
Reviewed by Judith Laura, Kensington, MD, USA

*Wanderings* is a moving spiritual memoir about Wendy Dickstein’s journey that, in the book, begins in Safed, Israel, continues to India, and then winds back to Israel. There is some departure from facts—such as changing the names of family members and sometimes places. But these are few and far between. The book’s narrator is called Rachel Chopra on the book’s back cover explanation, but is unnamed in the book itself. I will call the book’s narrator Dickstein (or “the author”) in this review. The names of famous people are given and Dickstein’s experiences with them are real.

The author was born in Connecticut, moved with her family to Australia when a teenager, and is a graduate of Monash and Melbourne Universities. She moved to Jerusalem, Israel, in 1986, after living in England, India, and California. She introduces the theme of this memoir in the Foreword, titled “Meeting Mother Teresa,” by including inspirational experiences and messages from well known people in several religions. In her meeting with Mother Teresa, in response to a question from Dickstein about how to pray, Mother Teresa suggests that the author begin by looking at “your beautiful Psalms,” and then gives her a card with the well-known prayer of St. Frances of Assisi that begins, “Lord, make me a channel of your peace….” (elsewhere, “channel” is sometimes translated “instrument”). The author places this card in her Jewish prayer book. Dickstein goes on to write about being assured by a Christian priest she has befriended that her planned move to India with her husband, who had been offered a career post in southern India, would strengthen rather than weaken her interest in Jewishness, because by investigating the way religions other than one’s own interact with God, “…one becomes more alive in one’s own tradition.” Dickstein then meets the famous rabbi, Shlomo Carlebach, who soothes her fear of losing touch with her own tradition by telling her, “Wherever you might find yourself, know that you are always on the way to Jerusalem.” This interaction with clergy in
different traditions sets the tone for the rest of the book in its recognition of the interrelationship between the beliefs and practices of several of the world’s major religions.

Chapter One relates how the author’s father’s death in Israel deepened her understanding of life as well as death and the death process, and tells of healing that took place as a result. She describes the approach of her father’s death: “I sensed that we were not alone. I remembered then that the rabbis maintain that the holy presence, the Shechinah, sits always above the head of a dying person.” She describes sensing a “streaming light” above her father’s head, and the spirits of women, possibly family members who had died previously, encircling him. As a result of this experience, she no longer feared death. The second chapter, now in India, relates the unusual way in which she celebrated the yahrzeit of her father’s death, which included a meeting with Mother Teresa, during which the author gave the nun a copy of Martin Buber’s Legend of the Baal Shem. Mother Teresa advised the author about her family situation in a way the author describes as “prophetic.” A few weeks later, Dickstein attended a Hindu ceremony commemorating an Indian hero, and through which she felt increased understanding of the significance of her father’s yahrzeit. In the third chapter, she describes her sense of meeting, in the south Indian town of Hyderabad where they lived, the prophet Elijah in the person of a young and poor Indian man.

Other highlights of the book for me include: The words of the hymn “Ain K’elokeinu” singing through the author’s mind as she walks through the impoverished areas of Hyderabad and its bazaar and graveyard; and her thoughts on the necessity for the appearance of a Messiah. These lead her to meditation in a Hindu Temple and a new understanding of the multiplicity of deities in that religion, as well as the probable Temple ceremonies in ancient Judaism. I was somewhat mystified by the role of an extensive tour of a rather odd art exhibit led by a professor of philosophy, who I assume is Dickstein’s husband since he is identified on the back cover as an “Indian philosopher . . .”

Probably at least partly because the book is short, and therefore we don’t get a sense that the author lived in India for as long a time as she did, her statement in chapter six, “For so many years I had fought to maintain my own spiritual space among a multitude of Hindus. And suddenly, here I was back with my fellow Jews. . . .” comes as a jolt not unlike the bounce of a
plane’s lowered wheels when it touches down. Did the author need a clearer transition here or does the seeming suddenness of her return to Israel intensify our understanding of her experience? I’ll let you decide. After her return, there are surprises and coincidences for her at two well-known spiritual sites in Israel.

With its vivid descriptions of two countries whose populations have multiple religions and its views of how different religions can interweave, *Wanderings* is an excellent example of creative nonfiction. It is available in print (the edition I read) and e-book formats.