



River of Smoke: A Novel (The Ibis Trilogy)

By Amitav Ghosh

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River of Smoke: A Novel (The Ibis Trilogy) By Amitav Ghosh

A *Washington Post* Notable Fiction Book for 2011

The *Ibis*, loaded to its gunwales with a cargo of indentured servants, is in the grip of a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal; among the dozens flailing for survival are Neel, the pampered raja who has been convicted of embezzlement; Paulette, the French orphan masquerading as a deck-hand; and Deeti, the widowed poppy grower fleeing her homeland with her lover, Kalua.

The storm also threatens the clipper ship *Anahita*, groaning with the largest consignment of opium ever to leave India for Canton. And the *Redruth*, a nursery ship, carries Frederick "Fitcher" Penrose, a horticulturist determined to track down the priceless treasures of China that are hidden in plain sight: its plants that have the power to heal, or beautify, or intoxicate. All will converge in Canton's Fanqui-town, or Foreign Enclave: a tumultuous world unto itself where civilizations clash and sometimes fuse. It is a powder keg awaiting a spark to ignite the Opium Wars.

Spectacular coincidences, startling reversals of fortune, and tender love stories abound. But this is much more than an irresistible page-turner. The blind quest for money, the primacy of the drug trade, the concealment of base impulses behind the rhetoric of freedom: in *River of Smoke* the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries converge, and the result is a consuming historical novel with powerful contemporary resonance. Critics praised *Sea of Poppies* for its vibrant storytelling, antic humor, and rich narrative scope; now Amitav Ghosh continues the epic that has charmed and compelled readers all over the globe.

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Editorial Review

Review

“No writer in modern India has held a novelistic lamp to the subcontinent's densely thicketed past as vividly and acutely as Amitav Ghosh . . . *River of Smoke*, the second volume of his ambitious Ibis trilogy, is the work of a writer with a historical awareness and an appetite for polyphony that are equal to the immense demands of the material he seeks to illuminate . . . Evenly written and engaging . . . The force of Ghosh's ideas and the beauty of his tableaus of Canton are two of the book's achievements; the semantic ripples of the variety of dialects he folds into the narration are a third. *River of Smoke* is both a stirring portrayal of the past and, novelistically, a prescient beacon for the future.” ?Chandras Choudhury, *The New York Times Book Review*

“The narrative is suffused with the rich intercourse of commerce and miscegenation, embracing within its capacious rubric a variety of set-pieces, from a Chinese boat serving authentic Indian fare to an Armenian trader interviewing Napoleon in exile on St. Helena . . . The period detail is meticulously researched and lovingly described . . . The novel celebrates the joys of cultural and culinary mingling, the mongrelization of language in the forms of pidgin and Creole, and the mixing of peoples across old barriers of acceptable sexual and racial intercourse . . . With *River of Smoke*, Ghosh's Ibis trilogy is emerging as a monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalization, an era when people came into contact and collision, intermixing costumes, customs, convictions, consonants, couplings and cash, shaping history all the while through their pettiness, their privations and their passions.” ?Shashi Tharoor, *The Washington Post*

“Like a wonderful multicoloured tapestry Ghosh has woven a story made up of a series of vibrant threads made from a multitude of materials . . . Ghosh has done a masterful job in not only making each of his characters fascinating studies and interesting people to spend time with, he has also managed to bring the strange exotic world of the foreign enclave in Canton vividly alive . . . While Ghosh's descriptive abilities allow us to create intricate portraits of people and locations, it's his agility with languages which gives *River Of Smoke* an extra level of verisimilitude. From the strange mix of words spoken by the family in the opening pages of the book, the scattering of pidgin appearing like exotic fruit in amongst the bland English of the trader's everyday speech, the conversations between the merchants and their Chinese partners, to the bombastic rhetoric of the ardent British free traders, each person we meet is given a voice as unique as their character and a language or dialect to match . . . *River Of Smoke* is a wonderful mixture of people, places and story that captures a moment in history like an insect snared in amber. All the details are there for the reader to see and appreciate.” ?Richard Marcus, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Spellbinding and astute, Ghosh continues the nineteenth-century historical saga about the opium trade that he launched with *Sea of Poppies* (2008). This is an even more fluid and pleasurable tale, however dire its conflicts, and stands firmly on its own, though readers shouldn't miss the first installment . . . With one more novel to go, Ghosh's epic trilogy is on its way to making literary history.” ?Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

“Ghosh sets the second volume of his Ibis trilogy in 1838, appropriately enough, because at heart he's a 19th-century novelist with a sweeping vision of character and culture...Ghosh triumphs both through the clarity of his style and the sweep of his vision, and he leaves the reader eager for volume three.” ?Kirkus Reviews

“On one level, *[River of Smoke]* is a remarkable feat of research, bringing alive the hybrid customs of food and dress and the competing philosophies of the period with intimate precision; on another it is a subversive act of empathy, viewing a whole panorama of world history from the ‘wrong’ end of the telescope. The real trick, though, is that it is also fabulously entertaining.” ?Tim Adams, *The Observer (London)*

