



# The Grammarian

*Annapurna Potluri*

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## **The Grammarian** Annapurna Potluri

In the fall of 1911, Alexandre Lautens, an ambitious French philologist, sweeps into a remote part of India to study the Telugu language. Hosted by a local wealthy landowner and his family, Lautens arrives at a moment of change for the Adivis: Mohini, the younger and strikingly beautiful daughter, is about to marry, an act which will inevitably condemn her older sister, who suffers from being plain and disfigured, to spinsterhood.

Intellectually curious by nature, the elder sister Anjali is beguiled by Lautens, and as they find an intimacy within language, an unexpected relationship develops. After Anjali confesses that her disfigurement, a lasting injury from polio, has kept her from swimming since her childhood, Lautens surprises her with a trip to the beach. Regardless of what might have happened between them, Adivi is outraged when he hears word of their outing. Thinking his daughter a tramp and Lautens a predator, both are swiftly kicked out, left to fend for themselves—separately—as they try to navigate what really happened.

Lautens returns to France, never sure if he should have remained part of Anjali's life. Anjali flees too, seeking a life of political activism she never knew possible. Despite a life brimming with independence and bravery, Anjali never loses sight of the man who, however briefly, filled her heart.

## **The Grammarian Details**

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Author : Annapurna Potluri

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# From Reader Review *The Grammarian* for online ebook

## Anthony Matthews says

So far so good, got this book on loan as an ebook from the Los Angeles Public Library

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## Jane Celwyn says

This is an extraordinary debut novel by a very clever storyteller. The engaging story of a French philologist who lives with a family in India at the turn of the 20th century is enriched by historical details that expand the context beyond the immediate time period and the usual East-West conflicts. This is a many layered novel. I won't spoil a future reader's experience by revealing more about the story and its conclusion which I found very powerful.

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## Beth says

As a French philologist visiting India, Lautens tries to be a guest showing more behavioral empathy to his "well-to-do" Adivi host family than colonial British would demonstrate. He especially enjoys engaging in conversation with the grandmother and polio crippled granddaughter, Anjali. His goal in visiting is to write a grammar of the family's Telugu language.

Mutual admiration develops between him and Angali by the time preparations are in full swing by the family and servants to ready the house for Angali's beautiful sister, Mohini to become married. Lautens wants to give Angali a special treat because it seems so obvious that she will never be able to be married.

In giving her a wonderful day at the beach, he has made a huge mistake as a guest and is turned out of the house. In later life, back with his wife, he thinks of Angali often. He finds that she also had been turned out but found herself a life as a political active who made protests and frequently got jailed. The second half of the book is about this absent yet continual remembrance by Angali of how wonderful he seemed to her.

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## Radhika says

Alexander Lautens comes to a remote part of South India during the British Raj. He is a French philologist and has come to study the Telugu language. He is hosted by the Adivi family. They are rich landowners, and the family has two daughters, Mohini, one who is strikingly beautiful while the other Anjali is disfigured by polio and due to the culture which she lives in where arranged marriages are business propositions is condemned to a life of spinsterhood in that era.

Alexander is appreciative of the Anjali's intellectual dialogues and Anjali blossoms with his attentions, mistaking them for romantic interest. Anjali mentions that she has never been to the beach after she has been struck with polio. He decided to surprise her with the trip to the beach. A small simple act of kindness that sparks an unpleasant chain of events with unpleasant consequences.

Alexander is asked to leave, Anjali is thrown out of her home disgraced. Alexander did not realise how different cultures have different set of rules for a simple act. He realises the cultural difference too late. But the story is set up in the times where grumblings of Indian independence had already started. Anjali joins Sarojini naidu and helps her with the independence movement.

Mohini becomes a dissatisfied housewife whereas Anjali though single goes through life as she had dreamed still loving Alexander and hoping to see him again.

Set in the background of pre independent India this book takes us on a good journey !

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### **Jessica Simmons says**

This book has a lot of potential and starts out beautifully, but the plot falls flat.

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### **Kathy says**

No good deed goes unpunished, especially in early 20th century colonial India! After an intense affair of the heart, though basically one-sided, powers the story, the author leads the reader through much Indian history. At times, I thought she was using her novel as a "bully pulpit" but nevertheless, found the book captivating. It helped immensely that she is talking about the region I visited!

