



A Good Indian Wife

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Handsome anesthesiologist Neel prides himself on his decisiveness, both in and out of the operating room. So when he agrees to return to India to visit his ailing grandfather, he is sure he'll be able to resist his family's pleas that he marry a "good" Indian girl. With a girlfriend and a promising career back in San Francisco, the last thing Neel needs is an arranged marriage.

Leila is a thirty-year-old teacher in Neel's family's village who has watched too many prospective husbands come and go to think her newest suitor will be any different. She is well past prime marrying age; her family has no money for a dowry; and then there's the matter of an old friendship with a Muslim boy named Janni.

Neel and Leila struggle to reconcile their own desires with the expectations of others in this riveting story of two people, two countries, and two ways of life that may be more compatible than they seem.

A Good Indian Wife Details

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From Reader Review A Good Indian Wife for online ebook

Felicia Fulks says

I actually know the author of this book, and I remember when she told me was writing a book. So I was thrilled when I read it and really enjoyed it. If you're curious about how arranged marriages work and how they affect everyone involved, then this will be an interesting read for you. What really stuck with me was that arranged marriages still serve a valid purpose in many cultures. We Americans still find them strange and someone old-fashioned, but for a culture who wants to preserve its history and culture, it works.

Lana Del Slay says

NUTSHELL: This poor book is so confused, just like its protagonists. **3.**

Hey! Don't pick on the book! I suppose a book can't help what it is -- but its writer can, and its writer missed a few of the more obvious novel-writing lessons. Point-of-view changed so often I had whiplash by the third chapter. There's no real sense of time, or place, for that matter. I wouldn't have guessed it was still the nineteen-eighties for the characters if Cherian hadn't mentioned that outright, and her San Francisco is a generic large city with place names pasted on. The narrative cuts off too abruptly at the end; if there's going to be a sequel, for God's sake leave us somewhere sensible.

Why'd you even bother with a 3? I liked Leila, the female protagonist. Neel's a slimy so-and-so and Caroline (Caroleen, like the French) is a caricature of white trash. I finished the book for Leila and no-one else. Bypass this book like a blocked artery.

Janna says

5.0 out of 5 stars Anne Cherian is my new favorite author!!, January 19, 2013

By Janna Whitehead - See all my reviews

This review is from: A Good Indian Wife: A Novel (Kindle Edition)

I have read many books about India and have come to love their food, their history, their culture. But, this is my favorite because of the new aspects I learned about India... and about Indian men especially!! The author is able to write in compelling detail just what thoughts and feelings each character has!! She shows both sides of each situation and really gets inside their 'skin.'

We see over-achieving, fully-Americanized Neel living the 'good life' in Pacific Heights with no desire for anything 'Indian' including a wife!!

We see lovely Leila still living with her parents at the age of 30 and teaching English in a local school in India. She has been rejected by so many suitors that she has lost hope of ever getting married.

We see Neel's family frantic for him to come home and marry a 'local' girl.

This is a wonderful, exciting, suspenseful book!!!! Read it!! You will be crying for more books by this author and you won't be disappointed. As soon as I finished it I ordered Anne Cherian's The Invitation!!! I plan to read every book she writes/has written!!

Claire S says

Really fun to read, the situation as described being so unbelievable (control freak-guy tricked into marriage in his village in India, totally against his will, to a beautiful, intelligent woman rejected by others for her height and/or seeing a movie with a Muslim guy and/or the one other thing..). But then, as Anne relates the story, it's all very believable. If I ever do write, I'll probably re-read this to look at her technique more - I always wanted to read the next thing, never was bored or claustrophobic in the story or anything.

Leila's reaction to the US was fun (trouble finding the place to put mail in at the mailbox) while not being insulting or harshly stereotypical. I liked Leila a lot, she is quietly self-possessed, intelligent but also personable, strong-willed and cooperative.

Many particular moments weaved together into a seemingly-unlikely but true-ish story arc.

And/or, just the right book at the right time for me!

