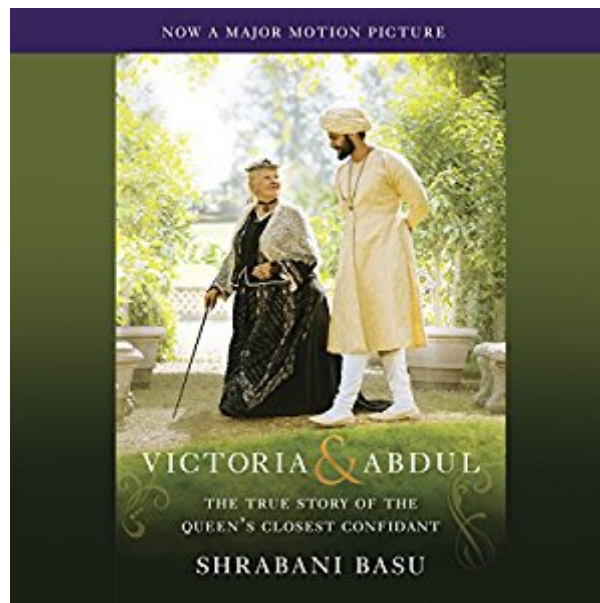




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Victoria & Abdul (Movie Tie-in): The True Story Of The Queen's Closest Confidant



Synopsis

Soon to be a major motion picture starring Dame Judi Dench from director Stephen Frears, releasing September 22, 2017. Tall and handsome, Abdul was just 24 years old when he arrived in England from Agra to wait at tables for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Within a year Abdul had grown to become a powerful figure at court, the queen's teacher, or Munshi; her counsel on Urdu and Indian affairs; and a friend close to the queen's heart. "I am so very fond of him," Queen Victoria would write in 1888. "He is so good and gentle and understanding...a real comfort to me." This marked the beginning of the most scandalous decade in Queen Victoria's long reign. Devastated first by the death of Prince Albert in 1861 and then her personal servant John Brown in 1883, Queen Victoria quickly found joy in an intense and controversial relationship with her Munshi, who traveled everywhere with her, cooked her curries, and cultivated her understanding of the Indian subcontinent - a region, as empress of India, she was long intrigued by but could never visit. The royal household roiled with resentment, but their devotion grew in defiance of all expectation and the societal pressures of their time and class and lasted until the queen's death on January 22, 1901. Drawn from never-before-seen firsthand documents that had been closely guarded secrets for a century, Shrabani Basu's *Victoria & Abdul* is a remarkable history of the last years of the 19th century in English court, an unforgettable view onto the passions of an aging queen and a fascinating portrayal of how a young Indian Muslim came to play a central role at the heart of the British Empire.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Victoria & Abdul is the story of Queen Victoria's relationship with Abdul Karim, an Indian Muslim. Karim was just 24 years-old when he came to Victoria's court from the city of Agra, India to be one of her two Indian servants. He was quickly elevated to the title of "Munshie" or teacher, ostensibly to school the Queen in the Urdu language, but he soon became her most trusted confidant and advisor on Indian affairs. Queen Victoria had been devastated at the loss of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861. She then developed a close relationship with her personal servant, John Brown, but he too passed away in 1883. In 1887, when Abdul Karim arrived from India, what developed was a friendship that set the Queen's household on its ear. When they began her Hindustani lessons, neither the Queen nor her Munshie realized exactly how much everyone in Queen Victoria's court would oppose him. For the next thirteen years, everyone around the Queen attempted to sabotage their friendship, but she steadfastly refused to hear anything against him. Author Shrabani Basu has framed a very readable book, despite a dizzying number of unfamiliar terms, locations and players. She has also made a very convincing argument that, as Queen Victoria believed, the objections raised against Karim were entirely due to racism and class snobbery. Queen Victoria held the title of Empress of India and, as the reigning monarch of the Indian colony, was very much loved by the Indian people. She insisted on having a large number of Indian servants in her household, much to the chagrin and disgust of her family and court. The various people in her life attempted to discredit the Munshie time and again, but were never able to substantiate any claims against him. When Queen Victoria died, the Munshie and his family were expelled from England, along with all the other Indians in her court. All personal correspondence from the Queen to her Munshie were seized and burned after her death and a paranoid persecution of Abdul and his family continued even beyond his death, eight years after his beloved queen. Of course, the situation in India did not continue and British rule was abolished less than fifty years after the reign of Queen Victoria. For over one hundred years the story of the Munshie and his Queen languished in obscurity, until Ms. Basu untangled a very complicated and hidden chapter in English and Indian history. Victoria & Abdul was a very interesting read and I definitely recommend it.

