

Time Out

Claire Scobie - Last Seen in Lhasa

Rating: four stars

Tibet, long colonised by the imagination of the West, is now subject to the very real colonising zeal of the People's Republic of China, under whose yoke its culture is inevitably straining. Claire Scobie has written a rich, profound and deeply moving book that captures the bizarre contradictions of modern Tibet, where ragged pilgrims prostrate themselves before ancient deities in smoke-choked shrine rooms while outside Gucci-clad Party apparachniks carve up the Plateau for its resources.

Scobie adroitly weaves personal travelogue into a meditation on the broader political context via the story of her own chance meeting with a wandering nun, aptly referred to as 'Ani' (Tibetan for nun) – her real name is withheld out of deference to the penalties faced by those who fraternise with foreigners. Scobie's travels were shaped by the rogues, adventurers and obsessives with whom she travelled, and their foibles too are gently teased out. She steers a skilful course between the mysticism that flourishes in the high, still air of the Tibetan Plateau and the uncomfortable political realities of the holy city of Lhasa, where bewildered Tibetan pilgrims from the high Plateau mingle with Han Chinese prostitutes, secret policemen and chancers lured by government financial incentives.

A brief affair with a Tibetan provides Scobie with insight into the shiftless lives of the disenfranchised Tibetans caught between the materialism of their colonisers and their own political impotence. She is a writer of considerable grit who has produced a book that is as gripping as any yet written on modern Tibet.

Nicholas Foxton, Fri Jul 7