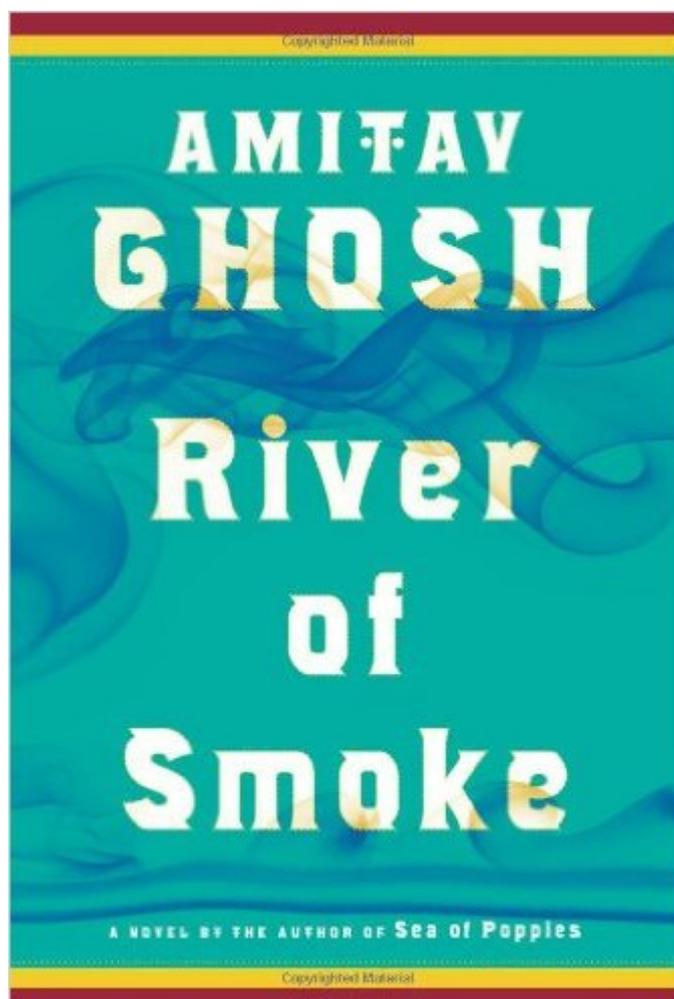


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River Of Smoke: A Novel (The Ibis Trilogy)



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

One of the benefits of a summer trip to London is to discover that a much anticipated new book is available there before its United States publication date. So much to my surprise I was able to purchase Amitav Ghosh's new book, the second of his Ibis trilogy, RIVER OF SMOKE. The first book being the outstanding SEA OF POPPIES which I read in 2009. Ghosh continues to amaze with his newest volume as both an excellent writer and story teller. I can not wait for the concluding volume in a few years. The trilogy is told against the backdrop of the Opium wars of the early 1800s. The first book took many characters to tell the story of how the Opium was produced by the East India Company in India. These characters all found their way to becoming passengers on the ship "Ibis" and the book ends with a great storm and its various character plot lines are cast off without clean endings. So I for one expected that the second book would continue with this same group of characters and their individual stories. Hoping I guess that they all would continue to star in Ghosh's epic production. This was not to be as Ghosh opens SMOKE with what I found to be an extremely muddled opening chapter or two. But then things get going and we also discover that Ghosh has something larger in mind. The story he intends to tell is that of the Opium trade itself. His characters and their stories provide an entertaining window on a world dominated by Opium and its impact on lives and history. The research in this book is astounding. You can feel, see, and smell every part of Canton, China where the setting has now moved from India. This is not a story told in hindsight... it is told in real time with what one recognizes must be real people's reactions to real time events .

The River of Smoke is the second installment of Amitav Ghosh's entertaining and informative Ibis trilogy. Is reading the first volume required? Technically, no. But, the stories are linked in a clumsy fashion, and at least one of the main characters in River of Smoke cannot be fully appreciated in TRS without having read the first volume Sea of Poppies. And, Ghosh is painting a broad canvas that includes the British poppy industry and its corrupting affect on Indian society. So, it helps to more fully appreciate Ghosh's story to read both volumes. The Sea of Poppies largely describes the Indian poppy growing and manufacturing industry in 1838. The passage describing an opium factory itself makes the book a worthwhile read. The River of Smoke (TRoS) places its characters in the historical events of 1838-39, when the Chinese succeeded briefly in expelling English opium traders from the international center of Canton. Ghosh's narrative captures in detail the emergence of Chinese resistance to the growing opium trade. There is tremendously relevant back and forth between the traders and the Chinese (including arguments repeated today to justify various global trade policies). And, the characters in his story are pushed and pulled by material and ethical

concerns that are still relevant today. For those unfamiliar with Ghosh's writing, he is very much from the Dumas, Hugo, Dickens lineage in literature. His books are as comfortable and traditional as overstuffed furniture in front of a fire in the den on a wintry night. I read both volumes of the trilogy back-to-back and would have read the third consecutively if it had been available.

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