

Doctor Margaret's Sea Chest

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One of the joys of delving into a thick historical novel is the exposure to numerous period details, and in this book the author presents them in settings unfamiliar to many western readers: India in 1965 and 1856. Born in India and educated in Pakistan, England, and Canada, the author is familiar with the locations he describes and offers a uniquely global perspective as he weaves several different stories together revolving around India's fight for freedom from the British Empire.

Sharif, an Indian-born American doctor working in Delhi in the 1960s, is entrusted with the recently discovered sea chest of Margaret, an American doctor who worked in the Crimean war. Charged with locating Margaret's relatives and returning the unopened chest to them, Sharif spins a tale that alternates between excerpts from his grandfather's 1856 diary and Margaret's three journals originating from the 1840s. The narratives overlap and intertwine to depict a history filled with danger, love, and war.

The author's attention to detail is noteworthy, such as his description of Sharif's uncle's clothing: "He was dressed in the traditional Muslim Delhi style, in a white cotton shirt, a short, silk waistcoat, tight pyjama-type trousers, and a white topi." In the accompanying five-page glossary of common Indian terms, a topi is defined as "as cap shaped like a boat." Similarly, the author describes many of the physical features of the Wallace Estates, which Sharif and his wife visit by the shores of Lake Ontario. "The wrought-iron gates were open and we drove up a long, winding farm road to the mansion...The main building was a...rambling Victorian-type manor house, perched atop the brow of the Niagara Escarpment." Such carefully crafted details aid in vividly portraying the book's many different scenes.

The numerous time periods and locations could create a chaotic read. To the author's credit, however, smooth transitions and clear labeling assist readers in navigating their ways through the volume. In addition to his useful glossary, the author provides a helpful genealogy of the main families—the Wallaces, Barinowskys, and Sharifs. As the first volume of a planned trilogy, the Azadi Trilogy, the book is quite lengthy and is of an epic nature; readers must be prepared to invest a fair amount of time and effort. That said, the delight in gaining knowledge of India's history through interesting characters makes it well worth the while.

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