



Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage

Jackie Griffiths

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After a mysterious note was left to her in a will, Jae embarks on a fateful philosophical adventure to uncover the meaning of life...

Jae has many questions about the meaning of life and the purpose of her existence, but frustratingly, no answers. After the death of her agnostic grandmother, with whom she had her most fruitful philosophical discussions, she embarks on a personal journey to fulfil a mysterious note left to her in the will: 'Seek and ye shall find.'

The plot follows Jae as one spring day she walks over a bridge into a strange world on the other side of the river. There she encounters challenging situations and unusual people offering tempting theories about the meaning of life. From then on she devotes all her energy to pursuing answers to the philosophical questions that drive her, experiencing a series of extraordinary adventures, until eventually she arrives at a completely unexpected conclusion.

'Ox-herding' is a term used to describe the search for meaning, purpose and spirituality that does not result in the finding of God, or of any other external authority. The ox represents the elemental beast within us all: ego. 'Herding' our ego is the struggle to recognise, battle with, control, subdue, and finally, transcend the ego.

Based on the successive phases of understanding as presented in the Chinese philosophical classic, 'The Ten Ox Herding Pictures,' this story has ten chapters through which Jae journeys, discovering the meaning and secret to an enlightened, yet thoroughly modern life; a place where all her doubts and questions are dissolved, a place without suffering or fear, yet firmly located in the midst of ordinary life. 'Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage' describes how she gets there in a Carrollesque adventure involving remarkable people in difficult yet inspirational settings, including wrestling a bull, performing in a concert, becoming a guru, engaging in dharma combat, and wandering through the garden of Eden.

Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage Details

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From Reader Review *Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage* for online ebook

Bookmuseuk says

Jae is dissatisfied with her life. Though she has a child, Chloe, and a partner, Jason, she lives with her parents, has no outside job and is at a crossroads. Distant and withdrawn, she accepts Jason's suggestion they take time apart. Jae feels the urge to explore a spiritual journey and she sets off on this quest, visiting a type of fairground where various religions and 'isms' have set out their stalls.

As she goes from one to the next learning their beliefs and practices she comes to realise none of the organised religions are for her. Neither are Humanism, Existentialism and so on. She decides she must find and follow her own path. At home she has a picture of a man leading an ox (one of the zen ox herding pictures). This image takes on greater significance for her when she encounters the man and the ox on her journey.

This book – and I'm not sure whether to call it a novel or a spiritual treatise – starts off couched in the real world of Jae's ordinary life. Very soon it ventures into a more fantastical territory, reminiscent at times of Alice in Wonderland. Nothing is quite as it seems and Jae must face and defeat her own demons in the shape of the ox and the young ox herder. Just as she seems to have gained wisdom she is brought down again and understands she has reached a false summit. There is still further she must go.

Jae's journey is the journey of a seeker after truth; it is the well-documented journey of spiritual advancement and ultimate enlightenment. At times beautifully written, at times overladen with unnecessary adverbs, it is always intriguing and honest in its intent. The present tense of the narrative threw me a little at first. I know from my own writing experiments that this can serve to distance the reader. However, I soon got into the rhythm of it and it became less distracting as I was drawn into the story.

I believe this is a first novel and if so, it is an excellent effort. Though not a total adverb-hater (I believe all words have their place), I would advise the writer to resist their lure in future. This book would be sharper and just as vivid without most them.

Alex Apostol says

I enjoyed this book right from the beginning. It was very different from what I thought it was going to be and I'm so glad it was! The story centers around Jae, who is deep in depression and questioning her life on a whole. This is something I can relate to very well and I feel many adults can. We all, at some point in time, question whether we are living our lives the right way, whether we have chosen the right religion or should choose one at all, whether our jobs are right for us or we'd be happier doing something else, and even if our current living situation with our family is working out. All these topics of life and more are explored through Jae in *Ox Herding*.

The book read like an adult Alice in Wonderland, which I couldn't get enough of. It was the first book in a long time that wasn't put out to entertain me, but rather to make me think and question things in my own life. It made me want to go on my own journey of exploration and make sure that I am living my own life in the best way I can. If you've ever questioned the meaning of life, or wanted to make dramatic changes to your

own life, then this is the book for you!

Chris Purchase says

When Jae finally accepts that the death of her grandmother has affected her far more deeply than she initially realised, she turns those strong emotions into action, embarking on a pilgrimage of personal discovery. Through Jae's eyes we embark on an intriguing journey, breaking out of domestic normality into a world of fables, fantasy and parable, and learning with her what really matters in life. Along the way, life's institutions, conventions, prejudices and preconceptions are carefully examined and dissected.

This is a beautifully written, engaging read. The content is, at times, very "rich" - I needed to "come up for air" between chapters. Ultimately I found it rewarding and uplifting.

Recommended.

Malcolm Macdonald says

This is a deceptively straightforward book. It is a web of meaning, but although it is the knots that hold the web together, we are led to see that it is in fact the space between the knots that are much more significant. This makes it sound rather earnest and hard-going. However, it really isn't at all. This is a delightful journey, a traveller's tale told with a delicate lightness. In tone, it is suffused with the utter sincerity of the protagonist, Jae. She has to keep moving ever onward, considering each alternative answer to her question as it is presented to her. Each has its merits and attractions, yet lacks the crucial element necessary for her to call off the search. This is a slim volume, but contains much that will prompt a train of enquiry in the readers' mind long after it has been read.