I give stars based on how much the book does what I wanted it to, how close it matches my (realistic as possible) expectations; not some 'great literature' scale (of which I would know not, anyway), hence the quietly happy 5.

Katie says

I've had a rather difficult time coming up with a rating for *A Good Indian Wife* by Anne Cherian. On one hand, once I got into the story, I couldn't stop thinking about it and what would happen next. I was also delighted to read about aspects of life in India and the Indian immigrant experience, both of which were depicted so well (having been to India myself and engaged to marry an Indian man.) On the other hand, character development was inconsistent, the portrayal of white women in the United States was disgustingly unfair, the portrayal of Indian men in the United States was, at times, stereotypical, and the ending was reminiscent of the sad trombone that plays when someone loses on a game show – *wah, wah, wahhhhhh*. Wait, let me start from the beginning.

Suneel "Neel" Sarath is a successful, up-and-coming anesthesiologist in San Francisco. He has a swanky, minimalist condo, an expensive car, a plane which he shares with two other doctors, and a secretive relationship with a beautiful blonde secretary who fawns over him and fulfills all of his sexual fantasies. Neel is also an Indian man, transplanted to SFO from a village in South India, where his family still lives, and where his destiny calls in the form of letters from his pushy Amma who insists he must return to India to marry. Neel can only ignore her nagging persistence for so long because, now, the letters and phone calls that arrive from India say that his beloved Tattappa is ill. When Neel returns to his village, family drama rears its ugly head and, somehow, he ends up engaged to be married – to a girl he's met only once!

Leila Krishna lives in a small village in South India with her parents and two younger sisters. She teaches English and literature at the local school, and tries to placate her overbearing Amma, who insists she continue to meet potential suitors, despite the fact that she's practically beyond marriageable age and that

she's been rejected time and again – likely due to the scandalizing “situation” she put her family through years ago. She is witty, well-read, kind, and beautiful, but realizes that, without a sizable dowry, it is likely she will never marry. Then, something astonishing happens. After an awkward first meeting with handsome doctor from America, her parents are informed that the boy’s family has accepted the match, and she is engaged to be married! In one month, she’ll go from single to married, and from India to America. Perhaps her dreams will come true after all!

Back in the United States, Neel finds it very convenient to leave his unwanted, subservient wife at his empty condo, and pick back up with his secret lover, Caroline. He internally agonizes over Caroline’s lack of education, her position as a mere secretary, and his doubt at her ability to ever be intellectually stimulating enough to mix with his well-off, educated, doctor friends. This doesn’t stop him, however, from giving Caroline his BMW, from taking her out for fancy dinners, and from taking her on exciting weekend trips to Reno in his airplane. Most of all, it doesn’t stop him from having sex with her any chance he gets. Dear readers, Neel is NOT a sympathetic or likable character!

Meanwhile, Leila must deal with the aftershock of leaving all she has ever known to spend the rest of her days with a man she barely knows; a man who “works late” most nights, doesn’t touch her at all, and barely contains his derision when he’s with her, even amongst his friends. She eventually goes on to surprise both Neel and herself by taking things in stride. Despite her new husband’s constant absences and confusing behavior, Leila boldly claims her new life in San Francisco by exploring her new neighborhood, making her own friends, volunteering her time at the local women’s shelter, and writing a children’s book with dreams to be published. She is steady, determined, loyal and loving, despite the poor treatment she receives from the man she’s committed to for life.

Throughout the narrative, we learn that Neel has a bit of a fetish for white women, and that he had heavily pursued a white woman in his university years, who eventually chose her white, well-bred family over him. He is incredulous that his mother and grandfather think they know what’s best for him, and furious at having been “tricked” into an arranged marriage. Well, he will show them all! He won’t shame the family name, no, but that doesn’t mean he has to *act* like a married man once he and his new bride are back in SFO. Life gets in the way of his best made plans, however, and Neel begins to realize that trying to please two women is exhausting (cue sarcasm), that Caroline is rather annoying and needy (though still gorgeous), and that his Tattappa may have been right after all when he told Neel that it is best to “marry your own kind.”

