

The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America

By Stefanie Syman

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In *The Subtle Body*, Stefanie Syman tells the surprising story of yoga's transformation from a centuries-old spiritual discipline to a multibillion-dollar American industry.

Yoga's history in America is longer and richer than even its most devoted practitioners realize. It was present in Emerson's New England, and by the turn of the twentieth century it was fashionable among the leisure class. And yet when Americans first learned about yoga, what they learned was that it was a dangerous, alien practice that would corrupt body and soul.

A century later, you can find yoga in gyms, malls, and even hospitals, and the arrival of a yoga studio in a neighborhood is a signal of cosmopolitanism. How did it happen? It did so, Stefanie Syman explains, through a succession of charismatic yoga teachers, who risked charges of charlatanism as they promoted yoga in America, and through generations of yoga students, who were deemed unbalanced or even insane for their efforts. *The Subtle Body* tells the stories of these people, including Henry David Thoreau, Pierre A. Bernard, Margaret Woodrow Wilson, Christopher Isherwood, Sally Kempton, and Indra Devi.

From New England, the book moves to New York City and its new suburbs between the wars, to colonial India, to postwar Los Angeles, to Haight-Ashbury in its heyday, and back to New York City post-9/11. In vivid chapters, it takes in celebrities from Gloria Swanson and George Harrison to Christy Turlington and Madonna. And it offers a fresh view of American society, showing how a seemingly arcane and foreign practice is as deeply rooted here as baseball or ballet.

This epic account of yoga's rise is absorbing and often inspiring?a major contribution to our understanding of our society.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Yoga conquers America—and is conquered in its turn—in this labyrinthine cultural history. Journalist Syman traces American enthusiasm for yoga back to Thoreau and follows it through cycles of waxing and waning popularity: it was decried by Victorians for its association with madness and tantric sex rituals, celebrated in the 1960s for its association with altered states of consciousness (and tantric sex rituals), and ubiquitously embraced in the 21st century as a wholesome, anodyne exercise program. The author argues that, even as the om-chanting adept became the embodiment of spirituality, yoga's mainstreaming risked the discipline losing its rich spiritual content, along with the more extreme contortions, regular enemas, and whatever else Americans considered off-putting. Unfortunately, the author's attempts to clarify yoga's spiritual content, which is multifarious and intractably murky, don't always succeed, and sometimes the narrative bogs down amid barnstorming swamis and their squabbling sects. When she pulls back to view the culture mashup yoga has become—a cure for back pain, a beauty regime, and a route to God—she gives a cogent, engrossing analysis of this Asian-born spiritual practice turned all-American panacea. 8 pages of b&w illus. *(June)*
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From Booklist
Syman begins her embracive and illuminating history of yoga in America by discussing how polymorphous a practice yoga has become. From an age-old spiritual tradition in India designed to enable disciples to gain mastery over their bodies to attain the divine, yoga has morphed over the last century and a half into a form of exercise so mainstream, people performed yoga poses on the White House lawn during Easter celebrations—a sight no one would have imagined when yoga first scandalized Americans with its frank approach to every aspect of physical life, from breathing to sex. From Thoreau, the first American yogi, to the earliest yogis from India in America, including the influential Swami Vivekananda who arrived in 1893, Syman profiles a great array of colorful yogis and yoga teachers while chronicling with remarkable knowledge and wit all the permutations yoga has undergone. Of particular pleasure and discovery are Syman's coverage of yoga in Hollywood, the profound social changes propelling the union of yoga and psychedelics in the hippie era, and the yoga for success of more recent vintage. --Donna Seaman

Review

“Stefanie Syman's . . . spacious history of yoga in America, *The Subtle Body*, begins by describing how deeply and enduringly classical Indian philosophy influenced American transcendentalists. Both Emerson and Thoreau admired the *Bhagavad-Gita* . . . However, neither knew much about the physical-fitness side of yoga. The earliest Indian vendors of spirituality, like Swami Vivekananda . . . looked down on the asanas, or poses, of hatha yoga as a defective path to yoga's goal: the union of the individual self with the divine Self.” ?*PANKAJ MISHRA, The New York Times Book Review*

“Syman . . . astutely shows how yoga's versatility as a practice has helped it adapt to ever-conflicting historical currents.” ?*CLAIRE DEDERER, Slate*

“Syman gives a terrific overview of the teachers whose names are now so much a part of the history of yoga in this country: Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Prabhavananda, Indra Devi, Jois and Bikram . . . As for charges of commercialism or elitism: ‘Yoga is both an indulgence and a penance,' she writes. ‘It will tone your thighs, and it might crack open your reality.'” ?*SUSAN SALTER REYNOLDS, Los Angeles Times*

“Many of us have been waiting for decades to read a comprehensive history of yoga in the United States. Stefanie Syman has written that history and she has written it very well. I recommend this book to the 16 million people who practice yoga in this country, as well as to anyone who simply wonders what the fuss is all about.” ?*David Gordon White, author of Sinister Yogis*

“*The Subtle Body* is an enthralling book, and an enlightening one.” ?*Robert Thurman*

“Stefanie Syman's superb book fills a major gap in our understanding of religion in America. This fascinating account, full of colorful characters, demonstrates the importance of yoga in transforming Americans' understanding of the body. Any survey of American religious history must take this narrative into account.” ?*Randall Balmer, Professor of American Religious History, Barnard College, Columbia University*

“As this intriguing narrative chronicles, few points of dynamic transfer in the encounter between East and West have proven more useful to creative Americans than the ancient philosophy and exercise regime of yoga. For its many practitioners, yoga fuses body, mind, spirit, energy, and attitude into an alembic of well-being harmonizing self and non-self, struggle and peace.” ?*Kevin Starr, University of Southern California*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lauren Joseph:

The actual book The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America has a lot details on it. So when you make sure to read this book you can get a lot of profit. The book was published by the very famous author. The writer makes some research ahead of write this book. This particular book very easy to read you can find the point easily after perusing this book.

Louis Trent:

This The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America is great guide for you because the content which is full of information for you who also always deal with world and get to make decision every minute. This kind of book reveal it data accurately using great plan word or we can say no rambling sentences inside. So if you are read the idea hurriedly you can have whole info in it. Doesn't mean it only provides straight forward sentences but challenging core information with lovely delivering sentences. Having The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America in your hand like finding the world in your arm, facts in it is not ridiculous just one. We can say that no book that offer you world with ten or fifteen moment right but this publication already do that. So , it is good reading book. Hey there Mr. and Mrs. busy do you still doubt that?

Patsy Phan:

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