

A new memoir on friendship, enterprise, triumph over tragedy and the art of the possible

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Fast moving, entertaining, funny and inspiring, *Accidental Lives* by Sylvia Holder and Lindsay Swan, to be published on 15 November 2024 by Black Spring Press, is a book about tragedy turned to triumph, 'sliding door' life changers, chance encounters and a glorious friendship. It tells the extraordinary story of how a young man's tragic death in a poor South Indian fishing village led to the setting up of a charity, the Venkat Trust, which has transformed thousands of young lives.

Pre-war baby, natural rebel and boarding school survivor Sylvia Holder, who has spent much of the 60s and 70s working her way around the world between pitstops in London, meets Scots born Lindsay Swan, 13 years her junior, at a Johannesburg PR agency. Here their paths cross with unlikely characters from Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton to the Wombles and the Monkees.

Returning to London, Sylvia sets up a PR consultancy and is later joined by Lindsay. For the next 20 years, Holder Swan Public Relations – which bears more than a passing resemblance to television's *Absolutely Fabulous* – handles an eclectic mix of clients. These take them on safari in Zambia, to Mexico's Mayan ruins, Iceland's volcanoes and the high rises of Hong Kong. At home, they publicise Chichester Festival Theatre, Hampton Court Flower Show and many more. Other celebrities making an appearance in their memoir include Roger Moore, Joan Collins, Elton John, Diana Rigg, Cliff Richard and Patricia Hodge, as well as members of the Rolling Stones.

"This book gives an entertaining and moving account of the adventurous lives of that fine duo, Holder and Swan, two fearless, funny and brave women. It's a story of friendship and enterprise and extraordinary generosity, of triumph over tragedy, with some amazing anecdotes and an exhilarating sense of life lived to the full."

Dame Margaret Drabble, author and fellow traveller to Zambia and India.

When not travelling the world, they hold court in their quirky London office, the original Chalk Farm farmhouse, thought to have been artist Walter Sickert's studio. Their entrepreneurial sidelines include a City sandwich bar and PR training business. In parallel Sylvia builds an impressive property portfolio. Underpinning everything is the authors' friendship, their shared delight in the absurd, sense of adventure, belief in the power of the possible and enthusiasm for making things happen.

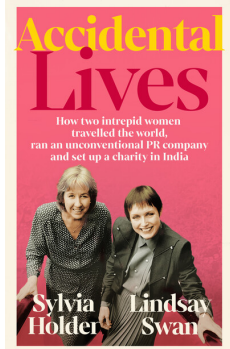
"This is the story of a uniquely creative female friendship. Its fruit was a PR agency built for fun as much as money and a charity which has transformed the life of a poor Indian fishing village. Absorbing, amusing, moving and inspiring, here is a hugely enjoyable read. Dr Piers Brendon, historian, biographer, broadcaster and fellow traveller to Zambia and India."

Aged 65, Sylvia retires to the south coast but things take an unexpected turn when Venkat, a poor Indian fisherman's son she'd met as a skinny 12-year-old 15 years earlier and whom she'd sponsored through school and university, is tragically killed in a road traffic accident. Heartbroken, she returns to Kovalam, Venkat's village near Chennai, and on impulse, pledges to bring education and a route out of the poverty of generations to the children of the 8000-inhabitant village, where free schooling is virtually non-existent.

That she knows nothing about India, education or charities and is 65 years old, is of no consequence to Sylvia, who sets about fulfilling her promise, working as always with Lindsay. The achievements are truly life changing: a state-of-the-art 1000 pupil higher secondary school, a 400-child sponsorship scheme and a university fund which pays the fees of 75 young people a year. Sylvia is now almost 86, Lindsay 72 but retirement never occurs to them. The book also reveals another friendship, the important one between Sylvia and JR, Venkat's brother, who with great aplomb, manages the Kovalam end of the Venkat Trust's work. Despite a 36-year age gap, different backgrounds, nationalities, culture, language and religions, they make a formidable team and their compatibility, affection and shared sense of humour lie behind the charity's extraordinary success.

ACCIDENTAL LIVES How two intrepid women travelled the world, ran an unconventional PR company and set up a charity in India by Sylvia Holder and Lindsay Swan is published by Black Spring Press on 15 November 2024, £16.99. 204 pages plus 16 pages of pictures. Available for order at all good bookshops, and online at [Amazon](#) and [Black Spring Press](#).

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