While Neel is see-sawing between the two women in his life, Leila eventually wises up to the fact that he is seeing another woman, which is confirmed twice over, once when she sees them together, and again when she receives a confessional phone call from Caroline. She contemplates leaving Neel, even going back to India, but knows that she would be turned away from her parent’s home if she broke her sacred marriage vows. Instead, she chooses to carry her burdens like a “good Indian wife” is expected to do, and confides in no one about her troubles. When Leila shares life-changing news with Neel, and he receives another phone call from India, it looks like things might start to turn around for the two strangers-turned-life partners. But is it all too little, too late?

After all of that drama, dear reader, can you see why I couldn’t stop reading until the end? I just had to see if Leila would ever confront Neel about his infidelity and poor treatment, or if Neel would realize how dishonorable he was being, not just to himself, but also to the two ladies in his life *and* to his family. I wanted to know if things got better!

I really liked Leila’s character. Despite being unwanted and unloved, she really blossomed in San Francisco, and expertly straddled the cultural divide by remaining true to herself and her values while remaining open to

new experiences and people. I loved her wit and the ease with which she related to others. Her situation demands sympathy, and her reactions and behavior are credible. I do feel she may be too perfect a character, but knowing that she was raised under very strict rules about how a woman and a wife should behave, I'm willing to give her some leeway.

Neel's character made me want to throw the book against the wall. He was so arrogant, shallow, selfish, manipulative, and most of all, he was a cheat and a liar! When he initially returns to India, he does so with a superiority complex, looking at everything through his Americanized eyes. He refuses to eat with his hands, he bemoans the lack of a proper shower, and he mentally corrects and criticizes the speech and grammar of his loved ones. He does some really rotten things to rid himself of his newly-acquired "baggage" - that is, his wife. Then, he carries on an affair with a woman he does not love or respect, a woman he keeps in hiding, a woman he knows without a doubt is not the woman he will marry.

That brings me to Caroline (pronounced "Caro-leen"), Neel's mistress. I alternated between feeling sorry for her for being the woman who is not "good enough," and despising her for knowingly being "the other woman." Caroline is Neel's blonde, beautiful secretary. We learn through Neel that she never completed her college degree, that she is a very sexual individual, that she is both clingy and willing to do anything for him, and that he never takes her out in public in their hometown. Alternatively, his (white) ex-girlfriend, Savannah, is depicted as beautiful, successful and educated, but when her family refused to accept her Indian boyfriend, she dropped him like a hot potato. So, there you are, dear reader: white women in the United States are either sexually promiscuous, uneducated bimbos *or* their families will not accept a man from a different ethnic or cultural background.

Speaking to Neel's characterization, I've seen many white women write depressing letters to Alex of Madh-Mama, saying that their long-term Indian boyfriend has gone off to India to get engaged or married to a proper Indian girl, leaving them high and dry. Now, this obviously *does* happen, but it doesn't mean I like to see Indian men portrayed as such unfeeling, unthinking characters in fiction. Perhaps I take it more personally because I am a white woman engaged to an Indian man? Make of that what you will, dear readers. My point is, Neel's character seemed extreme in its carelessness, and I wish he had been depicted in a more balanced manner.

That brings me to the end of the book. As the page count started to thin, I found myself desperately wondering whether Neel would ever fully 'fess up to his nasty behavior, and whether there would be enough time for some deep introspection on his part as to the role he played in the grand scheme of things. I am torn between feeling rather disgusted at the ending, and begrudgingly admitting that such an ending may very well be reality for the type of situation Neel and Leila found themselves in. I see that several reviewers were actually pretty happy with the way the story ended. If any of my fellow book lovers has read *A Good Indian Wife*, I'd love to discuss this with you!

A Good Indian Wife is, first and foremost, a story about an arranged marriage. It is also about the evolution of life for Indian emigrants in the United States, and the importance of honor in Indian families. Finally, this is a story about the existential struggle of many young people in India: the struggle between pursuing their desires and conforming to the expectations of their family. Overall, I enjoyed the time I spent with this story. I feel that I am more understanding of the role that family honor plays in the lives of many South Asians, and I can appreciate the (more often than not) sincere intentions behind arranged marriages.

