

Henry Miller meets Gopi Krishna, May 5, 2008
By Dennis Littrell – Amazon Top 50 Reviewer

Deciphering the Golden Flower One Secret at a Time

I'm not familiar with *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which is the book that initiates Semple into meditation, but I did read one of Gopi Krishna's books some years ago. It was either *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* originally published in 1971 or *Kundalini: The Secret of Yoga* published in 1972.

Gopi Krishna wrote about the awakening of Kundalini as a powerful force that almost killed him. Semple's experience is in some ways similar. Indeed in some ways it seems patterned after Gopi Krishna's experience, especially in how powerful and scary the awakening was and how long it went on.

I have practiced yoga for 34 years and have spent many hours in kundalini meditation. I have never had anything but agreeable experiences during that time. But that is not surprising. Gopi Krishna's and Semple's experiences are highly unusual. I would not give up kundalini meditation for fear that something untoward might happen to me.

But putting kundalini aside, and some of the other things that Semple concerns himself with in this narrative, such as Intelligent Design versus biological evolution or the nature of prana or the distinction he makes between what he calls material science and empirical science, let me say that this is a superbly written memoir. Semple's narrative command might invoke the envy of a best-selling novelist. And his facility with the language, his ability to effortlessly (or so it seems, without effort) to find just the right word or expression to make his story vivid and engaging for the reader is highly admirable. Furthermore the prose is polished and very nicely edited. The book is pleasure to read and it reads fast.

Even though the book is obviously a memoir or an autobiography with some names changed I felt very strongly that this was an excellent work of fiction. I am not disputing Semple's story in any way; rather I am in admiration of the way he develops the first-person, present-tense narrative, the way he picks and selects details, adventures, and significant others so that the tension is maintained throughout the story. He begins with himself as a child who is accidentally impaled with a three-inch long and somewhat thick splinter in his foot. For a reason that remains inexplicable to the very end of the book, Semple does not tell his parents or the doctors about the splinter still in his foot. He suffers a lot of pain. He goes on to believe that the splinter destroyed the symmetry of his body and caused him to lose his math and musical ability. It is only with the beginning of his meditative practice and the awakening of kundalini that Semple starts to regain his symmetry and his sense of body wholeness. The reader however may come to believe that Semple's problems had nothing to do with the splinter, rather more to do with his propensity for self-indulgence, particularly as he enters his twenties. As a teen he is an indifferent student in private boarding schools, a privileged child who doesn't even bother

to get "gentleman's B's" while blaming his lack of academic achievement on what the splinter did to him. As a young adult he is given to sex, jazz, alcohol and drugs. The crucial moment in his life comes when he gives up all his bad habits, rents a house in a small French town and alone reaches a climax with what he sees as the life force (or kundalini: he uses both terms interchangeably). However while kundalini seems to be racking his body and mind, the reader may suspect that it is the 15 days of fasting, ten of which contained sleepless nights that brought about his anguish.

The glimpses we get of the women in his life are very interesting. I especially liked Margo and Martine. Semple has the novelist's gift for dialogue and quick description through which these women come to life. Curiously the last two women, Gloria and Donna, are not characterized at all. Well, Gloria is a waitress who is apparently very good in bed, but that's it. Donna, he tells us in passing, he married; and then later in passing, he mentions that he has a son. Nothing more is said about them.

This inconsistency of focus is necessary in a book that covers so many years of a man's life. However Semple maintained what I thought was a beautiful and perfectly balanced pace up until Chapter "14--Relapse." Suddenly the temporal pace becomes inconsistent. Some indefinite time has gone by, and on page 125 he says he has a wife (apparently Martine and not Donna, who comes later) and a successful business. The reader wonders when all this happened.

One other curious thing I must note. Semple includes two charts showing a "Comparison between Interrupted and Uninterrupted Growth" by age from his birth to age 63. The "interruption" occurs at age seven when he gets the splinter. The interrupted growth continues lagging behind a hypothesized normal growth until age 63 when he goes on a raw food diet and becomes "the being" he was "destined to become."

In today's book marketplace it is not easy to say whether a certain story should be told as a memoir or as a work of fiction. This is an excellent memoir, but I think, strangely enough, that it might have been more powerful as a work of fiction. Many readers will be skeptical (as Gopi Krishna learned!) to the idea of a prolonged and anguished "kundalini rising" taken as objective fact. However if presented as a fiction the possible distraction caused by the reader's skepticism disappears and the story gains in psychological power. Fiction is a way of conveying human psychological truths that sometimes cannot be expressed in a nonfictional way. As I used to say to my students, "What could be truer than fiction?"