

Kim - Rudyard Kipling



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Rudyard Kipling was one of the most popular writers in English, in both prose and verse, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author Henry James said of him: "Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius (as distinct from fine intelligence) that I have ever known." Notable for its detailed portrait of Indian people, culture, and its varied religions, *Kim* is Kipling's best serious long novel. One of the particular pleasures of reading *Kim* is the full range of emotion, knowledge, and experience that Rudyard Kipling gives his complex hero. Kim O'Hara, the orphaned son of an Irish soldier stationed in India, is neither innocent nor victimized. Raised by an opium-addicted half-caste woman since his equally dissolute father's death, the boy has grown up in the streets of Lahore: Though he was burned black as any native; though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song; though he consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazar; Kim was white-a poor white of the very poorest. From his father and the woman who raised him, Kim has come to believe that a great destiny awaits him. The details, however, are a bit fuzzy, consisting as they do of the woman's addled prophecies of "a great Red Bull on a green field, and the Colonel riding on his tall horse,

yes, and'-dropping into English-'nine hundred devils.'" In the meantime, Kim amuses himself with intrigues, executing "commissions by night on the crowded housetops for sleek and shiny young men of fashion." His peculiar heritage as a white child gone native, combined with his "love of the game for its own sake," makes him uniquely suited for a bigger game. And when, at last, the long-awaited colonel comes along, Kim is recruited as a spy in Britain's struggle to maintain its colonial grip on India. Kipling was, first and foremost, a man of his time; born and raised in India in the 19th century, he was a fervid supporter of the Raj. Nevertheless, his portrait of India and its people is remarkably sympathetic. Yes, there is the stereotypical Westernized Indian Babu Huree Chander with his atrocious English, but there is also Kim's friend and mentor, the Afghani horse trader Mahub Ali, and the gentle Tibetan lama with whom Kim travels along the Grand Trunk Road. The humanity of his characters consistently belies Kipling's private prejudices, and raises Kim above the mere ripping good yarn to the level of a timeless classic. - Alix Wilber

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