

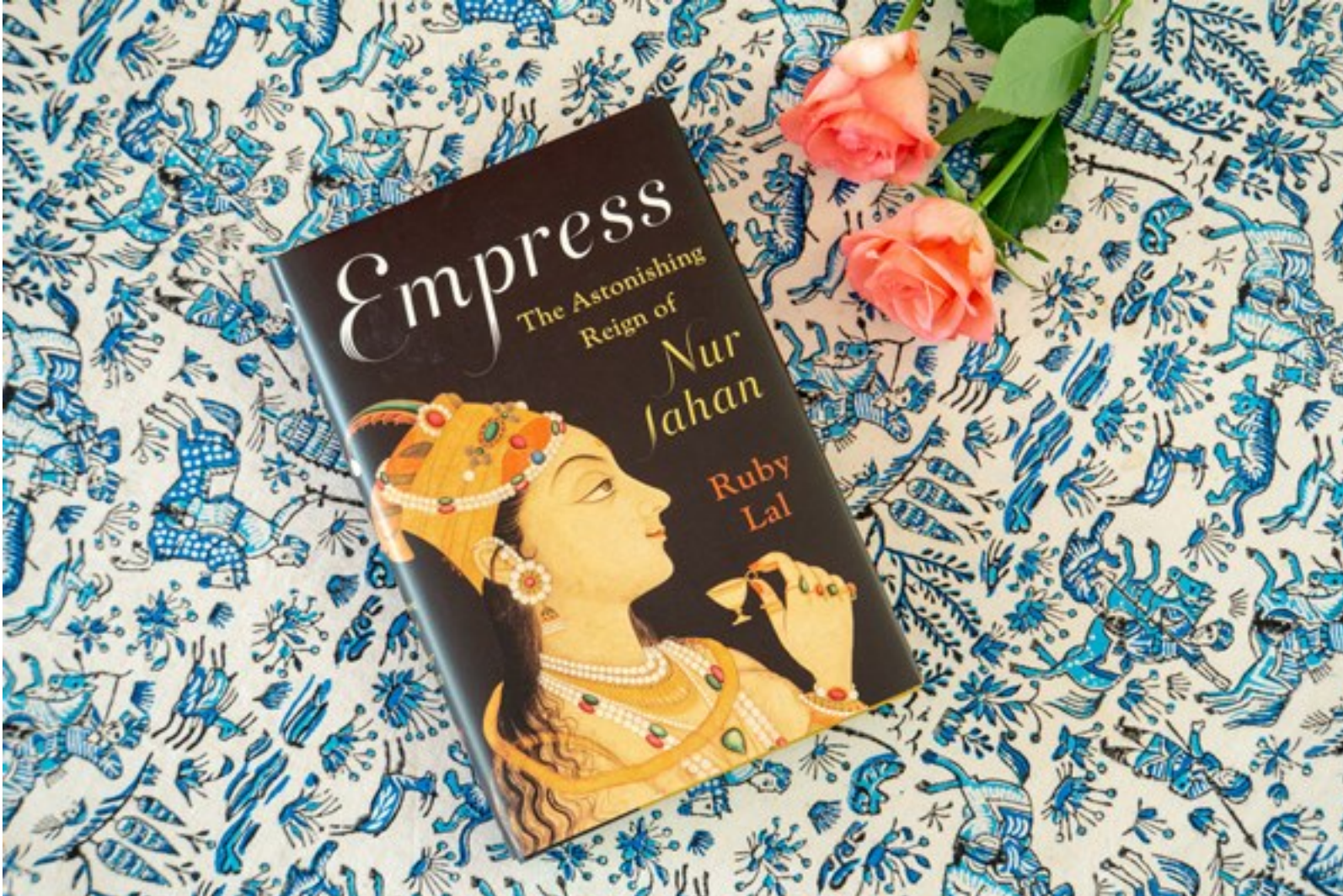
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August 6, 2018 by [Victoria](#) in [Books](#)

Empress Nur Jahan by Ruby Lal : Power and Roses

One doesn't often see empresses portrayed loading a gun, but among the many representations of Nur Jahan, the 17th century Mughal sovereign, the most famous shows her doing just that. She's standing against a leafy landscape, dressed in a man's turban, orange trousers and a transparent silk coat. The musket is long and unwieldy, but she handles it with ease. Her posture is confident, bold and self-assured. When the painting was presented to Nur Jahan's husband, the emperor Jahangir, he proclaimed it perfect and named the court painter Abul-Hasan, Nadir uz-Zaman, the Wonder of the Age. But as the historian Ruby Lal notes in her book, *Empress : The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan*, the true wonder was the subject of the painting herself.



