



Sea of Poppies: A Novel (The Ibis Trilogy)

By Amitav Ghosh

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Sea of Poppies: A Novel (The Ibis Trilogy) By Amitav Ghosh

The first in an epic trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is "a remarkably rich saga . . . which has plenty of action and adventure à la Dumas, but moments also of Tolstoyan penetration--and a drop or two of Dickensian sentiment" (*The Observer* [London]).

At the heart of this vibrant saga is a vast ship, the *Ibis*. Her destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean shortly before the outbreak of the Opium Wars in China. In a time of colonial upheaval, fate has thrown together a diverse cast of Indians and Westerners on board, from a bankrupt raja to a widowed tribeswoman, from a mulatto American freedman to a free-spirited French orphan. As their old family ties are washed away, they, like their historical counterparts, come to view themselves as *jahaj-bhais*, or ship-brothers. The vast sweep of this historical adventure spans the lush poppy fields of the Ganges, the rolling high seas, and the exotic backstreets of Canton. With a panorama of characters whose diaspora encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the East itself, *Sea of Poppies* is "a storm-tossed adventure worthy of Sir Walter Scott" (*Vogue*).

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Diaspora, myth and a fascinating language mashup propel the Rubik's cube of plots in Ghosh's picaresque epic of the voyage of the *Ibis*, a ship transporting Indian girmitiyas (coolies) to Mauritius in 1838. The first two-thirds of the book chronicles how the crew and the human cargo come to the vessel, now owned by rising opium merchant Benjamin Burnham. Mulatto second mate Zachary Reid, a 20-year-old of Lord Jim-like innocence, is passing for white and doesn't realize his secret is known to the gomusta (overseer) of the coolies, Baboo Nob Kissin, an educated Falstaffian figure who believes Zachary is the key to realizing his lifelong mission. Among the human cargo, there are three fugitives in disguise, two on the run from a vengeful family and one hoping to escape from Benjamin. Also on board is a formerly high caste raj who was brought down by Benjamin and is now on his way to a penal colony. The cast is marvelous and the plot majestically serpentine, but the real hero is the English language, which has rarely felt so alive and vibrant. (Oct.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Ghosh's best and most ambitious work yet is an adventure story set in nineteenth-century Calcutta against the backdrop of the Opium Wars. On the *Ibis*, a ship engaged in transporting opium across the Bay of Bengal, varied life stories converge. A fallen raja, a half-Chinese convict, a plucky American sailor, a widowed opium farmer, a transgendered religious visionary are all united by the "smoky paradise" of the opium seed. Ghosh writes with impeccable control, and with a vivid and sometimes surprising imagination: a woman's tooth protrudes "like a tilted gravestone"; an opium addict's writhing spasms are akin to "looking at a pack of rats squirming in a sack"; the body of a young man is "a smoking crater that had just risen from the ocean and was still waiting to be explored."

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

In his sixth novel, Amitav Ghosh observes the pervasive effects of colonialism through the daily trials and discordant inner lives of his large, diverse cast of characters. Though the reviewer from the *Wall Street Journal* objected to the overt political message and convoluted plot, most critics praised this lush and evocative novel, filled with vivid details of life in 19th-century India. Ghosh's vibrant prose radiates compassion and empathy for his characters and ingeniously recreates the Anglo-Indian pidgin they would have spoken. (Readers may find the frequent foreign words distracting, but a glossary is provided.) The first installment in a projected trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* ends just as the *Ibis*'s voyage begins, having spent most of its 500-plus pages in exposition. But Ghosh's epic, ambitious vision will keep readers riveted.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Julie Tice:

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Maria McGhee:

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