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### **Susan says**

This book had an interesting storyline, and could have been much better. A French philologist travels to India to study Telugu, a language of southeastern India. While there, he is hosted by a wealthy family and is intrigued by one of the daughters, who is intelligent and socially conscious, but not as beautiful as her younger sister, and also crippled by a childhood case of polio (the story mainly takes place in 1911). Because of a misunderstanding, Alexandre, the philologist, is banished from the house and never sees the daughter again. The setting is beautifully described, and the history is interesting. But the style is rather disjointed and doesn't read smoothly. In addition, the book is marred by a number of typographical errors. It could have used better editing.

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### **RoseMary Achey says**

Many books have been written with British rule in the Indian subcontinent as their setting or framework and The Grammarian is one such book. In 1911 a French philologist spends time in an Indian family while he studies the Telugu language.

The wealthy host family considers it a high honor that Dr. Lautens, the philologist, is staying in their home. Unfortunately Dr. Lautens shows the eldest daughter a kindness that is misinterpreted by her traditional father. The philologist is sent packing and the daughter is turned away from her home and family.

This novel has a rich sense of place and time. Through the author's gorgeous language you can almost smell the flowers, taste the meals and feel the deep hurt that dwell in the hearts and souls of the characters.

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### **Peter Rock says**

I found this to be an amazingly assured debut. The prose here is so rich and supple; what's most impressive is the sheer amount of dimension--within individuals, and between them, and politically/historically, and even the way language is plumbed and investigated. Some of the shifts between perspective and both so sudden and so subtle that we at once have a resonance of an experience from multiple perspectives. While this isn't a new technique, I usually find it quite jarring, and it can take a reader out of a story. Potluri's intuitive sensibility is right on. All about lost and impossible possibilities, this reader felt yearning so admirably translated.

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### **Cherie says**

This book took me on a journey to India. At the start I had no great expectations. I was drawn to the book by the title and the picture on the front caught my eye. Even the text style drew me in. It called to me to pick it up and after reading the summary on the jacket cover, I was happy to pay my money and take the book home. It was a risk, but the story line sounded interesting to me. The next day, my book group posted a challenge to read a book set in a country of one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. So, I read this book.

The story line revolves around Alexandre Lautens, a French man, writing a book about an Indian language called Telugu and a young woman named Anjali Adivis. Anjali is the oldest daughter of a wealthy land owner in Waltair. Alexandre has been invited to stay with the Adivis family while he is studying the language. Their story takes place beginning in October of 1911. After a long train ride across India from Bombay, he arrives and meets the family. He settles into the family routine, devotes himself to writing every morning and evening and engages with family members to validate the meanings of the words he is trying to define.

The Adivis family are preparing for a wedding for the youngest daughter of the house, Anjali's sister, Mohini. Normally, the older sister would be wed first, but Anjali has no prospects due to a disfigurement suffered in child hood. Alexandre observes the activities surrounding the younger sister, and notes how Anjali seems to be unhappy and left out of the planning by her harried parents. The day of the marriage draws near and Alexandre makes a terrible mistake by taking Anjali out of the house on what he deems a harmless excursion. The repercussions are huge, and he is asked to leave after the wedding ceremony.

Alexandre finds lodging with an Englishman named Anthony Davidson and his Indian mistress, Madhuri, where he spends the Christmas holidays. He receives a letter from Anjali's grandmother, Kanakadurga. After reading the letter, and finding out that Anjali was no longer at her Father's house, Alexandre decides to go back to France before the New Year.

After Lautens goes back to France, he receives letters from Anjali, which he does not answer. After she left her father's house, she went to live with a famous Indian poet and political activist, Sarojini Naidu. She

becomes involved in the Home Rule movement, along with Naidu and spends the rest of her life working to free India from English rule.

Obviously, this is a brief, brief summary of the main story of the book.

The last third of the book is mostly about Anjali, but also captures events in Alexandre's life. It was a little disjointed at times. The story seemed a little chopped up. Too much time passing was shown in small chapters, as highlights almost. It was still absorbing and kept me reading and interested.

Anjali's pain was beautifully documented:

"Inside she was dying. Inside there was rotting flesh inside her living flesh, death eating her from the inside out, killing her in the world's slowest-ever murder, those thoughts that came to her mind, that she could not be loved, that she could be neither missed nor noticed, that she figured into the life of the world no more than the dirt on the road filled her heart and she believed them. She was addictively attached to the sorrow in her heart, thinking these things to feel the pain that reminded her she was living. She felt the death inside her bloom the moment her father exiled her, but in truth the death entered her at the moment love did. She who had not been made for love. Only through loving and losing was this despair made possible, and it clouded each minute of her day, all the colors in the world were bleached out. "

The story was well written, and I enjoyed reading it. I liked reading the Indian names for things and learning a little about some of the culture and food and how people lived. The disparity between the rich and the poor, was indicated in one of the small comments on Indian life:

"To Alexandre's view, to be rich in India was unrivaled by what it was to be rich in Europe. How wealth here was a buffer against all the cruelties, all the vulgarities of life. Every peasant had his price. Servants watched children. They cooked, cleaned, minded the horses, fed and washed the family pets, tended the gardens, washed the clothes, brought tea, summoned cars and coaches, shopped for vegetables and meat and fish and sweets and fruit; there seemed in India no task of daily life not able to be delegated to some servant for a small price.

