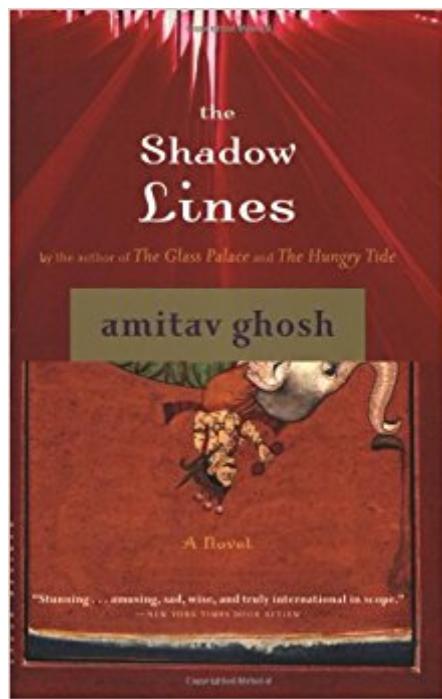


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The Shadow Lines: A Novel



Synopsis

From the acclaimed author of *Sea of Poppies*, a novel weaving history and memory together to create a rare work that balances formal ingenuity, heart, and mind • (New Republic) Opening in Calcutta in the 1960s, Amitav Ghosh's radiant second novel follows two families—“one English, one Bengali” as their lives intertwine in tragic and comic ways. The narrator, Indian born and English educated, traces events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of World War II to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali partition and violence, observing the ways in which political events invade private lives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The Shadow Lines” by Amitav Ghosh was written when the homes of the Sikhs were still smoldering, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh’s treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, more than ten years after its publication. What has happened recently in Kosovo and in East Timor show that answers still evade the questions, which Ghosh poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines, which divide nations, people, and families. The story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present

mainly in the shadows they cast. There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus the going away - the title of the first section of the novel - becomes coming home - the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama Boris Godonow. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere.

The new Indian English fiction of the eighties is free from the self-consciousness, shallow idealism, and sentimentalism that characterised the work of the older generation of novelists such as Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand who started writing in the thirties. The fiction of the eighties takes a maturer view of Indian reality. There is freshness and vitality and the writers betray remarkable confidence in tackling new themes, and experiment with new techniques and approaches to handle those themes. Amitav Ghosh, whose first novel, The Circle of Reason appeared in 1986, has strengthened the new English novel in more than one way. The Shadow Lines takes us into the mnemonic fund of a young narrator who as a wide-eyed adolescent hero-worshipped Tridib, an uncle, who fed him on his memories of his one visit to London during the war; and his grandmother who shared with him her nostalgic memories of East Bengal where she was born and spent her childhood. And then there is Ila (his cousin, for whom he nurtures a secret passion), who travels all over the world with her diplomat glob-trotting parents and occasionally comes home to tell a wonderstruck boy accounts of her peregrinations abroad. Their memories "form a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I know the keys and coordinates, but which was not for that reason any more imaginary than the code of a safe to a banker." From the three whose memories form his own consciousness, he learns to see in different ways. Ila sees much but experiences little. With her superficial response to life, she only remembers how one airport differed from the other by its less or more conveniently located ladies'.

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