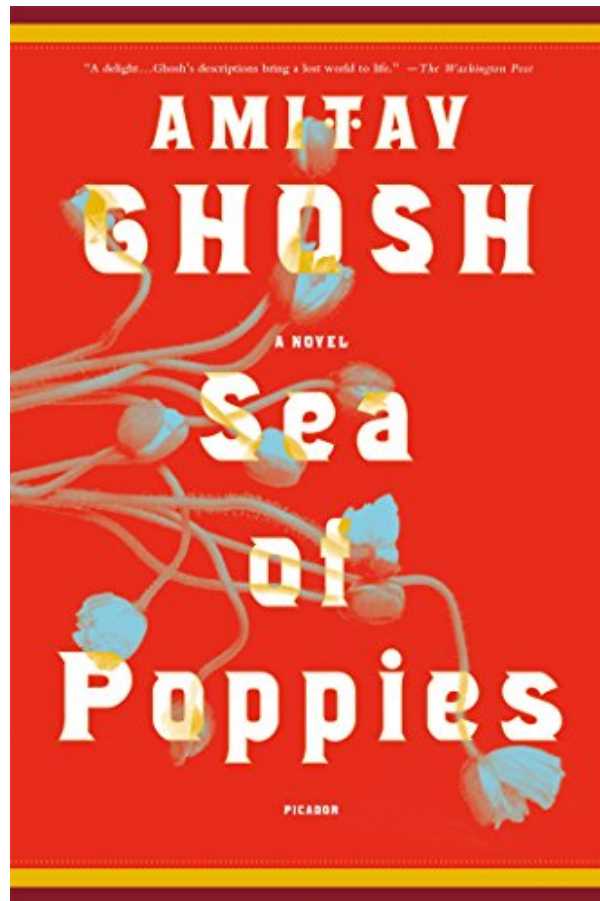
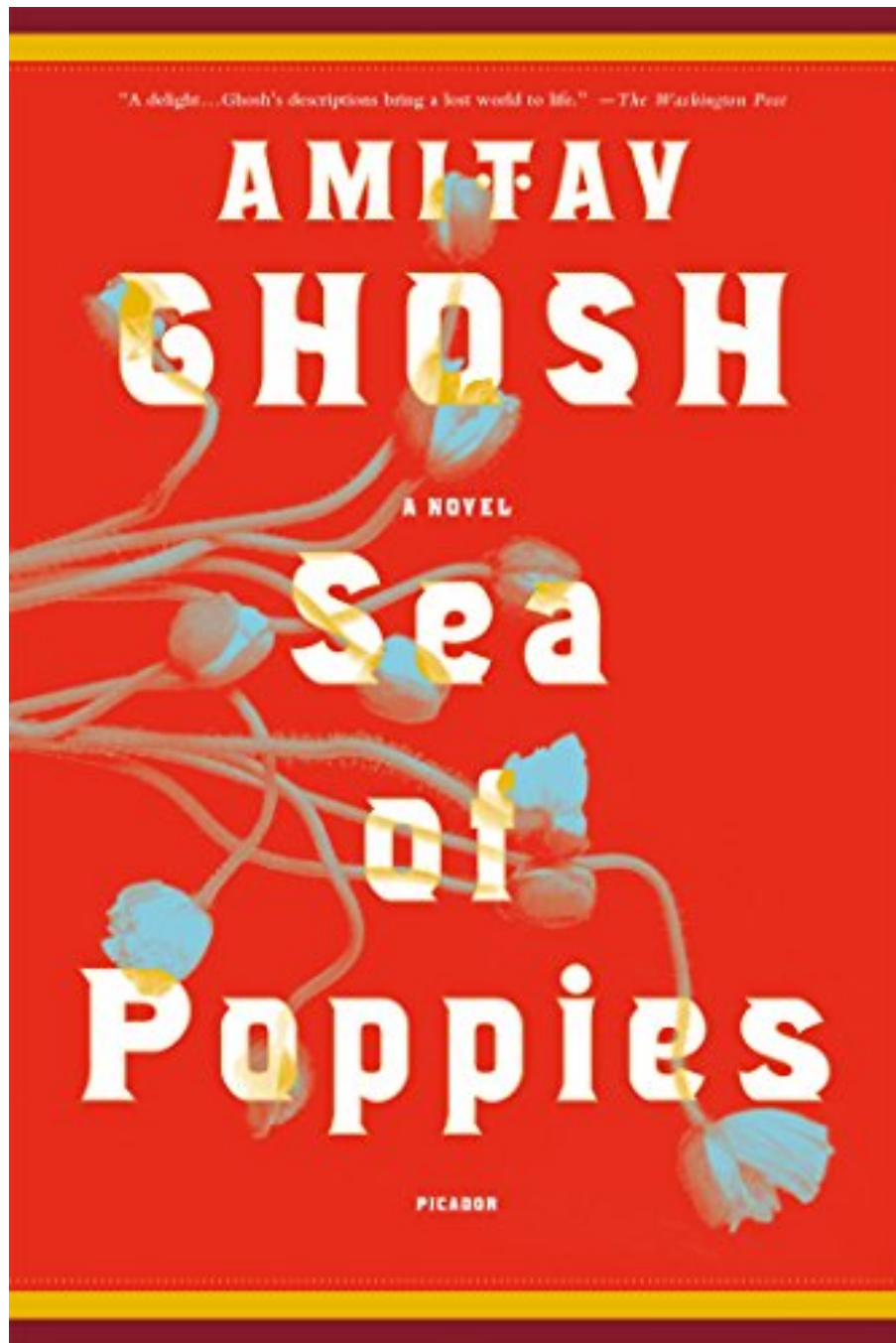