“Eloquent . . . Fascinating . . . *[River of Smoke’s]* strength lies in how thoroughly Ghosh fills out his research with his novelistic fantasy, seduced by each new situation that presents itself and each new character, so that at their best the scenes read with a sensual freshness as if they were happening now.” ?Tessa Hadley, *The Guardian*

“[This] vast book has a Dickensian sweep of characters, high- and low-life intermingling . . . Ghosh conjures up a thrilling sense of place.” ?*The Economist*

“Ghosh’s best and most ambitious work yet . . . [He] writes with impeccable control, and with a vivid and sometimes surprising imagination.” ?*The New Yorker on Sea of Poppies*

“A delight . . . [Ghosh is] a writer of uncommon talent who combines literary flair with a rare seriousness of purpose . . . His descriptions bring a lost world to life.” ?Shashi Tharoor, *The Washington Post Book World on Sea of Poppies*

“Brilliant . . . By the book’s stormy and precarious ending, most readers will clutch it like the ship’s rail awaiting, just like Ghosh’s characters, the rest of the voyage to a destination unknown.” ?Don Oldenburg, *USA Today on Sea of Poppies*

About the Author

Amitav Ghosh is the internationally bestselling author of many works of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Glass Palace*, and is the recipient of numerous awards and prizes. Ghosh divides his time between Kolkata and Goa, India, and Brooklyn, New York.

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River of Smoke

Part I

Islands

One

Deeti’s shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius, where the island’s western and southern shorelines collide to form the wind-whipped dome of the Morne Brabant. The site was a geological anomaly - a cave within a spur of limestone, hollowed out by wind and water - and there was nothing like it anywhere else on the mountain. Later Deeti would insist that it wasn’t chance but destiny that led her to it - for the very existence of the place was unimaginable until you had actually stepped inside it.

The Colver farm was across the bay and towards the end of Deeti’s life, when her knees were stiff with arthritis, the climb up to the shrine was too much for her to undertake on her own: she wasn’t able to make the trip unless she was carried up in her special pus-pus - a contraption that was part palki and part sedan chair. This meant that visits to the shrine had to be full-scale expeditions, requiring the attendance of a good number of the Colver menfolk, especially the younger and sturdier ones.

To assemble the whole clan - La Fami Colver, as they said in Kreol - was never easy since its members were

widely scattered, within the island and abroad. But the one time of year when everyone could be counted on to make a special effort was in midsummer, during the Gran Vakans that preceded the New Year. The Fami would begin mobilizing in mid-December, and by the start of the holidays the whole clan would be on the march; accompanied by paltans of bonoys, belsers, bowjis, salas, sakubays and other in-laws, the Colver phalanxes would converge on the farm in a giant pincer movement: some would come overland on ox-carts, from Curepipe and Quatre Borne, through the misted uplands; some would travel by boat, from Port Louis and Mahébourg, hugging the coast till they were in sight of the mist-veiled nipple of the Morne.

Much depended on the weather, for a trek up the wind-swept mountain could not be undertaken except on a fine day. When the conditions seemed propitious, the bandobast would start the night before. The feast that followed the puja was always the most eagerly awaited part of the pilgrimage and the preparations for it occasioned much excitement and anticipation: the tin-roofed bungalow would ring to the sound of choppers and chakkis, mortars and rolling-pins, as masalas were ground, chutneys tempered, and heaps of vegetables transformed into stuffings for parathas and daal-puris. After everything had been packed in tiffin-boxes and gardmanzés, everyone would be bundled off for an early night.

When daybreak came, Deeti would take it on herself to ensure that everyone was scrubbed and bathed, and that not a morsel of food passed anyone's lips - for as with all pilgrimages, this too had to be undertaken with a body that was undefiled, within and without. Always the first to rise, she would go tap-tapping around the wood-floored bungalow, cane in hand, trumpeting a reveille in the strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Kreol that had become her personal idiom of expression: *Revey-té! É Banwari; é Mukhpyari! Revey-té na! Haglé ba?*

By the time the whole tribe was up and on their feet, the sun would have set alight the clouds that veiled the peak of the Morne. Deeti would take her place in the lead, in a horse-drawn carriage, and the procession would go rumbling out of the farm, through the gates and down the hill, to the isthmus that connected the mountain to the rest of the island. This was as far as any vehicle could go, so here the party would descend. Deeti would take her seat in the pus-pus, and with the younger males taking turns at the poles, her chair would lead the way up, through the thick greenery that cloaked the mountain's lower slopes.

Just before the last and steepest stretch of the climb there was a convenient clearing where everyone would stop, not just to catch their breath, but also to exclaim over the manifik view of jungle and mountain, contained between two sand-fringed, scalloped lines of coast.

