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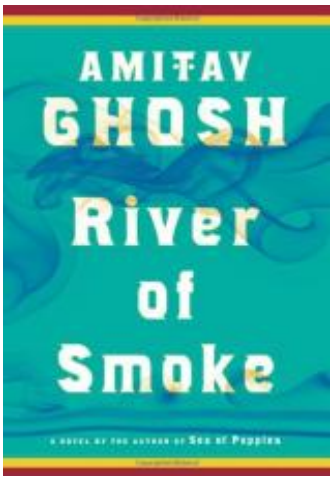
River of Smoke

by Amitav Ghosh



About the Book

In Amitav Ghosh's SEA OF POPPIES, the Ibis began its treacherous journey across the Indian Ocean, bound for the cane fields of Mauritius with a cargo of indentured servants. Now, in RIVER OF SMOKE, the former slave ship flounders in the Bay of Bengal, caught in the midst of a deadly cyclone. The storm also threatens the clipper ship Anahita, groaning with the largest consignment of opium ever to leave India for Canton. Meanwhile, the Redruth, a nursery ship, carries horticulturists determined to track down the priceless botanical treasures of China. All will converge in Canton?s Fanqui-town, or Foreign Enclave, a powder keg awaiting a spark to ignite the Opium Wars. A spectacular adventure, but also a bold indictment of global avarice, RIVER OF SMOKE is a consuming historical novel with powerful contemporary resonance.

Discussion Guide

1. The opening scenes recount Deeti's survival after she and Kalua escaped the *Ibis*. She insists that destiny, not chance, led her to the site of her hidden shrine. For her, what does destiny mean? What legacies does she pass on to the next generation?

2. Like many of the novel's characters, Ah Fatt and Robin Chinnery have bicultural ancestries. What limitations and freedoms accompany their lack of a legitimate, aristocratic bloodline? Do ancestry and prestige go hand in hand in **River of Smoke**?

3. Discuss Bahram's and Fitcher's motivations. Are they simply greedy?

4. Paulette is a master of disguise and can comfortably move between cultures. What does she consider to be her true identity? Why is horticulture a suitable field for her?

5. Discuss the role of religion in shaping the characters' view of the world. When Christian characters justify the opium trade, how do they reconcile it with their faith? (You may enjoy revisiting Charles King's letter to Charles Elliot near the book's final pages.)

6. Bahram and Zadig discuss the experience of having an additional, foreign wife, debating whether love is a factor. How does the relationship between Bahram and Chi-mei change over the years? Would Bahram enjoy Canton as much if he weren't a foreigner?

7. How do the trilogy's ships --- the formerly slave-trading *Ibis*, Fitcher's practical but eccentric-looking *Redruth*, and the treasure-laden *Anahita* (named for the Zoroastrian angel) --- reflect their passengers?

8. In chapter seven, Robin's letter describes the Pearl River as a suburb of Canton. In chapter thirteen, Zadig recalls the legend that claims the river got its name from a foreign trader who dropped a mysterious pearl. Drawing on these and other impressions, discuss the Pearl River as a character: how would you describe its powers and its personality?

9. Consider Ghosh's penchant for intertwining fates. For example, Ah Fatt had been Neel's companion in the labor prison, while Neel (qualified to work as a munshi because of the education that accompanied his noble status) is close by when Mr. Punhyqua is arrested, marking the unlikely fall of another member of the ruling class. Does Ghosh create tragicomedy or pure irony in story lines such as these?

10. Near the end of chapter six, Bahram has a chance encounter with Napoleon (a scene inspired by reported encounters between the French emperor and seafaring traders). If you had been in Bahram's position, what would you have asked Napoleon?

11. Chapter two depicts Bahram's slippery ladder escape, echoed in the last chapter. What is the effect of watching Paulette observe the aftermath of the dangling ladder? What do you imagine for Bahram after those final moments?

12. Explore the novel's closing scene, in which Deeti and Neel look at Robin's prophetic painting. Through his art and his letters, what vision of history does Robin present? Is this vision different from the novel's?

13. Although Neel is a fictional character, he was inspired by an 1820s court case in which a wealthy Bengali was convicted of forgery and sentenced to servitude. How was your reading affected by the blend of real-life and imagined figures?

14. Amitav Ghosh revels in the written word, compiling Neel's amusing, extensive *Chrestomathy* in *Sea of Poppies* and playfully exploring the French influence on the vocabulary of Deeti and other sojourners. What makes Ghosh's approach to language unique?

15. What do you predict for the third installment of the *Ibis* trilogy?

16. What can the modern world learn about economics and humanity from this novel? Is the history of the Opium Wars --- with international trade rivalries such as Dent and Jardine's --- repeating itself?

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

"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."

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