SEA OF POPPIES: A NOVEL (THE IBIS TRILOGY) BY AMITAV GHOSH



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From Publishers Weekly

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From The New Yorker

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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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Most helpful customer reviews

157 of 165 people found the following review helpful.

a magnificent historical epic

By Aleksandra Nita-Lazar

When the former slaving ship, the Ibis, sails off from America to India, Zachary Reid enlists as a ship's carpenter to escape his American fate as a son of a freed slave girl and her master. Little does he know, how much his life will actually be transformed by this decision...

The year is 1838, and Asia is on the eve of the Opium Wars. The fates of several people become intertwined, as they make their way onto the Ibis. Deeti is a peasant who grows crops of opium, and a wife of the opium factory worker, addicted to the drug. When her husband dies, grey-eyed Deeti has to escape the attention of her vicious brother-in-law. Her only idea is the sati - but unexpectedly, she is snatched from the funeral pyre and becomes an outcast together with her savior, Kalua, the village strongman from the caste of untouchables. They decide to become indentured workers ("coolies") and seek their happiness in the Mauritius. Paulette Lambert, the daughter of a French botanist, is orphaned and cannot bear the strange behavior of Mr Burnham (who happens to be the owner of Ibis), and his family, when he takes her under his protective roof. Neel Rattan, the Raja, finds himself unable to adjust to the changing ways of the colonial world, and, bankrupt, is sent to exile. In jail, he meets the half-Chinese Ah Fatt, convicted for robbery. Baboo Nob Kissin (the funniest and probably the most tragic of the main characters), the company's accountant, filled with religious spirit, is overcome by the need of establishing a shrine. All of these original, hilarious characters come to see the overseas trip as an escape. And so their journey is the new beginning.

Amitav Ghosh wrote a great, magnificent, epic novel, a beautiful, complex story revolving around central characters, original and colorful, a great choice of the representatives of the nineteenth-century society in colonial Asia. There are also many great secondary characters (the ship's first mate, Jack Crowle; Jodu, the peasant turned lascar; Serang Ali - the lascar's boss with the gloomy past; the flirtatious girl Munia; and many others), who add a lot of flavor.

The historical details are thoroughly researched - for me, coming from Europe and ignorant of the most part of Asian history, it was a great lesson. The global problems tackled by the author, colonial politics, wars, caste and race, remain significant even today. The geography and landscape descriptions, from India, Calcutta, Mauritius (real and imaginary) to the Sundarbans, one of Ghosh's favorite locations, are also alluring.

The incredibly rich language adds the whole other dimension to the novel. I have to admit that at the beginning the linguistic peculiarities characteristic for each character made the novel difficult to read and I needed to adjust for a while. The sea pidgin, Bengali, Hindi and other dialects of India incorporated into English, with some French added on top of all that, create a unique mix of idiolects. There is a lovely bonus at the end in a form of meticulously done appendix containing Neel's dictionary of sea pidgin, called Chrestomathy.

Fate also plays an essential part in this novel - there are characters, like Deeti, who has a vision of the Ibis, or Baboo Nob Kissin, obsessively devoted to Krishna and his female guru so that he sees signs and omens everywhere, who follow their fate, and there are those who try to run away or do not believe in it... It is intriguing to observe how the fate is present in everyone's story.

I loved the flow of this novel and was completely immersed in the plot, so that I laughed loud at Baboo Nob Kissin and could not repress melancholy and anger when I read some passages. If I could compare it to any other book, it would probably be Barth's "The Sot-Weed Factor" - a picaresque novel of the sea and sailors, which, although set in a very different point in time and space, came to my mind when I was reading "Sea of Poppies".

