

Sail Into the Mystic

Trading poppies in Asia, 19th-century style

SEA OF POPPIES, fiction by Amitav Ghosh. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008. Hardcover, \$26.

When I finished the last line of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, I flipped through the pages, swore and yelled, "No! This can't be the end!"

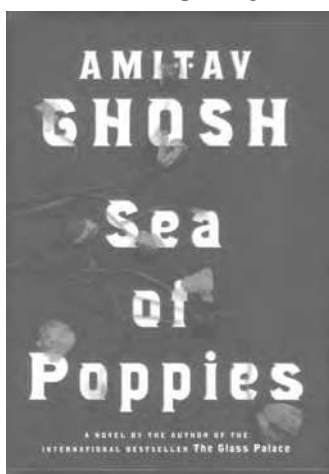
Where was the rest? Was publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux deliberately teasing me by ripping a vital piece from the advance reader's copy? Did I somehow get the one defective book in the print run? Argh!

Misplaced anguish, as it turns out. *Sea of Poppies* ends with a rain-and-blood-drenched dramatic flight into the unknown, true. But that flight is hardly the conclusion to Ghosh's symphonic tale, merely the flourishing final note of a first movement. To switch metaphors for a moment, Ghosh's massive and colorful scenes demand more than one huge canvas. But he sets up the trilogy well in *Poppies*, creating a tale filled with lively characters and language some distance beyond lively.

Then there's the plot, with the action

set in 1838 just before the British went to war in order to force China to buy the opium grown in British-controlled India.

From servant to opium farmer, from a Raja destroyed by a British kangaroo court to the destitute daughter of a French naturalist, the vivid characters converge upon a ship, the *Ibis*. The image of the ship begins and ends the book (yes, Ghosh has something of Joseph Conrad in mind). The *Ibis* serves as the fulcrum



around which the varied strands of the plot turn, and once everyone's aboard, the ship intensifies the stresses and strains of societies at war both without and within.

The *Ibis* had been retrofitted from a slave ship to a cargo ship, but during the novel it turns back into a carrier of humans — indentured Indians bound for work in Mauritius. That means second mate, Zachary, the light-skinned son of a freed slave from Baltimore, faces complex situations in which his race and his educated bearing mix to form a potent brew of confusion about right action.

The book might seem historical. After all, it's set in 1838. When the trilogy becomes an epic movie or three, scenes of forced poppy farming and horrifying opium factories might crowd out even the overriding darkness that comes belowdecks on the *Ibis*. But the sea of poppies (and the flowers' products) proves just as current as a dinner party scene in which British men

discuss their justifications for going to war and make predictions about the speed and ease of victory.

Ghosh mentioned in an NPR interview that most of the words he uses can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but he's clearly aware that many readers won't understand some passages that mix English, Portuguese, Hindi, Yemeni and everything else that made up the language of the sea during the 19th century. Readers might glide over those bits, but they shouldn't miss the postmodern glory of a glossary of sorts (*The Ibis Chrestomathy*) that follows the acknowledgements. The secrets hinted at and sometimes revealed there served to slake my thirst for more story — and to stoke the fires of anticipation for Ghosh's next installment. **EW**

Amitav Ghosh reads from Sea of Poppies at 8 pm Thursday, Nov. 13, at Powell's on Hawthorne in Portland.

BOOK NOTES

Poets **Matthew Dickman** (*Dismantling the Hills*) and **Michael McGriff** (*All American Poem*) read, 8 pm 11/13, Knight Library, UO. **Jordan Paust** and **Marjorie Cohn** discuss *Beyond the Law & Cowboy Republic: Six Ways the Bush Gang Has Defied the Law*, 2:30 pm 11/14, 175 Knight Law, UO. **Maryrose Larkin**, **David Abel** and **Eric Matchett** read, 7:30 pm 11/15, DIVA. Sliding scale. Contributors to *Walking Bridges Using Poetry as a Compass* read, 7 pm 11/15, Newport Visual Arts Center. \$5. **Bob Welch** interviews **Sgt. Don Malarkey** about *Easy Company Soldier: The Legendary Battles of a Sergeant from World War II's "Band of Brothers,"* 2 pm 11/16, Barnes & Noble. **Amit Goswami** discusses *God Is Not Dead* and *Creative Evolution*, 7 pm 11/17, Gerlinger Lounge, UO. Poets **John Witte** and **Stephanie Lenox** read, 7 pm 11/18, Downtown Library. **Jan Eliot** discusses *This Might Not Be Pretty*, 7 pm 11/18, Springfield Public Library, and 2 pm 11/19, UO Bookstore.

Above the Fray: Traditional Hilltribe Art
Pre-Holiday Trunk Sale

Saturday, Nov. 15: 11 AM - 4 PM
 Sunday, Nov. 16: 11 AM - 4 PM
 2141 Crest Drive (Chambers south to Crest, right 1/4 mi.)

We're just back from the hills of Laos and Vietnam with a STUNNING selection of authentic shaman cloths and other hand-woven silks and hand-crafted wares, many direct from the artist.

Silk wall-hangings, shawls and scarves
 Baskets • Jewelry • Unique decorative art
 485-9386 www.hilltribeart.com

3% of sales go to MAG-Laos to eliminate unexploded bombs

Mister Whiteaker
CONTEST!

TALENT!
 SWIMWEAR!
 EVENINGWEAR!

SATURDAY, Nov 15TH 8:00 PM
 \$5 ADMISSION, 21 & OVER

WANDERING GOAT COFFEE CO.
 268 MADISON ST. 541-344-5161

Manola's
 Thai Cuisine

GOURMET THAI FOOD

OUR WINTER DISHES;
 THOM KAA COCONUT SOUP
 THOM YUM RICE NOODLE
 TOFU SEAWEED SOUP
 SWEET PUMPKIN CURRY
 TOFU TEMPEH & BROWN RICE

BEER WINE & COCKTAILS
 NO MSG OR DAIRY

WE DELIVER TO MOST OF EUGENE
 652 E. BROADWAY
 342-6666 MANOLASTHAI.COM

Sunrise
 Asian Food Market

Largest Selection of Asian Groceries
 Seaweed, rice, noodles, frozen products, deli, snacks, drinks, sauces, spices, produce, housewares, and more.

We carry groceries from Holland, India, Pakistan and Polynesia
 Sushi & Asian deli take-out

Woodfield Station SHOPPING CENTER
 29TH AVENUE

WILLAMETTE STREET
 OAK STREET

Sunrise

www.sunriseasianfood.com
 M-Th 9am-7pm • F 9am-8pm • Sa 9am-7pm • Su 10am-6pm
 70 W. 29th Ave. Eugene • 541-343-3295

New UK Shipment Has Arrived

A Taste
 Gourmet
 Bistros & Catering

Christmas Crackers & Puddings
 Walkers
 Thorntons
 Uncle Joes
 Hob Nobs
 Custard Cremes
 Stilton in Cocks
 Lemon Curd
 Tea Towels
 Gifts and More!

988-2580
 270 West 6th Avenue
 Junction City, OR
www.tastegourmet.com