

# Mowgli, the man-cub from wild Vermont

## Kipling's time in New England serves as inspiration for 'Law'

### The Jungle Law

By Victoria Vinton

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Reviewed by Carolyn Juris

Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" relates the adventures of Mowgli, a boy reared by wolves in the wilds of India. Just as Kipling's man-cub found succor with an improbable mother, so too were the seeds of his tale sown in unlikely ground: the rocky hills of rural Vermont.

In 1892, Kipling and his pregnant wife, Caroline, moved to her hometown of Brattleboro, Vt., where they would remain for the next four years. "The Jungle Law," Victoria Vinton's first novel, fictionalizes the major events in that initial year of the couple's brief New England stay — the birth of their first child, Josephine; the groundbreaking on their estate, Naulakha; and the genesis of Mowgli, Baloo the bear and the other iconic "Jungle Book" denizens.

Vinton's extensive research is evident. She quotes Kipling liberally, sourcing lines from his poem "The Law of the Jungle" and other key phrases from the "Jungle Book" for each of her chapter titles. Vivid flashbacks dramatize the documented facts of Kipling's life, such as his childhood exile from his beloved Bombay to the grim English foster home he later dubbed the House of Desolation, and the Yokohama bank failure that prompts the honeymooning Kiplings to refund their only in-hand assets — two around-the-world Thomas Cook vouchers — and flee to Vermont.

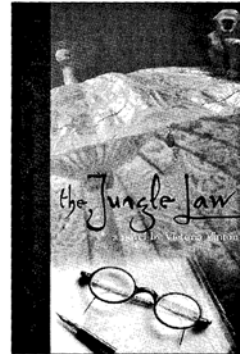
While Kipling awaits royalty checks from his already acclaimed writing, his household retains some of its privileged trappings, much to the disgust of his neighbor, Jack Connolly. "Acts like we're nothing but a bunch of damn coolies," he sneers to his son, Joe, as Kipling jounces by in a surrey driven by a liveried groom, giving the pair a patrician wave. For the embittered Connolly, a hard-luck immigrant whose meager farming income compels his wife, Addie, to take in the Kiplings' laundry, his neighbors' excesses recall "the gentry he would see as a poor child in Ireland. They'd parade about their holdings and parks in their fancy coach and four, stopping to collect samples of lichen and moss for their precious curio cabinets, while his mother, his own mother, was reduced to serving broth she had made from grass and kelp."

The Kiplings, by contrast, are almost playing at being poor, and the recent trouble in Yokohama already has become family legend. As Kipling recounts the saga of what he calls "The Englishman and His Bride," Caroline laughs out loud, "a skeptical but good-natured guffaw that acknowledged the absurdity of their current situation." She still, after all, has a maid to bring her tea and a neighbor to do her laundry.

Addie Connolly enjoys no such relief, and washing the Kiplings' snowy linens is the closest

she'll ever get to such finery. Even a simple muslin nightdress offers the promise a gentler existence. "Surely such a garment would not be subjected to the kind of tussling that goes on in her house when her husband is not too drunk to stumble into their bed," she imagines. "Would it be different in different attire?"

Young Joe, too, is seduced by the Kiplings' lifestyle. His fascination with the globetrotting author offers a refuge from his father's violent outbursts and the narrowness of own world. As the dreamy 11-year-old steers a laundry-laden wheelbarrow to the Kipling home, "he tries to imagine this is not some country lane but a road in ancient Burma, where just around the corner he might see a flotilla anchored in a palm-lined bay that looks across to China and the distant spires and tiers of pagodas that form



the golden skyline of Mandalay." He delivers his burden and for the first time meets Kipling, who invites him into the nascent world of the "Jungle Book": "A feral child, raised by the wolves. No mother, no father to speak of. I found him sitting in a cave this morning, playing with some stones. And I thought, you being a boy yourself, you might be able to tell me what he could be doing with them."

Joe obliges, and a friendship of sorts develops between the two. As Kipling updates the boy on Mowgli's adventures, Joe becomes increasingly engrossed in the man-cub's story. He even begins to absorb some of Mowgli's intrepid spirit, and, as Vinton convincingly demonstrates, his obsession with Kipling's fanciful tale spurs the boy to actions that profoundly alter the course of his life. As any boy must learn to do, Joe finds his own way to stand up to his father and become a man. His acquaintance with Kipling is as pivotal, we can be sure, as any he will experience.

But that same year in the Kipling household is, if not uneventful, then ultimately unengaging. Major emotional traumas — Kipling's suffering in the House of Desolation, the deaths of two of their three children — lie either in their past or their future. We come to care more about Joe and his parents than we do about the Kiplings, because, although it is the Connollys who are fictional, their travails are more real. ■

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