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Sandwich

a bite of the island

BY PAUL WOOD



THE FUN OF SELF-PUBLISHING

Ever since the invention of paper, writers and publishers have been at war. Each needed the other and, like shackled chain-gang fugitives, both felt disgusted by the arrangement.

But now self-publishing has bloomed. You can put your book up on Amazon, fold your arms across your chest, and say, "I'm published." This is the French Revolution for all literary peasants. From now on the writer is the publisher.

Now the writer has no one to blame but herself.

Gail Tredwell is a perfect example with her new book *Holy Hell*. Gail lives in an undisclosed location for reasons I will now disclose: half of all the Hindus in the world are furious with her. She did something terrible—she told the truth.

For twenty years Gail was the personal attendant for the character known worldwide as "Amma the Hugging Saint." The relationship began when both women were scarcely more than girls. Amma became a purported living goddess. Gail became her slave.

Her commitment to absolute devotion turned into a nightmare of physical, verbal, and moral abuse so severe that Gail fled the Amma organization in darkness, hiding under a blanket in the rear footwell of somebody's Toyota. Under that blanket Gail realized there are no living gods, only humans. And she felt the need to say so.

If a pure and virginal hugging saint returns from her public performances to beat, slap, and obscenely insult her devoted attendant, then order this attendant to huddle in a closet so that said saint can play sticky fingers with favored swamis, then the story is not about "god" but about monumental hypocrisy.

Gail needed to exorcise this hypocrisy, and she asked for my help as editor—not only to manage her sentences but also to make sure that she was honest and not

damning. She had found other editors who wanted the book to be a burn-the-guru potboiler, but Gail wouldn't have it. Her book reports profound spiritual moments, confesses personal weakness, and expresses deep love for Amma. But things go wrong, and Gail needed to come clean.

I saw that about her, and I decided to help. I've helped a lot of people with their books. Sometimes I get paid, almost never enough. In Gail's case I took no money. For one thing, I could tell she didn't have any. For another, I liked her message. I think crybabies are gods, too. And publishers. And writers. And you. Or (more likely) none of us.

So now there are near-riots in southern India protesting *Holy Hell*. I've seen pictures of 150,000 people assembled to condemn Gail for insulting the dharma. Some claim that she is just the shill for a Vatican plot to discredit all of Hinduism (Opus Dei!). I watched Indiavision news, all spoken in Malayalam, as the newscaster gestured repeatedly to the one page from *Holy Hell* that states my name. He kept pointing to it. I don't know what the hell he was saying.

All this commotion is just a farce stirred up by the immensely wealthy Amma Inc. The irony is that the organization is publicizing Gail's book beyond the wildest fantasy of your run-of-the-mill self-publisher. What a boon! If 150,000 Kerala protesters have her book, then she's in best-seller range!

But no. Sales have scarcely covered Gail's expenses. The e-version has been swiped and altered. The naked truth is still taboo (said Dylan). And humans, god love 'em, still go to great lengths to avoid reading.

And who knows, I might have a heat-seeking Hindu missile headed for my fanny. That's okay—I'm a writer, I can self-publish.

That is so cool. ■