Deeti alone was less than enchanted by this spectacular vista. Within a few minutes she'd be snapping at everyone: *Levé té! We're not here to goggle at the zoli-vi and spend the day doing patati-patata. Padit!* Chal!

To complain that your legs were fatigé or your head was gidigidi was no use; all you'd get in return was a ferocious: *Bus to fana! Get on your feet!*

It wouldn't take much to rouse the party; having come this far on empty stomachs, they would now be impatient for the post-puja meal, the children especially. Once again, Deeti's pus-pus, with the sturdiest of the menfolk holding the poles, would take the lead: with a rattling of pebbles they would go up a steep pathway and circle around a ridge. And then all of a sudden, the other face of the mountain would come into view, dropping precipitously into the sea. Abruptly, the sound of pounding surf would well up from the edge of the cliff, ringing in their ears, and their faces would be whipped by the wind. This was the most hazardous leg of the journey, where the winds and updraughts were fiercest. No lingering was permitted here, no pause to take in the spectacle of the encircling horizon, spinning between sea and sky like a twirling hoop.

Procrastinators would feel the sting of Deeti's cane: *Garatwa! Keep moving ...*

A few more steps and they'd reach the sheltered ledge of rock that formed the shrine's threshold. This curious natural formation was known to the family as the Chowkey, and it could not have been better designed had it been planned by an architect: its floor was broad and almost flat, and it was sheltered by a rocky overhang that served as a ceiling. It had something of the feel of a shaded veranda, and as if to complete the illusion, there was even a balustrade of sorts, formed by the gnarled greenery that clung to the edges of the ledge. But to look over the side, at the surf churning at the foot of the cliff, took a strong stomach and a steady head: the

breakers below had travelled all the way up from Antarctica and even on a calm, clear day the water seemed to surge as though it were impatient to sweep away the insolent speck of land that had interrupted its northward flow.

Yet such was the miracle of the Chowkey's accidental design that visitors had only to sit down for the waves to disappear from view - for the same gnarled greenery that protected the shelf served also to hide the ocean from those who were seated on the floor. This rocky veranda was, in other words, the perfect place to foregather, and cousins visiting from abroad were often misled into thinking that it was this quality that had earned the Chowkey its name - for was it not a bit of a chowk, where people could assemble? And wasn't it something of a chokey too, with its enclosing sides? But only a Hindi-speaking etranzer would think in that vein: any islander would know that in Kreol the word 'chowkey' refers also to the flat disc on which rotis are rolled (the thing that is known Back There as a 'chakki'). And there it was, Deeti's Chowkey, right in the middle of the rock shelf, crafted not by human hands but by the wind and the earth: it was nothing but a huge boulder that had been worn and weathered into a flat-topped toadstool of stone. Within moments of the party's arrival, the women would be hard at work on it, rolling out tissue-thin daal-puris and parathas and stuffing them with the delectable fillings that had been prepared the night before: finely ground mixes of the island's most toothsome vegetables - purple arwi and green mouroungue, cambaré-beti and wilted songe. Several photographs from this period of Deeti's life have survived, including a couple of beautiful silver-gelatin daguerrotypes. In one of them, taken in the Chowkey, Deeti is in the foreground, still seated in her pus-pus, the feet of which are resting on the floor. She is wearing a sari, but unlike the other women in the frame, she has allowed the ghungta to drop from her head, baring her hair, which is a startling shade of white. Her sari's anchal hangs over her shoulder, weighted with a massive bunch of keys, the symbol of her continuing mastery of the Fami's affairs. Her face is dark and round, lined with deep cracks: the daguerrotype is detailed enough to give the viewer the illusion of being able to feel the texture of her skin, which is that of crumpled, tough, weatherworn leather. Her hands are folded calmly in her lap, but there is nothing reposeful about the tilt of her body: her lips are pursed tightly together and she is squinting fiercely at the camera. One of her eyes, dimmed by cataracts, reflects the light blankly back to the lens, but the gaze of the other is sharp and piercing, the colour of the pupil a distinctive grey.

The entrance to the shrine's inner chambers can be seen over her shoulder: it is no more than a tilted fissure in the cliffside, so narrow that it seems impossible that a cavern could lie hidden behind it. In the background, a paunchy man in a dhoti can be seen, trying to chivvy a brood of children into forming a line so that they can follow Deeti inside.

This too was an inviolable part of the ritual: it always fell to Deeti to make sure that the youngest were the first to perform the puja, so they could eat before the rest. With a cane in one hand and a branch of candles in another, she would usher all the young Colvers - chutkas and chutkis, laikas and laikis - straight through the hall-like cavern that led to the inner sanctum. The famished youngsters would hurry after her, scarcely glancing at the painted walls of the cave's outer chamber, with its drawings and graffiti. They would run to the part of the shrine that Deeti called her 'puja-room': a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back. If the shrine had been an ordinary temple, this would have been its heart - a sanctum with an array of divinitie...

Users Review

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