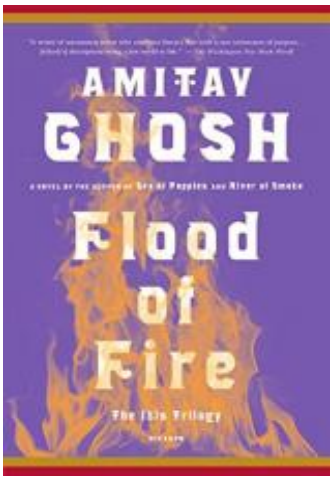
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Flood of Fire

by Amitav Ghosh



About the Book

The stunningly vibrant final novel in the bestselling *Ibis Trilogy*.

It is 1839 and China has embargoed the trade of opium, yet too much is at stake in the lucrative business and the British Foreign Secretary has ordered the colonial government in India to assemble an expeditionary force for an attack to reinstate the trade. Among those consigned is Kesri Singh, a soldier in the army of the East India Company. He makes his way eastward on the *Hind*, a transport ship that will carry him from Bengal to Hong Kong.

Along the way, many characters from the *Ibis Trilogy* come aboard, including Zachary Reid, a young American speculator in opium futures, and Shireen, the widow of an opium merchant whose mysterious death in China has compelled her to seek out his lost son. The *Hind* docks in Hong Kong just as war breaks out and opium "pours into the market like monsoon flood." From Bombay to Calcutta, from naval engagements to the decks of a hospital ship, among embezzlement, profiteering, and espionage, Amitav Ghosh charts a breathless course through the culminating moment of the British opium trade and vexed colonial history.

With all the verve of the first two novels in the trilogy, FLOOD OF FIRE completes Ghosh's unprecedented re-envisioning of the 19th-century war on drugs. With remarkable historic vision and a vibrant cast of characters, Ghosh brings the Opium Wars to bear on the contemporary moment with the storytelling that has charmed readers around the world.

Discussion Guide

1. What was it like to read about the life of Deeti (who figured especially prominently in RIVER OF SMOKE) from Kesri Singh?s perspective? Why are his beliefs about fulfillment in life and love so different from hers?

2. Is Kesri?s career in the Pacheesi a success story? What does his service to the native infantry reveal about power structures and British colonization?

3. What is the effect of Neel?s journal entries? How do they enhance Ghosh?s narrative voice?

4. Ghosh asks, ?What exactly was it that had come into being between them [Zachary Reid and Catherine Burnham]? It was not love?nor was it only lust.? How would you answer that question? What do Zachary and Catherine need from each other?

5. Discuss Shireen?s discovery of Bahram and Chi-mei?s relationship, which was a central storyline in RIVER OF SMOKE. If you had been in Shireen?s situation, would you have been so eager to meet Freddie?

6. FLOOD OF FIREpresents a full spectrum of attitudes toward sex, from the stern medical advice of Dr. Allgood to Gulabi?s sultry troupe. How do the characters balance guilt and hedonism?

7. Read as armchair travel, what does the novel present in terms of landscape, cuisine, and the journey itself? How does the Hong Kong of recent headlines (since the 1997 return to Chinese control) compare to the early 19th-century version presented in the novel?

8. What makes Zadig an appropriate suitor for Shireen?

9. How do the Ibis trilogy characters, who represent a profusion of backgrounds, overcome or exploit their ancestry, gender and economic status? In particular, how do Neel and Paulette negotiate their multifaceted identities?

10. As FLOOD OF FIRE brought to life the East India Company?s exploitation of small farmers and the explosive tactics used to push British opium on China, what did you discover about the process of subjugation? What are the contemporary parallels to these global power struggles?

11. How did you react to Zachary?s hunger for wealth, with Mr. Burnham as his mentor, professing the noble cause of free trade and the blessed status of those ?whom God chooses to be present at such moments in history??

12. What was Commissioner Lin?s greatest disadvantage? Ultimately, who is to blame for Freddie?s addiction?

13. Were Paulette and Zachary simply the victims of miscommunication, or do their temperaments inevitably make their romance a struggle?

14. Throughout the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh writes of survivors and victims in dire straits both personal and global. In the closing scene, does fate or willpower appear to be the stronger force in this saga?

Author Bio

Amitav Ghosh is the author of the bestselling *Ibis Trilogy*, composed of SEA OF POPPIES (shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize), RIVER OF SMOKE and FLOOD OF FIRE. His other novels include THE CIRCLE OF REASON, which won the Prix Médicis étranger, and THE GLASS PALACE. He is the author of many works of nonfiction,

including THE GREAT DERANGEMENT, THE NUTMEG'S CURSE and SMOKE AND ASHES. He has received two lifetime achievement awards and five honorary doctorates. In 2018, Ghosh became the first English-language writer to win the Jnanpith Award, India?s highest literary honor. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Critical Praise

?FLOOD OF FIRE is a huge, sprawling, rumbustious novel?. It?s a remarkable achievement: an adventure novel full of feeling, but one which also invites --- even compels --- you to think about the assumptions which men act upon.?

Flood of Fire

by Amitav Ghosh

Publication Date: August 2, 2016
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 624 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 1250094712
ISBN-13: 9781250094711