Abdul Karim, an Indian Muslim who lived in the Indian city of Agra in view of the magnificent Taj Mahal and worked as a clerk, was chosen to become a servant to Queen Victoria, as she was fascinated with this faraway country in her Empire. It wasn't long before the Queen realized Karim

had more education, intelligence and potential than a mere table servant and elevated him to the position of Munshi, or teacher. Over a span of about 13 years, he taught her the Urdu language, explained Indian culture and discussed Indian affairs with her, eventually becoming a close and beloved confidant. Shrabani Basu has unearthed a fairly unknown story about Queen Victoria's reign. It was fascinating to read about the Queen's growing love of the Indian culture, language and people. Among other things, Karim introduced her to Indian curry dishes, cooking them himself in the kitchens of her three homes (Balmoral, Windsor and Osborne). The Queen showed her gratitude by conferring favors on Karim and his family in India, granting them land and other financial benefits, and by decorating Karim with prized medals of honor. The one thing that made me queasy about the book is that the author presents the Queen's attentions to Karim as always given in the spirit of friendship and concern for his welfare. More often, I saw an imperial monarch who wanted Indians around her as exotic decoration and ordered their lives as she wished, not as they would want. Although the author tries to show the Queen as one who had no prejudices and backed Karim unconditionally when her court wanted to banish him as a "deplorable," I saw a woman who expected complete loyalty and submission and when she got it, mistook it for true connection. "The Indians always wait now and do so, so well and quietly," she says in praise of Karim and another Indian servant. I also had sympathy for those around her, who could see the Munshi's growing ego and brashness when the Queen was blind to it. Just as she had attached herself to Prince Albert and later John Brown, she did the same with Karim. She could not completely shelter Karim from her vengeful court, though -- after Victoria's death, it was truly shameful how he and his family were treated by the British court. I'm eager for the movie that follows this book. I think it might be the rare case where the movie is better than the book. The author repeats herself endlessly. It became annoying after awhile. (I read "the Queen's favorite Indian Prince, the Maharajah of Cooch Behar" so many times it made me laugh!) There's also a lot of unnecessary detail that brings the narrative to a screeching halt. ("The men servants were in the sleeping carriage number 870, while the Queen's personal servants (including Karim and Buksh) and dressers were closer to the Royal saloons. The Queen shared a saloon with Princess Beatrice. Ponsonby and Reid shared a double saloon numbered 131.") But by skipping some of the denser material, I was able to maintain an interest in the narrative throughout the book.

~side note #1 Since there is a movie tie-in, you might be misled into thinking that VICTORIA & ABDUL is a historical novel, or something contrived, very much an 'adapted history'. It is Not. This is a solid historical work that has been well researched. It reads like good history, but if you are looking

for a dive into the heart and soul of the characters, you might just want to wait for the movie.~VICTORIA & ABDUL is a wonderful read. The author gives us lots of delicious detail about the times, mood, and place. She describes things like the Queen's railroad coach and rooms exceedingly well. I felt myself dropped into place watching Victoria's entourage having parties and visiting Europe. I previously indicated that you weren't going to see inside the hearts of Victoria and Abdul like you will in a historical novel or the movie, but that's not entirely accurate. What you get are insights into their thinking. Basu gives us telling snippets from their own writings. And where we might fail to see the significance, Basu lights the way. Certainly, when you finish this book you will understand the care and attention that Queen and servant had for one another. The paintings, the notes, the conversations all present to us a wonderful tale that has not been told before. Recommend.

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