



# Finding a soul friend at the top of the world

**TRAVEL** Claire Scobie engages deeply with Tibet, writes **Sophie Cunningham**, but also shows us the wider issues.  
**FICTION** In Alexis Wright's new book, **Alison Ravenscroft** has found a voice she can trust.

## Last Seen in Lhasa

By Claire Scobie  
Vintage, \$35

**A**T FIRST, *LAST SEEN IN Lhasa: The Story of an Extraordinary Friendship in Modern Tibet* reads simply as a particularly engaging travel story. But like the woman Claire Scobie befriends, appearances can be deceptive. This memoir charts Scobie's relationship with a remarkable Buddhist nun, Ani, and charts Scobie's relationship with Tibet. Over the course of several years and journeys we see the changes that Chinese occupation has wrought. It is this impressive combination of strong narrative thread and both political and spiritual transformation that makes this such a terrific book.

*Last Seen in Lhasa* is also a story of courage. The physical courage needed to go on such extended and remote treks, and the spiritual courage to pursue a friendship that is, in effect, illegal (though Scobie is, at first, ignorant about the danger Ani has placed herself in by allowing their friendship to flourish).

As a young journalist Scobie was asked to join a trek through Pemako (the relatively unexplored lands in southern Tibet that inspired the myths of Shangri-La) with a group of British botanists who were in search of a rare red lily. "Pemako was a

nebulous place," she writes, "a spiritualscape where legend merged with truth."

A land of extremes — of both heavens and hells — Pemako gave Scobie a crash course in the wonder that is Tibet, and in the political oppression under which it now exists.

That first trek ended prematurely because of the withdrawal of permits by local police, before the lily had been sighted. A second trek to Pemako a few months later ended with the entire group being frog-marched out of the region at gunpoint. On that second trek Scobie met Ani, a middle-aged nun with the demeanour, humbleness and innocence of a girl.

Ani's lightness of being — despite great physical deprivation — Scobie comes to understand as the quality of a serious spiritual practitioner. It is the inspiration that Ani provides, and the love that Scobie feels for her, that causes Scobie to return to Tibet a further five times.

Because of what writer Patrick French has called "the mind's Tibet", many books have been written about the country. The beauty of *Last Seen in Lhasa* is that it moves beyond such intellectual and metaphoric conceptions of the place to a deep, real and emotional engagement. Scobie does not overly romanticise Tibet but she writes of romance and a brief affair with Tashi, a Tibetan guide. But even here

she allows us to see the wider issues: that this generation of young Tibetans has become second-class citizens in their own land; that bitterness, anger and poverty have become the enemy to be kept at bay.

This is made more difficult because China's relentless persecution of Buddhism has undermined the people's most important weapon in the face of persecution — their spirits.

Ani means aunty, or nun. Scobie cannot risk giving the true name of the woman who becomes what she calls her "soul friend" for fear she will be arrested.

Ani is no ordinary nun, but a yogini: a woman who undertakes physically and psychologically demanding practices — practices in danger of becoming extinct — during long periods of isolation. She has wandered, for years at a time, through the Himalayas, searching for spaces where she can pursue her spirituality in peace. This is, in part, because she is nomadic by inclination, and in part because the nunneries that would have once protected her are being closed.

This is why, as Scobie tells Ani, she must write her story: "You're precious, Ani. There aren't many women like you left."

**Claire Scobie discusses Tibet at the Age Melbourne Writers' Festival next Saturday. Sophie Cunningham is the author of *Geography* (Text).**



Story of courage: inspired by a Buddhist nun, Claire Scobie made many treks to Tibet.  
PICTURE: QUENTIN JONES