David James says

Griffiths, Jackie. Ox Herding.

Subtitled 'A Secular Pilgrimage,' this novel follows a young woman, Jae, on a spiritual quest for meaning and purpose that draws the reader along strange paths. After her grandmother Vivian's death, Jae becomes a recluse, abandons her live-in lover and child to cross the river and visit the stalls in the strange yet familiar world of belief. She carries Vivian's note saying 'Seek and ye shall find!' and what she finds are the familiar tenets and words of wisdom laid down by prophets. She listens politely and moves on through Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Humanism, Existentialism and so forth. None of them satisfy her.

Jae is accompanied in turn by a spirited puppy, a mystical ox and a familiar named Douke who continually reappears in various guises: as a concert conductor, a swimmer, a seducer or simply a man in a painting she had made as a child. We are drawn through the world of Alice in Wonderland, The Wind in the Willows, King Arthur and The Garden of Eden before finally Jae reaches domesticity in her parents home with its leaking washing machine.

This picaresque novel has its own peculiar charm and the fantasy is in places reminiscent of Pilgrim's Progress, Piers Plowman and Don Quixote. The purpose is illustrative, rather than realistic; the characters are fixed and symbolic. We are interested in the journey (the quester is the reader) its variety and strangeness, and the underlying 'message' of non-attachment, learning to listen, love and leave alone. A happy ending is naturally grafted on, and the territory ahead - in Jae's case a career as a masseuse - is glanced at. Altogether, a satisfying and provoking read.

Nicola Hawkes says

I'm quite prepared to accept that I wasn't ready to engage with this book, that I don't currently have the spiritual quest within me that might resonate with Jae's journey, and that I didn't approach it with the right attitude, etc. And honestly I'm only being a little bit ironic here - it really wasn't the right book for me at this time and I got impatient with it. But having said that I did feel that the prose was a bit over the top, quite frequently. It read more like a hallucinogenic narrative, which for me rather detracted from the underlying meaning. I've seen another review which described it as being akin to Alice-in-Wonderland - perhaps so, but "Alice" was more enjoyable. Perhaps I will revisit it one day.

Timea B says

If you are looking for a different kind of a travel journal, you might want to take a look at "Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage" by Jackie Griffiths. Unlike the classical books of this genre, this novel takes you on an expedition to the previously untouched continents of a person's psyche.

Just as the title suggests, this book is based on the Ten Ox Herding Pictures which are as Jackie Griffiths explains herself: "a Zen Buddhist philosophical classic that depicts the journey to enlightenment through ten distinct and progressive stages of spiritual development". In fact the author gives us a brief description of these stages in the Introduction section. Although she admits to having doubts about her interference in the reader's comprehension of her text ("I write this introduction with great trepidation, acknowledging that I'm running the risk of attracting attention to the finger pointing at the moon, rather than to the moon itself"), I find that some of the associations and explanations she puts forward here are necessary. The most useful intervention she had was introducing the reader to the Ten Ox Herding Pictures. Without this, much of the meaning of the novel would have been lost to me. However, going into the actual plot of the novel in this context seemed unnecessary to me.

There is general symmetry between the Buddhist stages and the chapters of the book, as each chapter corresponds to a stage. But, in the case of "Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage", there are a few additional sections. I found the Decoding quite fascinating and it threw a fresh light on the text, but it was a little too late. These explanatory notes should have been accessible while reading not only afterwards. They would have been more impactful if they were on the bottom of the page or if the references would have been numbered. So, future readers be aware! I recommend checking out the Decoding section before diving into the novel.

Jackie Griffiths takes the reader as an observer on an intimate voyage of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

When it comes to certain journeys the way we get to the final destination is more important than the destination itself. Jae's spiritual crisis is triggered by the loss of her grandmother with whom she shared both a deep emotional and intellectual connection. And the key to unlock this mysterious door to a foreign land of inner search comes in the form of a note left by her deceased grandmother, which says: "Seek and ye shall find". In the end, the destination proves to be the starting point in the spatial dimension, but on a spiritual level, things are much different.

Mirrors are a reoccurring symbol throughout the novel. There is a lot of meaning attributed to these objects. According to popular belief, mirrors reflect our souls and they also can show us a glimpse into the future. Furthermore, it is considered a bad omen if one's reflection is distorted. Actually, Jae can monitor her progress with the help of her reflection in mirrors. At each stage she makes contact with her reflection, which reveals hidden truths.

Describing and sharing deeply personal spiritual experiences is not an easy task, but Jackie Griffiths' novel is a heroic attempt at this. "Ox Herding: A Secular Pilgrimage" is an easy to read book that could appeal to all ages and genders regardless of their specific interests, since it is a book about human nature and our lust for understanding.

Barbara Scott-Emmett says

Jae is dissatisfied with her life. Though she has a child, Chloe, and a partner, Jason, she lives with her parents, has no outside job and is at a crossroads. Distant and withdrawn, she accepts Jason's suggestion they take time apart. Jae feels the urge to explore a spiritual journey and she sets off on this quest, visiting a type of fairground where various religions and 'isms' have set out their stalls.

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PS: I received this ebook free in return for an honest review. (To be reviewed on Bookmuse.)