If you're looking for a good weekend read with a bit of dramatic Indian flair, and you're willing to not look too deeply into both the cultural and relational implications in *A Good Indian Wife*, you may very well enjoy this book, too!

This review originally posted on my book review blog, ShelfishlyAddicted.com.

Rio (Lynne) says

I'm not sure why other reviewers called this a romance? Neel, born in India makes his way to the USA for college and ends up a successful anesthesiologist in San Francisco. He is tricked into going back to India because he is told his beloved grandfather is dying. His mother has other plans. A marriage. Arranged marriages are normal in India. Having worked with Indians myself, this story was very parallel to what they told me. Lelia, who only knows Indian tradition is excited she is finally getting a husband, especially one who lives in America. Sadly, he wants nothing to do with her. He marries her out of obligation, but tries everything in his power to make it not work, from hoping she can't get a Visa, to ignoring her completely and continuing his relationship with his blonde bimbo. Neel is not likable. An arrogant prick. This book is about Lelia learning who she is and growing despite her situation. This wasn't by any means great fiction, but I still enjoyed it. I needed something fresh to read and this definitely was an original, light read.

Aishwarya says

Disclaimer: This might be a very emotional review. Oh, and I'm Indian.

I'm twenty two years old so I have no idea what it was like in the eighties. I am a nineties kid - my childhood moulded by hours of Mario Bros, cartoons like Tom and Jerry and other things. I don't know if this is why this book seems so alien and relatable to me.

Alien because I cannot comprehend why a woman with as much fire and smarts as Leila would stay with someone like Neel. Call me whatever you want but I was full of admiration for her when she was in a frenzy to either kill him or leave him, filled with rage at the mockery he was making out of her, her life and their marriage. But then she realized that she couldn't go back to India for obvious reasons (so many years later, divorce is still a stigma that makes my family shudder.). So, she lingers confused and then she finds out she's pregnant. Neel actually pushes her to get an abortion but she refuses. And then when things do a 360, she's all happy because life is as it should be. She's pregnant and Neel wants the baby and they're happy. A baby does not make things okay. I can't accept it. And I can't believe Neel lied like that. Does he honestly think Oona or Shanti aren't ever going to bring it up with Leila ever? One word, one reference and the whole thing could fall apart. Bring up the argument that Indian women aren't comfortable discussing their marriage and I'll point out that Oona isn't Indian. However, I did like the little snippets into Oona's thoughts, the frustration when she realizes that she will never know Indian tradition like an Indian woman does. That it will always cause a gulf between Sanjay and her.

Relatable because I can understand the compulsion to get married, the emotional blackmail that seems so foreign to non-Indians but is a term that every 20-something Indian knows. It's a part and parcel of our country, tucked away alongside the dosa, the colorful chutneys and the coconut. However, no matter how much I sympathized with Neel, I never really liked him. Leila on the other hand, Leila I could really get behind.

Heather says

I caught wind of this book before its official release and was somewhat excited about it. I'm something of an Indophile, and while I knew that the story was likely a [spoilers:] "NRI marries abroad and ditches blonde secretary for new bride" tale, I was hoping that the story would be told in such a way that one wanted the two lovers to succeed and prove that sometimes arranged marriages work (just as sometimes love marriages work; call me a pessimist). That is not what happened. Leila is interesting, but Neel is a tool. The whole story is about her winning him over (which I expected), but he never redeems himself, and in the end I wish she ran off with one of the white dudes who kept hitting on her. The only interesting character is the bride; the rest are formulaic and dull.

Kavya says

It is funny how in India one can be so easily categorized: the typical behenji, the one whose mother won't let her go out, the one who's traditional, the wild party freak, the bad character. Why is it then, that after having the word 'America' associated with them does one lose any of this? Is it synonymous with being modern or un-traditional?