Nur Jahan (1577-1645) was born Mihr un-Nissa, a daughter of Persian nobles who left the repressive conditions of Safavid Iran for the greater freedom—and wealth—of Mughal India. She became Nur Jahan, the Light of the World, when she married Jahangir in 1611. She was an unconventional imperial spouse, because she was not only past the nubile age—she was 34 at the time of their betrothal, but also a widow and a mother. Records don't tell us exactly how the meeting between Mihr and Jahangir happened. What we know for sure is how much the emperor esteemed his wife, describing her bravery, archery and shooting skills, her wisdom, and her generosity at length in his journal, Jahangirnama.

As Jahangir's health declined, in no small part due to his opium and alcohol addiction, he entrusted power to Nur Jahan. She issued imperial orders in her name, appeared at royal functions alongside the emperor and minted coins that bore her name, an unprecedented move in the Mughal empire. She was both feared and respected, lauded and judged. Even as many nobles were uncomfortable with a powerful female figure at the helm of the state, Nur Jahan's achievements couldn't be denied.

Lal's book brings Nur Jahan's character to light. Many other historians gloss over her, either focusing on the great Mughal monarchs like Akbar (1542-1605) or his grandson Shah Jahan (1592–1666) or dismissing the idea that a woman in Mughal India could wield real power. It's a shame, because hearing a diversity of voices makes our understanding of the past greater. While Nur Jahan lived in a conservative, patriarchal society, she nevertheless showed that the boundaries were less rigid and the limitations less severe than might seem at first glance.



Nur Jahan Holding a Musket by Abul-Hasan, 17th century

Nur Jahan’s is an inspiring and engrossing story, and I read it in one evening, stopping only to search for images of the mosques, public baths, gardens, and mausoleums designed by the empress that still grace Agra, Lahore and Delhi. (Lal’s book includes several color plates, but I wanted more.) Not only Nur Jahan, but also other Mughal characters, parade before our eyes, from Jahangir himself, a man fascinated with the natural world and philosophy, to Gulbadan Begum, the first Mughal historian. Lal’s book recreates vividly the world of the Mughals—the pleasure gardens, court painting sessions, travels to Kashmir, celebrations as well as intrigues and insurrections.

Perfume lovers will appreciate the story of how rose essence was discovered—courtesy of Nur Jahan’s mother. The anecdote was touchingly recorded by Jahangir in his journal, and Lal explains its significance.

As I was reading, I was thinking how easily remarkable individuals, especially women, can slip out of our gaze, since historians have their own prejudices and blind spots. It doesn’t mean, however, that they are not there. As Lal aptly reminds us, some individuals write themselves into history, and Nur Jahan left many tangible clues to her larger-than-life personality.

Ruby Lal. Empress : the astonishing reign of Nur Jahan. New York, NY : W.W. Norton & Company, 2018 ([public library](#)).

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
38 Comments

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Sandra: Dear Victoria-
I am reading this one right now! Very good so far! Thank you for this review and I hope other readers of this blog will become interested so we can all discuss.
At the same time (am I the only ones who reads 2 books at a time?) I am reading Call me Zebra by a young talented author Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi.
I just finished Sand by Wolfgang Herrndorf, if anyone likes a murder mystery. This book was recently translated into English. I couldn't put it down. August 6, 2018 at 7:31am [Reply](#)
- 

AndreaR: I am enjoying this book too. It's always fun to hear about the books BdJ readers enjoy. August 6, 2018 at 9:21am [Reply](#)
- 

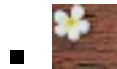
Sandra: This is my first reading a book of this type. Have you read others along the same lines? August 6, 2018 at 9:38am [Reply](#)
- 

[Victoria](#): Another one I've started reading is called Rebel Sultans. It's about the South India sultans, who were real characters. August 6, 2018 at 2:30pm [Reply](#)
- 

[Victoria](#): I'm so glad to hear it! August 6, 2018 at 2:30pm [Reply](#)



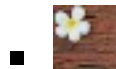
AndreaR: I was intrigued the moment I read that Nur Jahan wore earrings and a necklace of diamonds, rubies and pearls to hunt and expertly kill the tiger who was terrorizing the village. August 6, 2018 at 2:52pm [Reply](#)



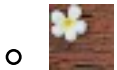
[Victoria](#): That was a great story! August 7, 2018 at 5:49am [Reply](#)



AndreaR: And a reminder to dress for success:-) August 7, 2018 at 10:43am [Reply](#)

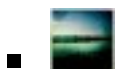


[Victoria](#): LOL! I'll remember this when I have any tigers to slay (metaphorical ones, in my case). August 7, 2018 at 10:47am [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): I also read more than one book at a time, and right now I'm also reading Ella Maillart's The Bitter Way, about her journey through Central Asia and Afghanistan on the eve of WWII.

I'm intrigued by Sand. August 6, 2018 at 2:32pm [Reply](#)



Sandra: Is there another title for your book by Maillart? I couldn't find it. Maybe it's not released in the USA.


