

Ernestine McHugh. 2001. *Love and Honor in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

*Love and Honor in the Himalayas* is a book with two stories. One story tells of the Gurungs of central Nepal while the other tells of the trials and tribulations of a young American anthropologist. Ernestine McHugh weaves a very personal narrative of her experiences as a novice anthropologist into an ethnographic account of rural Gurung life. The result is a book that is one of few “reflexive ethnographies” that succeeds in going beyond theoretical navel-gazing to actually document the processes—haphazard and subjective as they are—whereby anthropologists “come to know another culture.” By refusing to remove herself from the ethnographic context, McHugh shows how anthropological knowledge is, in effect, co-produced by the

anthropologist and her hosts at the place where their divergent lives intersect. McHugh forces us to recognize that what anthropologists “come to know” is not so much the result of coldly-objective research methodology as of how real people—with all their idiosyncrasies, emotions, agendas, and cultural/historical baggage—come together to produce shared experiences. The point is not that what anthropologists know, and what they pass on to readers as ethnography, is somehow untrue, but that ethnographic knowledge is always partial and situated.

Although the book’s ethnographic content is nuanced and informative, McHugh’s intended audience is not research scholars or area specialists. Rather, the work is written for a general audience and is intended to be accessible to Western college undergraduates. McHugh avoids ethnographic and theoretical terminology, minimizes the use of footnotes and citations, and focuses instead on presentation. The result is a beautifully written, at times poetic, book that draws the reader in almost like a novel. McHugh’s own powerful black and white photos accompany the text.

McHugh’s book is based on experiences in rural Nepal that began in 1973 while she was still an undergraduate anthropology student. Her initial two-year stay was augmented by many subsequent trips over a fifteen-year period as she moved on to graduate and professional study. Much of the book focuses on McHugh’s early years in Nepal describing her struggles to learn Gurung language, grasp the intricacies of Gurung culture, and live up to her role as an adopted daughter in a Gurung family. The result is a vivid description of the “culture shock” that McHugh must overcome as her naiveté and inexperience bring on feelings of isolation, frustration, and helplessness. But what makes this more than just another account of the anthropologist-as-hero intellectually conquering a foreign culture is the way McHugh shows how it is through the establishment of strong personal relationships, with the “locals” working no less than the anthropologist, that one is drawn into another culture. By building deep relationships with her fictive mother and other kin, McHugh is drawn into the rhythms and expectations of this village in the Annapurnas. The point is that the anthropologist’s “coming to know” is profoundly influenced by her human ties with the people among whom she lives. McHugh offers her readers not just glimpses of the hardships that go along with fieldwork, but of how the objective knowledge that anthropologists bring home from the field is acquired in intensely subjective circumstances.

One of the most interesting sub-themes that runs through the text is McHugh’s gradual discovery that, like it or not, as an American she is

indelibly marked with a status that carries both privileges and prohibitions. On the one hand, McHugh shows us how being an American opens doors, confers a kind of un-earned honour, and thus facilitates her ethnographic work. On the other hand, that status can only take her so far. Through a series of skillfully developed stories we see how every time McHugh thinks she has finally managed to become Gurung—to seamlessly melt into her cultural surroundings—she is forced back into the reality of difference. Whether through the humiliation of having committed a cultural faux pas, or being denied access to certain areas because of her foreign status, McHugh learns (and describes to us) that, as much as she tries to dissociate herself from her own past, she is the bearer of a history. These too are important lessons for students interested in the nature and production of anthropological knowledge.

McHugh spends a good bit of time describing the physical surroundings of the Gurung villages in which she lived. For readers unfamiliar with Nepal, this vivid portrayal of a vertical landscape—villages clinging to mountainsides, storms reverberating off sheer cliff walls—is very important. McHugh evokes the beauty of this mountain world, but also stresses the difficulty of lives lived along steep trails and narrow terraced fields.

Throughout the book McHugh details the intricacies of the Gurung social sphere that she experienced. Social hierarchies, kin structures, and gender roles are all described in detail through illustrative stories of relationships, actions, and consequences, rather than through more cold, formal ethnological discussions. McHugh follows the themes of generosity and appeasement as they occur throughout a range of Gurung social interactions, stressing how these moral principles are essential for the peaceful cohesion of the community. Another important theme is the social value placed on intimacy or a sense of closeness, both physically and emotionally. Through stories of her own discomfort with domestic sleeping arrangements, or accounts of the sheer delight that people take in being part of large festival crowds, McHugh helps the reader experience something of what it means to have a very different cultural sense of the body and its pleasures. She also stresses the importance of kinship terms in the production and maintenance of emotional intimacy. Regardless of blood ties, everyone is known to one another by specific kin titles that subtly chart out relationships of status and claims to honor. The liberal use of kinship terms helps to maintain social order and harmony. Another key dimension in the establishment of status and honor revolves around the exchange of gifts and hospitality. Again, McHugh makes her

ethnographic/descriptive points through stories that show how, through her own mistakes and incomprehensions, she eventually “came to know” something of the cultural codes of her hosts.

This book’s main strength is its ability to evoke a sense of the daily life in a Gurung village and the social interactions that fuel it. By being made privy to McHugh’s own personal experiences, we are given an intimate view of not just a Gurung community, but of individuals. Not surprisingly, there is a marked emphasis on women’s culture. Hair-braiding, bangles, the symbolism of women’s dress, ritual life, marriage customs, menstrual and sexual life, and women’s labor all emerge in rich detail. Less clear are corresponding male cultural experiences. To the extent that most available ethnographies of Gurung life are male-centered, this omission is excusable, even welcome. Still, even some brief discussion of, for example, male military (“Gurkha”) service would have helped readers unfamiliar with Nepal place Gurung society in its larger world-historical and political context. Also somewhat confusing is McHugh’s tendency to collapse experiences acquired over a long span of time into a single narrative.

*Love and Honor in the Himalayas* is a fine work of scholarship that offers a nuanced and evocative account of Gurung social life. As such, it is an important contribution to the ethnography of Nepal. But beyond this, it is also a valuable teaching tool in its ability to make significant theoretical points in not just accessible, but often captivating narrative prose. By bringing her reader along on her quest to know another culture, McHugh opens important perspectives on the nature and production of anthropological knowledge.

**Kathleen Riley and Mark Liechty**  
University of Illinois at Chicago