Why do we Indians forget that we come from a country where people with mindsets of different centuries co-exist and walk the same streets as we do? Why does anything traditional have to be ridiculed as an 80's story? I am a millennial - modern and educated. Traditional - by choice. Upbringing stays. I can relate to Leila on so many levels.

Would I have to defend and explain my traditional views to fellow-Indians if I lived in India? No. Five stars for this book.

Christy says

This is a great book about an arranged marriage that actually kind of happens by mistake. I loved reading about the differences in Indian culture - even though I didn't always know what they were talking about, it was totally descriptive. I really enjoyed Leila's journey from a daughter in India dealing with numerous rejections and feeling quite useless to a wife in America who's unsure of her husband's true feelings, motives and plans. I loved seeing her become more confident and independent and, finally, fighting for what was rightfully hers all along. Grade: B

Kavyen says

Suneel Sarath, a Stanford graduate and now an anesthesiologist works in San Francisco. He was born in India but has lived in the United States long enough to feel and be completely Americanized. He prefers to be called Neel, lives in a condo, has a foreign girlfriend and very few Indian friends.

Neel like every other American Indian still struggles with his identity and has to oblige to his conservative mother's request of making a trip to India to visit his ailing (dying) grandfather. Once in India he realizes that this was yet another trap to get him married. He decides to play it safe and just make a social visit to please his relatives but things do not work out the way he planned, as he soon finds himself married to Leila, a teacher of English literature. Leila has remained a spinster long enough to have no hopes of marriage and is very excited when she finally becomes the bride to a very eligible bachelor. The book narrates the differences between Leila and Neel and if they manage to make the marriage work.

This book was a joy to read. Anne Cherian's debut novel portrays the challenges faced in arranged marriages in a very beautiful and elegant manner.

The novel is written from three perspectives that of Neel's, Leila's and Caroline's (Neel's girlfriend). All of the characters save Leila were believably flawed (maybe Neel a bit too flawed) and struggled with their uncertainties and insecurities. Caroline was very predictable and so were Neel's Indian friends. Neel is hateable and comes across as an educated moron who cannot decide what he needs to do with his life. He adds a lot of character to the book and plays a very vital role in making Leila the person she becomes. Leila is picture perfect and I loved the self-confidence she gains while struggling with her loveless married life. She stands out as a woman of class with great will power who finally gets what she deserved.

Bob says

A Indian emigrant naturalized as a U.S. citizen is single, is a doctor, lives in San Francisco, dresses nice, has good friends, has true love for the family he has moved so far from, and is good looking. He is also an arrogant deceitful shallow asshole douchebag focused on bling and blondes. On a trip to India to visit his family, he gets railroaded and tricked into an arranged marriage. His new wife is past her prime for arranged marriages, is naive about anything to do with any aspect of a relationship, and her family has little extra money. She also is intelligent, well-read, kind, adventurous, independent, and beautiful. The power and wisdom of the Indian traditions, combined with the promise of plowing fertile virgin fields 24-7, overcome the douchebag's resistance and bring out his devoted, loving side. We also learn that tall blonde American women either come from money or are money grubbing, and either way they likely come from racist families who cannot bear to see a white woman married to someone of Indian descent.

But, the perspectives on arranged marriages and on Indian/American identity of emigrants are interesting and made this enjoyable. 2.5 stars.

Terri says

While I found the ending unsatisfactory (you just want to shake Suneel for being a prick and Leila for being a dope), this book was a page turner (I was up reading until 1:00 am most work nights trying to finish this book)- what would happen to Leila? Would she be bound by tradition and culture to stay with her prick husband or would she become Americanized enough to strike out on her own? On the other hand, you have to wonder if more modern day couples waded through the initial ups and downs of a marriage (which is, really, the joining of two strangers, no matter how well you think you know the other person) and took a "I made my bed, now I have to lie in it" approach (obviously barring abuse!) instead of jumping ship when things get rocky, how many marriages might work out the initial kinks and end up sticking? Perhaps Leila is

not a dope after all.

Kim says

This was good although I don't know why my library has this as a Young Adult read. The main characters are 35 and 30 years old.