Sand is good, Herrndorf writes with a bit of humor. It is a book that demands your attention though or else you will not be able to connect the dots.

While reading Empress Nur Jahan did you wear a rose perfume? August 7, 2018 at 8:52am [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): Let me check. I think it's The Cruel Way (La Voie Cruelle in French).

I read Ruby Lal's book in one evening, and it's been too hot for perfume these days. August 7, 2018 at 10:45am [Reply](#)

■  Victoria: Yes, it's The Cruel Way.

<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo15331634.html>

Do take a look at her other books too. She was an explorer and traveled all over Asia and the Middle East. August 7, 2018 at 10:46am [Reply](#)

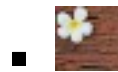


Sandra: Perfect thank you!

I will add this one and the rebel sultans to my autumn reading list.

Its been really hot here in NYC. We have a heat advisory and I have been keeping my two little kiddos cool. Today I am in Songes.

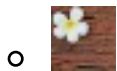
I can't remember the last time I read a book in one evening... kudos to you. August 7, 2018 at 11:10am [Reply](#)



Victoria: It's been sweltering here too. I've made another batch of my fennel-cardamom sharbat. Otherwise, I make a big jug of water mixed with Persian herb distillates (mint, rose or willow) and ice. Refreshing and cooling. August 7, 2018 at 11:33am [Reply](#)



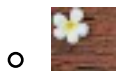
matty: Sounds a very interesting read. August 6, 2018 at 11:02am [Reply](#)



Victoria: I very much enjoyed it. August 6, 2018 at 2:29pm [Reply](#)



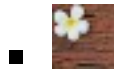
Emilie: She sounds like a fascinating woman! Was she the one who became a perfumer while under house arrest? I wonder if there are any descriptions or ingredient lists of her creations floating around... August 6, 2018 at 3:49pm [Reply](#)



Victoria: The author doesn't mention it in her book, and there doesn't seem to be many records on her life once Shah Jahan became emperor and pushed her out of the way. But since making perfume was an important part of Mughal culture, it's quite possible. August 7, 2018 at 5:50am [Reply](#)



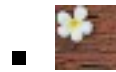
Emilie: I think I'm mixing her up with someone else but now I certainly want to learn more about Nur Jehan. Perhaps this one will go on my Christmas book list (it's getting ridiculously long!) August 7, 2018 at 6:19am [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): I can imagine! My list is always long, but to be honest, I just read whatever catches my interest, without following a specific order anymore. Too many great books around! August 7, 2018 at 10:42am [Reply](#)



Emilie: Very wise! I'm a sucker for meaning to read what looks like a great new release... but in the meantime getting sidetracked and re-reading an old favourite three times over! August 7, 2018 at 12:49pm [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): Why not! It's such a pleasure to re-read old favorites. I used to think that I must read as many new books as possible, but honestly, sometimes I derive more from re-reading the ones that moved me in the first place, and I derive even more out of them. August 9, 2018 at 2:24am [Reply](#)



Emilie: This is true 😊 You will always discover new facets or insights each time you read a really wonderful book.

Also it can be so comforting! I'm finding this winter for some reason I am re-reading all my old childhood favourites. Tove Jansson's Moomin books give me the same cosy feeling as sitting in front of a fire with a hot chocolate. Pure delight! August 9, 2018 at 6:53am [Reply](#)



Annie: Me too! I reread them with my kids every winter. I think I enjoy rereading them the most. 😊 August 13, 2018 at 8:07am [Reply](#)



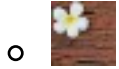
Emilie: Aww it was my Mum who first read them to me when I was little! They are going to have such fond memories of those books now 😊 August 13, 2018 at 7:35pm [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): You make me want to pick it up and re-read it! 😊
August 14, 2018 at 10:55am [Reply](#)



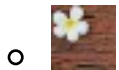
[Gaye Rowley](#): This sounds fascinating! Many thanks indeed for letting us know about Ruby Lal's new book: it's gone straight on to my to-read list. August 6, 2018 at 5:47pm [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): Hope that you enjoy it. It really takes you into that long vanished world. August 7, 2018 at 5:51am [Reply](#)



Christine M: Such a lovely article to read on my way home from work on the train last night Victoria- we should be paying you for this August 7, 2018 at 6:32pm [Reply](#)



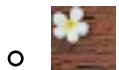
[Victoria](#): Thank you for your kind words, Christine! August 9, 2018 at 2:24am [Reply](#)



Christine M: It's a pleasure- love your blog! August 9, 2018 at 3:38pm [Reply](#)



Sherry Frantz: Persian women are always so independent. Contrary to what people think. This lady was an example. That are still like that even a the mullahs have tried to oppress them 😊 August 14, 2018 at 2:06am [Reply](#)



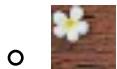
[Victoria](#): They are. In general, women are very much part of the public life in Iran. August 14, 2018 at 11:14am [Reply](#)



Silvermoon: Absolutely intend to read this one. I was always fascinated by Nur Japan when studying history in school in India.

