

Andrew Jakabovics

Week 10-

I, too, read Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh subtitled his book "History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale." The traveler's tale is a common narrative structure and provides small vignettes oriented around place rather than a consistent theme. I would distinguish the traveler's tale from other literary/historical works that chronicle an individual who travels. Thus, while Joinville's *Life of Saint Louis* is a travelogue, it focuses on King Louis rather than the travels. That being said, Ghosh does relatively little traveling (other than the implied travel from India to Oxford to Egypt).

Nevertheless, in the modern era, given the relative ease with which we move from place to place, it should not be surprising that the genre has changed.

Is this "history"? Is this a primary source for the study of Egyptian culture in a time of great change? Is any of it true? What has been added to aid the narrative? Assuming for a moment that the prologue is entirely true, other than knowing that Ghosh became interested in MS H.6 and the slave ultimately identified as Bomma and went to Lataifa to study him, what else is factual from Ghosh's own story?

Interweaving a modern tale with an ancient one is an old literary framing device. That does not exclude historians from telling a compelling story using the device, but it leads one to suspect there is less that is factual than appears on the surface. Ghosh is, after all, a novelist. Should we assume that anything not sourced in an endnote is fiction? Is this book any more true than Eco, Perez-Reverte, or any one of the other excellent fiction authors who wrap their characters completely in the time period? Should those works be read as history or anthropology as well? (Has anyone read David Liss's excellent *A Conspiracy of Paper*?)

Ghosh tells a wonderful tale that draws on the methodologies sometimes employed by urban ethnographers in sociology and anthropology. One of the questions raised by the ethnographic method is the degree to which individuals' behaviors are modified by the presence of the ethnographer. Ghosh is open about the fact that he is an anthropologist. He generally limits his comments directly to what he observed rather than reports of other people's activities. Only over the course of the whole book does the villagers' context become apparent. For me, the response of the village to technological and social change was the most interesting (if not dispiriting) part of the book. I come back to the question of "truth." I by no means mind becoming engrossed in the fictional lives of characters, but I allow myself to do so consciously and suspend both my personal values and judgments as well as my critical eye when I do. If I read the book as fiction and come to find it's almost entirely true, my reaction to the characters is likely to change. Is Ghosh somewhat duplicitous in luring me into a sense of suspended judgment when I should have been more critical as a historian?