



The Opium Clerk

Kunal Basu

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Hiran is born in 1857—the year of the Mutiny and the year his father dies. Brought to Calcutta by his widowed mother, he has few talents apart from an uncanny ability to read a man's lies in his palm. When luck gets him a job at an auction house, Hiran finds himself embroiled in a mysterious trade and in the affairs of his nefarious superior, Mr. Jonathan Crabbe, and his opium-addicted wife.

The Opium Clerk Details

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From Reader Review The Opium Clerk for online ebook

Lindsay says

I love historical fictions and I really wanted to like this book more than I did, but something about the prose made it very difficult to get into and find rhythm in the reading. The descriptions were always wonderful, but I felt disconnected from the characters and I think it had a lot to do with the way it was written. It wasn't a bad book by any stretch of the imagination, but it just wasn't one that drew me in.

Cameron says

Quite dreamy. A good read.

Marnie says

this book was OK...I was confused a lot of the time and I kept waiting for *something* to happen. there were huge time leaps that added to the confusion. I was hoping this would help me bide my time till the 2nd book in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy arrives, but this book pales by comparison.

Praveen Palakkazhi says

A potentially fascinating story of the Opium trade in the British controlled Empire and that of the unwitting Hiran who gets caught up in it while performing duties at the 'Auction House'. However, the frustratingly languorous prose is almost sleep inducing at times and it seemed the author may have written it while under an Opium induced haze himself. Yes, there are some poetically great descriptions here and there, but as a novel it completely failed to give me a sense of place or urgency in the story and characters. A pity, since the subject held so much of promise.

Rakhi Anil says

Very boring. Stopped reading after a few pages.

Luce Cronin says

This is definitely not a book for the linear thinker. A book about the opium trade out of India, it creates in the reader the feeling of being in some kind of dream, where events are disconnected and not understood. Unless you have some knowledge of the history of the opium trade and India in this period, you might become lost in this novel. Very well written, with the main character, Hiran, being passive and baffled by the English

presence in India, a reflection of Indian society at that period.

Molly says

This book was incredibly difficult to follow, and even more difficult to get into. It was like a dream sequence with random pacing in the passage of time, confusing flashbacks/forwards, and a lack of a cohesive plot. There was some history I knew nothing about (knowing little to nothing about India) and many words that I didn't know although they ended up being used frequently due to the locations of the story. I'm not sure I would recommend this to anyone. I don't know if it was translated, but perhaps if it was there was a great deal lost in translation.

Naheed Hassan says

The book begins with a bang and the story and setting are set impressively. But then, sadly, the author the narrative and the hero, get lost in the offices of the opium exporting emporium and lose their way - and the readers interest.

Sundarraaj Kaushik says

The book is based during the era when the flourishing opium trade, carried on by the Britishers from India with China was coming to an end.

The book is about a Bengali Brahmin boy, Hiranyagarbha or Hiran who has lost his father, joins as a clerk in the opium exporting office. One of his friends Vinny is an offspring of a British officer and a Vietnamese lady. Vinny introduces him to the politics that dominate the Opium export office. He is asked to teach Sanskrit texts to the British Manager, Mr. Crabbe, to whom he reports.

During the course of these interactions, he has several interactions with the lady of the house, who is addicted to opium. He is sometimes joined during these interactions with the white man and the lady by a Parsee who also works at the opium export office.

One day Mr. Crabbe makes a strange request to Hiran asking him for a child that he could adopt. Hiran manages to get one for his manager. Soon he is asked to Canton. He sets sail for Canton. Vinny joins him. Vinny is hoping to get married to a Vietnamese girl identified for him by his mother.

In Canton the atmosphere is antagonistic towards the opium traders with only local smugglers interested in getting the opium to mainland China. Hiran manages to thrive in this atmosphere, thanks the credentials established for him by Mr. Crabbe. He manages to survive despite all odds and returns back with Mr. Crabbe to India.

Back in India it is found out that Mr. Crabbe has been amassing large sums of money by under reporting the export details. He is sent back to England. When he goes back he leaves the adopted child with Hiran. The society does not accept this fact easily and his mother finds it very difficult to accept the situation.

Soon the boy grows up and as per somebody's suggestion he is inducted into the opium office by Hiran. In the office, thanks to his colour, he is treated as a white man. The boy is accused of making a local girl pregnant and he is forced to leave for South East Asia. There too he finds a job in an opium export office. He settles down with a local kid as his attendant. He meets his boss's sister in a camp for lepers, run by an Indian priest and falls in love with her. They have a child, but they lose the child to illness and they emigrate to Canada.

The book ends there. Did not enjoy the book much.

Heather D-n says

A piece of historical fiction that highlights how important opium was to the British empire - they were exporting it from India to China. It also made me think about how the sea/colonies allowed British people (and perhaps also Indians) a place to escape the strictures of traditional society and remake themselves into anything they wanted to be. Perhaps some of this lives on in America.

Marvin Bernardo says

The words are beautifully arranged, even poetic at times. But this also becomes its flaw, the structure of the storyline suffers, insacrifice for poetic flow. Certain parts are confusingly told. In addition, the books becomes thinner at the end, meaning the story takes over the language.

Madeleine McLaughlin says

This is one good writer.

Randi says

This is one of this books that was slow going at first, but then I was sorry to leave it's world when it was over. Very richly drawn, I could picture the time and place of 19th century India.

Lisa says

A lovely book and I would say Basu is one of the most interesting authors currently writing about India. The prose is considered and things are explained through the action rather than as an aside or just straight up. This story follows the history of the opium trade from Calcutta at the time of the Uprising to China and Sarawak through the end of WW1. Interesting historical and cultural aspects really add to the book.
