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Q&A with author Ajit Hutheesing



Ajit Hutheesing is the author of the new book *The Shadow of Her Smile: A Love Story*, which focuses on his late wife, the violinist Helen Armstrong. Born in India, a member of the Nehru family, he worked for many years as a banker in the United States. He lives in Connecticut.

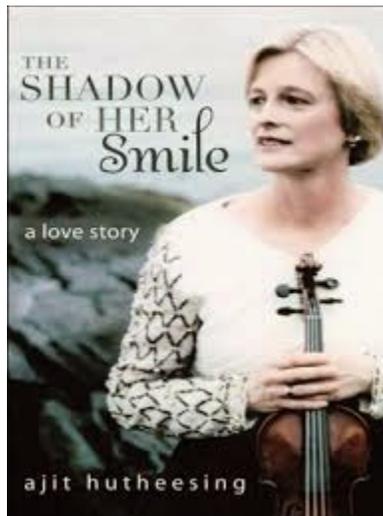
Q: Why did you decide to write The Shadow of Her Smile?

A: I didn't decide to write the book. After my wife's death, I couldn't sleep at night, and I would stay up and pour out my thoughts about our relationship. I did this for 60 days, and I had 60 pages. I was getting calls from musicians and from my stepdaughter, asking, When are we going to see the things you wrote? I said, It's just for friends and family. They said, It's got to be put in a book; she led a life of such modesty, she never sought publicity. Then we thought to

put it in the form of a book, and show what a remarkable woman she was.

Q: How did you choose the book's title?

A: It was not the first title I chose; the first was before I even started writing. But after writing the book, I thought about the things I was writing about, and one of the last things Helen did was to visit one of the great recording engineers in the world. He had been recording her playing popular songs, and she had recorded *The Shadow of Your Smile*—Frank Sinatra, every singer had done that song. I thought about what I had written, and it seemed more appropriate. Helen always had a smile stamped upon her face.



Q: Can you describe more about how you decided to turn your private memoir into a book? Who persuaded you?

A: Everybody who knew Helen. My children, Helen's children, certainly a dozen musicians who really wanted to see something. Musicians were such a big part of her life. Many were very good friends of Helen's and mine.

Q: What are some of the lessons you hope readers take from your book?

A: One big lesson is the theme that Helen symbolized, and that Helen and my relationship symbolized. Those of us who have strong, loving relationships—we, particularly men, so seldom say, “I love you,” and so seldom manifest that love in other ways. When I spoke at Helen’s memorial service, I said, One thing you must do is to say and show the love you have for those in your lives before it’s too late and you regret it.

Q: You describe the book as “a love story dedicated to those she loved and those who loved her.” What are some of the ways Helen touched and affected those around her?



A: That became even more apparent after she died, and it was always apparent when she was alive. She had a remarkable ability [to connect with people. At a high school], the principal was a little worried that her classical music was outside the realm of the students, and that when she performed, there would be trouble in the halls and they would not pay much attention to her. But when she spoke, everyone was silent.

Her personality was very saintly. Little children, in kindergarten, would be listening to her lessons and her talk, and would come back and say, I wish you were my mother! They would say, I had a dream that you had wings on your shoulders! I was just stunned....the way the kids would look at her, I've never seen that before.

There were spontaneous connections. Policemen would not give her a ticket. But there was a negative side to it. Contractors who would come to do repair work either wouldn't charge her, or would rip her off because they thought they could say anything to her and she wouldn't protest.

Q: Are you working on another book?

A: Yes—a completely different book! I started it when Helen was alive. When my father died, I received trunkloads of papers that my father and mother had accumulated. My mother's books had been published; my mother was the sister of India's first prime minister, Nehru.

The papers I found were so incredibly interesting. The people I grew up with—my uncle, my aunt, other members of my family—I was much more influenced by their public service and their intellect than by my father. He was also very bright, but stubborn, and determined to have his children do what he wanted. I thought, There's a book somewhere in there!

My mother and Helen were the two most significant people in my life. They both attracted people like magnets. It's going to take two or three years—reading, going back to the source on the other side of the letters. I would like to

see if [my family members] had replied to any of these letters.

Q: Anything else we should know?

A: One interesting comment that was made at her memorial service by a well-known musician was that she was “a phenomenon of nature.” I thought that was a nice expression, and an appropriate one.

--Interview with Deborah Kalb

Posted by [Deborah Kalb](#) at [5:04 AM](#)

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