Also, I love reading biographies of women (never have been interested in reading biographies of men). Two excellent books are Alison Weir's biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Helen Castor's multiple short biographies under the title of She Wolves. Both dealing with women in pre Elizabethan England.

August 14, 2018 at 6:41am [Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): Thank you for the extra recommendations! I'm especially drawn to the book by Weir.
August 14, 2018 at 11:14am [Reply](#)



Silvermoon: Victoria, I would recommend it very highly. Eleanor was a formidable woman- wife of two kings and mother of kings. A strong, intelligent and highly cultured woman. And the book is an excellent one. Hope you enjoy it.

I am looking forward to reading the one about Nur Jahan August 14, 2018 at 12:23pm
[Reply](#)



[Victoria](#): Thank you, I will do! August 16, 2018 at 2:25am [Reply](#)


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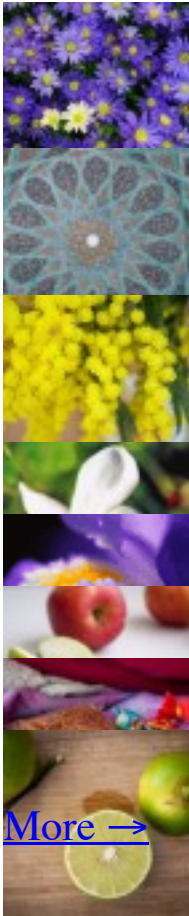
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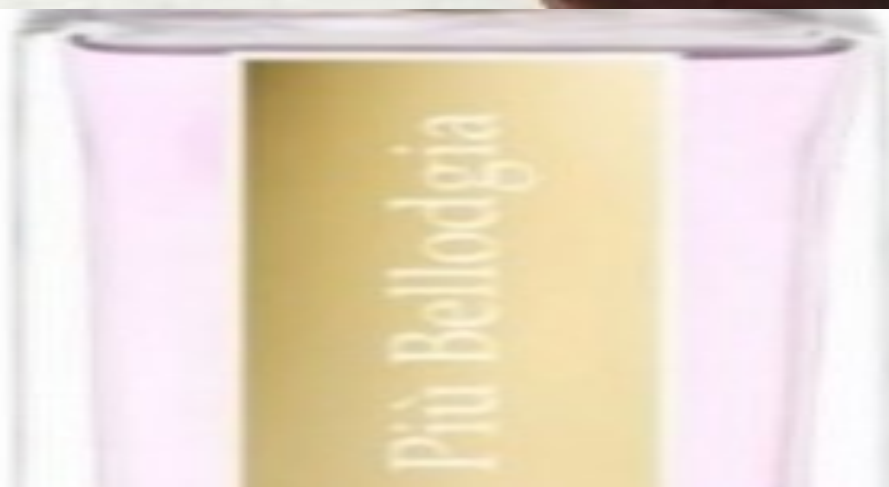
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[Mileta](#) in [Bulgarian Rose Perfume : Under \\$5](#): Oh my gosh! I'm from Bulgaria and I'm loving your description of the whole experience. I was there this past summer and going again in a week, and am very... September 6, 2018 at 7:09am



[Filomena](#) in [Chanel Paris-Deauville : Fragrance Review](#): Sorry I am getting back to these comments


long after they were posted. I own Misia in the EDT. I think Venise and Misia are similar in the way they... September 5, 2018 at 10:42pm




[rachel h](#) in [Incense Samples Giveaway](#): 1. Hiking in cool dry clear weather, cozy clothing. The seasonal food! chanterelles!, apple and pear season with walnuts and hazelnuts, drying pears, stewed plums with cinnamon and clotted cream,... September 5, 2018 at 1:26pm

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Victoria Frolova
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"Let's drop words as gardens
drop orange-peel and amber:
lavishly, diffusely,
and scarcely, scarcely..." These lines by Boris Pasternak open the Bois de Jasmin September newsletter. It... [instagram.com/p/BnWRJrDnvtd/...](#)





Sep 5, 2018




Victoria Frolova
[@Boisdejasmin](#)




In the Bois de Jasmin fall reading list, I want to share the books I've read and enjoyed. As always, I look forward to your lists and recommendations. [boisdejasmin.com/2018/09/fall-r...](#)




Sep 4, 2018





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Yes, sunscreen in a lotion form is the way to go. Powders and sprays, not to mention foundations and moisturizers with sunscreens aren't as effective. [gizmodo.com/the-best-way-t...](#)



The Best Way to Apply Sunscreen on Your Face, Revealed by a UV ...
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