For a new author and first novel, I think the language and well written story was wonderful and definitely worth reading.

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### **The Tick says**

I feel like the author overelaborated on a lot of events in this story that didn't need elaboration, and could have gone into more detail about certain other things, especially in the second half of the book, which was very disjointed. A lot of the language was pretty, but at some points it distracted from the story itself.

However, this book also had two things I love: South India and grammar. I enjoyed those elements enough to give it an extra star.

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### **Scherzadee says**

So disappointed. The plot interested me so much, and the writing just let me down. To my taste, poor to say

the least. Halfway through the book I toyed with the idea of taking a highlighter and starting to highlight all the times "beautiful" and "handsome" were used. An empty, shallow description of India (and of beautifully handsome people. Apparently.)

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### **Mirella says**

For those who like lush foreign settings, engaging prose, and a poignant story, *The Grammarian* by Annapurna Potluri definitely delivers. From its opening pages, the flow of the writing made the story visually come alive in my mind. Cultural values pertaining to beauty and non-beauty enhanced the characterization of the poor, afflicted, Anjali, a young woman disfigured from polio at an early age. Through the author's rich prose, I could empathize with Anjali's plight and feel her lingering sadness.

When a simple act of kindness destroys Anjali's life, and she and Lautens are banished from the Adivi home, the story truly becomes affecting and we are shown the heroine's courage and the hero's loss. This was a lovely debut novel from a talented writer and I look forward to reading more of her work in the future. This is definitely a book to savour.

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### **Dianna Carlson says**

The author definitely is a "big picture" observer. I liked her observational perspective. I liked the grandmother's comments about her son and his wife and the friendship she offered the protagonist. *The Grammarian* visits another culture to learn and finds himself definitely out of his element in a culture that he had not understood or really attempted to study. The unforeseen consequences aren't what they at first seemed, either. I would definitely like to read more by this new young author.

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### **Debbie says**

I have given this book 3 stars because it averages out the 1 star rating I would give it for plot and the 5 star rating I would give it for prose.

Annapurna Potluri writes beautifully. Her prose transported me to the sultry bustle of India, and inside the heads of her characters so that I felt their emotions and saw through their eyes. And for the first half of the book the story is purposeful and enveloping, but then it fizzles out and I was left feeling very unfulfilled and thinking 'What was the point of the story?'

The Grammarian of the title refers to Frenchman Alexandre Lautens, who arrives in India in 1911 to create a grammar of the Telugu language. He stays with the Adivi family who are wealthy and privileged and very conservative in their moral values. There are two daughters in the Adivi family, the elder, Anjali, has been crippled by polio and is considered unmarriageable. The younger, Mohini, is beautiful and about to be married in an arranged marriage.

Anjali's disability is something of which her father is ashamed. Anjali herself has a keen mind and an interest in linguistics and the independence of India but finds it hard to accept that she cannot have the life that her sister will have. Anjali helps Alexandre with his work and a friendship develops between them that becomes

infatuation on Anjali's side.

Then from a misguided act of kindness Alexandre unintentionally compromises Anjali's reputation and causes a great rift between her and her family, and forces him to leave the Adivi's with great ill will. At this point the flow of narrative alters, the tempo changes and it starts to lose direction.

The remainder of the book looks at the effect this one act has on the remaining separate lives of both Alexandre and Anjali, but there is no depth to the narrative and the consequences of Alexandre's act seem minimal and ultimately unimportant. Both Alexandre and Anjali go on to lead lives of dissatisfied accomplishment that don't engage the reader and fail to deliver on the promise of the first half of the book.

Anjali eventually comes to the conclusion that her disfigurement and the rift with her family actually provided her with opportunity and freedom that was denied to most Indian women. But by the time she realises this it is too late to act on it. If she had reached this epiphany earlier in the book and taken advantage of it, it would have been a much better story.

This is Annapurna Potluri's first book and hopefully she will improve her plotting for her next one because she can certainly write beautifully and engagingly.

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