The open ending left me a little disappointed, because I yearned to know more about the fates of the characters I got to know so well. Therefore, I was very happy to learn that "Sea of Poppies" is the first novel of the planned "Ibis" trilogy. I will await the second one impatiently, hoping that the author can keep up with the first one and will not disappoint the readers!

72 of 78 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars if Part I; Three if a Stand-Alone

By Richard Wells

It's good to hear (though it's unconfirmed,) that "Sea of Poppies," is part one of a projected trilogy, because although it's a beautifully styled (I'd say extravagantly written,) completely engaging, well researched work of historical fiction, it closes without a satisfactory end. Three stars as a stand-alone, (despite its many merits, and because of the ending;) five stars if it is, indeed, installment one.

Beautifully styled - extravagantly written. I've not read other works by Amitav Ghosh, so I'm not familiar with his stylistic strategies, but "The Sea of Poppies," is written with the love of language I've come to expect from Indian novelists. Mr. Ghosh has captured both the English and the "Hing-lish," of the Victorian Age, and enriched it with a delightful and descriptive patois and pidgin. I don't know how much Mr. Ghosh has invented whole cloth, and how much is a result of research, but it's hugely entertaining, and perhaps near genius. Yes, it does leave you slightly at sea in terms of full understanding, but I find that to be part of the charm. (I've nodded my head in befuddlement in many countries.) It reminds me of the language recorded in the Booker Prize winning, "Sacred Hunger" by Barry Unsworth, another beautifully written novel about fretful times.

Well researched. Even as a student of India, the scenes and details of "The Sea of Poppies," were new to me. Village life, city life; the tics, prejudices, and beliefs of the hoi polloi as well as the ruling classes; the facts and lore of the opium trade, the merchant life, and life at sea are all well limned and thoroughly convincing -

and enchanting, though not in the whimsical sense that word is usually employed to describe. The description of a walk through an opium refining plant is worth the price of admission. Mr Ghosh engages all the readers' senses in his detailed portrayals of character as well as location. You can smell the ship, "Ibis," not pleasant, but...

Totally engaging. I can't say as I experienced a dull moment. It's a romance, an adventure, a history all combined with a colorful cast of characters and exotic settings.

43 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

"If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it."

By Mary Whipple

(4.5 stars) When the Ibis, a "blackbirder," leaves Calcutta and sets out across the Bay of Bengal carrying "indentured migrants," the seas darken and become stormy. As the ship tosses and conditions deteriorate, the ship becomes a microcosm for life on land, full of tumult and unexpected twists of fate, as each person's heart is laid bare. Everybody aboard is escaping from something, so anxious to put their problems behind them that they see no choice but to submit to the atrocious living conditions and sometimes sadistic overseers.

Set in India in 1838, at the outset of the three-year Opium War between the British and the Chinese, this epic novel follows several characters from different levels of society who become united through their personal lives aboard the ship and, more generally, through their connections to the opium and slave trades. Deeti Singh, married as a young teenager to a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband and provider, is forced to work on the family's opium field outside Ghazipur by herself, though she fears her sadistic brother-in-law. Zachary Reid, a young sailor from Baltimore has left America because his status as an octoroon has led to constant harassment by other American sailors.

At the opposite end of the scale is Benjamin Burnham, who owns the Ibis and engages in the opium trade. Formerly a slave trader, Burnham now transports exiled prisoners and coolies, and he has acquired enormous wealth and a lavish lifestyle impossible for him in England. Among his acquaintances is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the zemindar of Raskali, who, accustomed to the unimaginable opulence that upper caste Brahmins assume is their right by birth, has paid little attention to his dwindling resources, and he has now accumulated debts.

Ghosh depicts the lives of these characters and their acquaintances in extravagant and thoroughly researched detail, bringing to life Deeti's misery, the expectations for her within her husband's family, and the customs which she must honor, for example. He fully describes buildings, their contents, bath facilities, dining customs, religious practices, the inside of a slave ship, and even the importance of omens, but he never forgets his obligation as a story-teller, continuously presenting one highly dramatic moment after another. Stories of piracy and cruelty, often growing out of the opium trade, exist side by side with more personal stories of love and nobility. Ghosh's use of local patois creates a rich and colorful atmosphere, and episodes of humor live side by side with episodes of terror. The first book in a projected "Ibis trilogy," this historical novel pulses with life, and as the novel comes to a satisfying close, Ghosh keeps several doors open, suggesting the direction he will take with this novel's sequel. n Mary Whipple

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