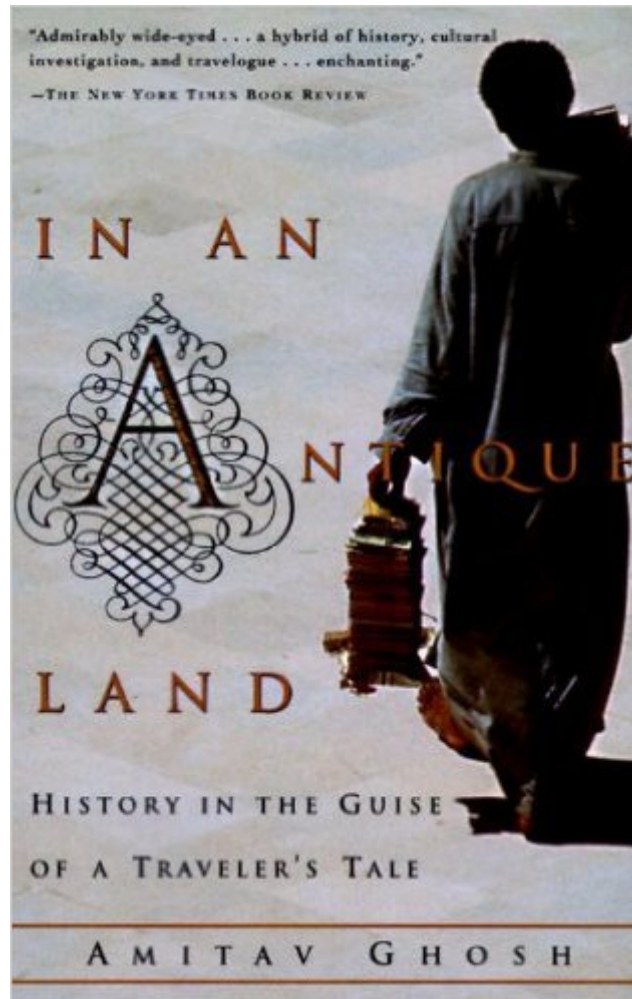


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In An Antique Land: History In The Guise Of A Traveler's Tale



Synopsis

In an Antique Land is a brilliant hybrid, a subversive history in the guise of a traveller's tale. It tells the story of two Indians in Egypt. The first was a twelfth-century slave; the second is Amitav Ghosh, who stumbled upon the slave in the margins of letters that were written by the slave's master. His curiosity piqued - even ill-defined, the slave's presence in the records of medieval history was completely out of the ordinary - Ghosh journeyed to Egypt in 1980 to try to fill in the details of the slave's life. His search - which would last for ten years - began in a tiny village two hours from Alexandria where Ghosh found himself among people for whom 'the world outside was still replete with wonders of the unknown.' There was Abu-Ali, his gargantuan landlord; Khamees the Rat, the beady-eyed local wit; his adversary, the Imam; Zaghloul the weaver (once so obsessed with a girl that he spent his nights kneeling outside her window to listen to the sound of her breathing); and young, quiet Nabeel, who would be left stranded in Baghdad at the outset of the Gulf War. These were zealous Muslims who found him, a Hindu, fascinating but utterly incomprehensible. Yet they willingly became his guides as he sifted through fact and conjecture, piecing together the slave's journey from India to Egypt. Ghosh discovered an 'elusive and mysterious acquaintance' in the slave, with whom he seemed to share, across eight hundred years, the experience of dislocation, and who seemed to have given him 'a right to be there, a sense of entitlement.' And, moving between the present and the ancient past, between his own life and the slave's, Ghosh creates an exuberant multi-layered narrative, rich in detail and anecdote, that affords us not only an inkling of the slave's life, but also a unique understanding of the private life of the world that both he and the author came to inhabit.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read *IN AN ANTIQUE LAND* because I greatly admire Amitav Ghosh's novels, and wanted to read more of him. As the reader quickly discovers, Ghosh in this book works with three narratives. One is a 'detective' story, albeit in the most scholarly of veins. As a student Ghosh recounts how he came across a reference -- one line -- to an Indian slave who worked for a Jewish master, Abraham ben Yiju. Who was this most marginal of historical personages, whose name emerges -- the time is 1148 AD -- "when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and sultans, the chroniclers and the priests -- the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time...the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved." The detective search for more information on the slave, his owner, the world they both inhabited, leads Ghosh to Geniza of Cairo, a storehouse of Jewish documents which miraculously survived the destruction that seems to be the fate of most paper over the course of many centuries. The documents are themselves a diaspora in miniature: none remain in Egypt, being dispersed to St. Petersburg, Oxford, Cambridge, Philadelphia...and yet the book recounts how Ghosh tracks them down. The second narrative requires Ghosh's novelistic gifts, as he attempts to reconstruct, from mere shreds of evidence, the life of Abraham and his slave.

Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* is a hidden history of India and Egypt during the 12th century in the guise of a traveler's tale. Amitav accidentally stumbled upon some letters of correspondence between Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant living in India, and Khalaf ibn Ishaq from Egypt in 1132. In the margins of these letters Ben Yiju's slave Bomma was often mentioned in passing with a special note of affection. No sooner had Amitav discovered about Bomma than he, out of volition, ventured out to Egypt, sifted through fact and conjecture, through a large number of letters and manuscripts referring to the trade between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, piecing together Bomma's journey from India to Egypt. In 1980, Amitav arrived in Egypt and over a span of five years he stayed in the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy. While Amitav diligently tried to fill in the details of the slave's life, whose record in medieval history was completely out of the ordinary, he befriended with enthusiastic Muslims who found him fascinating but incomprehensible. Amitav's landlord, Abu-Ali, was an obese, inimical, petulant man who was diligent in exploiting all moneymaking

possibilities of his strategically located house. Shaikh Musa, who referred Abu-Ali obliquely to his avarice and acrimony, always watched out for Amitav and cautioned him to evade certain people in the village. Ustaz Sabry, a well-read history scholar who taught in Nashawy, and his students Nabeel, who aspired to work in the government but left stranded in Baghdad, Iraq at the outset of the Gulf War, cultivated with Amitav a friendship that later proven to be indomitable. Amitav did not always meet the usual hospitality.

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