Jenifer Hanen says

If this book is considered a light summer read, then I give it 4 four points for a tale of 1980s immigrants struggling to figure out to which culture they belong, with a bit of a love-ish story thrown in. If a light summer read, then it also succeeded in introducing the average American reader to the ups and downs of immigration for upper class, educated Indians.

If the book is meant to be considered a literary novel that examines the immigrant experience and contrasts between India of the 1980s and the US of the 1980s, then I give it a 2.5 to 3 points for missing a few key points that would have taken it from an ok to not-so-good literary novel over the top into a good or great novel.

The book read as if the novelist had not decided where she wanted to the book to reside, or maybe she new but her editors thought otherwise to market it, and tried to write both a light romance novel and a literary novel in one, except it didn't really work.

Here is where the book fell down:

1) Time placement. I really wish the author had anchored the book firmly in time, but as it was it was mostly pre-1995, but with some ambivalence as to whether the story was taking place in 1981 or 1987 or 1997 or 2007.

With a careful reading, there are only 4 places in the whole book that place it occurring sometime between 1981 - 1989:

- a) A small statement in the first 4 or 5 chapters about it being "the Eighties". The eighties were 10 years long, when in the eighties?
- b) A small statement midway through the book that Neel was born just after the Independence of India. The author tells us several times that Neel is 35, so if he was born sometime between 1948 and 1960, then the book would have taken place 1983 to 1995.
- c) A discussion between Leila and her friend Rekha on arranged marriages talking about the wedding of Charles & Diana being an contemporary event or at least within the last few years.
- d) No internet or mobile phones, but one communicates between the US and India via land line and sending "cables".

Why does time placement matter? Well, if the author had managed time a bit more precisely and presented the 1980s India as a world on the edge of big change (as we now in hindsight know it was), the reader could have felt more keenly both the ambivalence of Neel's wanting to escape traditional India and Leila's willingness to straddle both cultures.

The time also matters, as if it was the early or mid-eighties, then some of the American cultural references (like rollerblades & recycling) would have been completely off. If it was the late eighties or early nineties, then those references would have been on in a culturally cutting edge town like San Francisco.

2) Neel - From a romance novel perspective, the character of Neel is a bit of a dud, as he does not redeem himself enough in the end. From a literary novel perspective, the character of Neel is almost there and needed a bit more fleshing out.

I believed Leila's character fully. I almost believed Neel, but not enough in the end. I would like to have a bit more on the conflict raging inside of Neel that made him in the end choose what he chose, particularly in regards to his wife.

3) Place: While we knew that that Neel and Leila hailed from a town in South India, that they were Iyengars, and went on their honeymoon in Ooty, I wish for the author had told us what town (even if made up) and what state in India they were from. It matters. She told us all about San Francisco, so why not give the reader as much on the town in India, the language they spoke (each state in South India has its own language, cuisine, ways of wearing a saree or the like, etc.).

After googling "Ooty" and "Iyengar", it became obvious that Neel and Leila were most likely from Tamil Nadu, with a small chance of Kerala or Karnataka. This matters, as each of these states has a distinct culture, just like it would have bothered the American reader if the author had not listed the town or state that the couple lived in on the West Coast. The story would have been just as odd if we were trying to guess what part of the West Coast the author meant (is it Seattle? is it Portland? is it San Francisco? etc.)

The crux of the story resides in the cultural conflict that an immigrant experiences between India and US. I wish South India had not been so generic. It is possible that the author or her editors did not want the story to have to go into the differences between Tamil culture and other parts of India, but the book would have benefited if both were from Tamil Nadu and the added dimension to Neel's internal conflict if we had known a bit about the cultural conflicts between Tamil culture and the North of India. Then Neel would have been more human, his desire to achieve in the US may have been more understandable, why he did not speak Hindi, etc.

Sorry to go on so much, but I did like this book and I really wanted it to succeed into the areas that would have made it a great book. I am still thinking of the story in my head, which means that the book is closer to 4 points than 3 points for me.
