

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

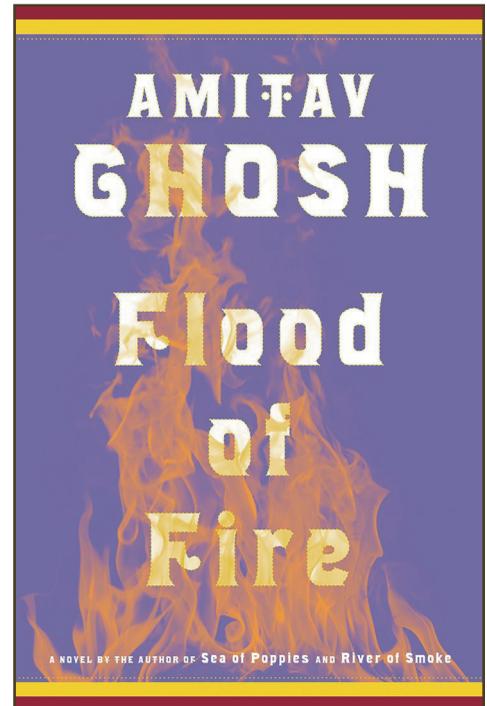
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Flood of Fire

A Novel

Book 3 in the Ibis Trilogy

by **Amitav Ghosh**



ISBN: 978-0-374-17424-8 / 624 pages

The final novel in the bestselling Ibis trilogy, *Flood of Fire* transports us to the culminating moment in Britain's opium trade. Shifting the point of view from the star-crossed characters at the helm of the previous two Ibis books, the acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh now turns to Kesri Singh, Deeti's brother, an ambitious soldier in the army of the East India Company; Mrs. Burnham, who emerges as a calculating, passionate force, determined to root out Zachary Reid's darkest secrets; and Shireen Modi, Bahram's grieving yet world-wise widow. Opening in 1839, just as China has embargoed the trade of opium, the novel draws its mesmerizing cast into a finely woven web as the British Foreign Secretary orders the colonial government in India to participate in an attack on China, determined to reinstate the sale of the lucrative but potentially devastating narcotic. Sailing from Bengal to Hong Kong, Kesri makes his way eastward on the *Hind*—a transport ship owned by Mr. Burnham—and charts a course through history.

By turns tragicomic and enchanting, *Flood of Fire* completes Ghosh's unprecedented reenvisioning of the nineteenth-century war on drugs. We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's experience of this stunningly vibrant novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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?

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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 Fire* presents 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 nineteenth-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?

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PRAISE FOR *FLOOD OF FIRE*

“*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.” —Allan Massie, *The Scotsman*

“Ghosh’s story roars along, constantly flipping between high seriousness and low humour . . . Ghosh sketches the larger sweep of history. He marshals the language of tiny details, from naval and military terminology to food and clothes and interiors, from boudoir to battlefield, in order to bolster our sense of how enormous and wide-ranging were the effects of this period of history, and of the unforgiving, brutalising opium trade in particular, how greatly it shaped international relations, communities and patterns of migration.” —Alex Clark, *The Guardian*

“It is a testimony to Ghosh’s great skills that he can both teach us history and create believable fictional characters . . . What makes Ghosh’s characters come alive all the more is the use of language.” —Mihir Bose, *The Independent*

“Ghosh’s scrupulous depiction of army life is just one part of this tour de force of historical description. Together, the novels are a weighty and precious chronicle of those times, a compendium of lost habits, languages and attitudes . . . *Flood of Fire* is all action [and] has all the romance, subterfuge and ingenious plotting to keep Ghosh’s audience firmly lagowed. But it is the integrity of his historical vision that will ensure his books outlast other literary dumbpokes.” —Alice Albinia, *Financial Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He grew up in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India. Ghosh studied at the Universities of Delhi and Oxford and published the first of his eight novels, *The Circle of Reason*, in 1986. He divides his time between Kolkata and Goa, India, and Brooklyn. The first novel in the Ibis Trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, and Ghosh was a finalist for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize. For more information, visit www.amitavghosh.com.

Guide written by Amy Clements