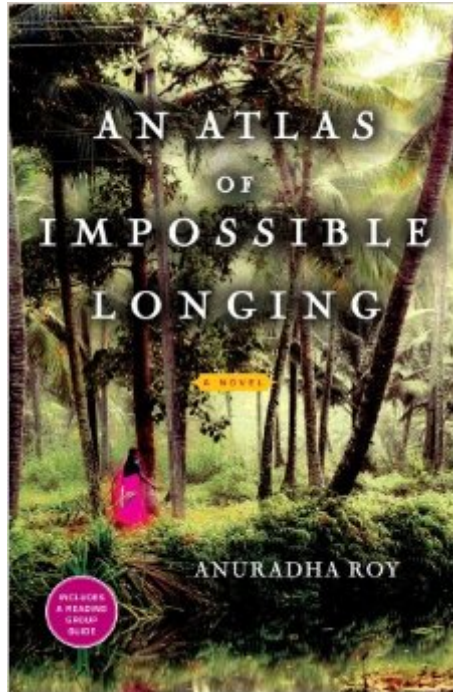


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An Atlas Of Impossible Longing: A Novel



Synopsis

“This is why we read fiction at all” • raves the Washington Post: Family life meets historical romance in this critically acclaimed, “gorgeous, sweeping novel” • (Ms Magazine) about two people who find each other when abandoned by everyone else, marking the signal American debut of an award-winning writer who richly deserves her international acclaim. On the outskirts of a small town in Bengal, a family lives in solitude in their vast new house. Here, lives intertwine and unravel. A widower struggles with his love for an unmarried cousin. Bakul, a motherless daughter, runs wild with Mukunda, an orphan of unknown caste adopted by the family. Confined in a room at the top of the house, a matriarch goes slowly mad; her husband searches for its cause as he shapes and reshapes his garden. As Mukunda and Bakul grow, their intense closeness matures into something else, and Mukunda is banished to Calcutta. He prospers in the turbulent years after Partition, but his thoughts stay with his home, with Bakul, with all that he has lost—and he knows that he must return.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Free Press; Reprint edition (April 5, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1451608624

ISBN-13: 978-1451608625

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars See all reviews (47 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #98,906 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Asian > Indian #295 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Australia & Oceania #330 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Cultural Heritage

Customer Reviews

An Atlas of Impossible Longing - The title of this book alone drew me in; that and I'm partial to books about India. This is a fine book on many levels and I was not disappointed. It's a multigenerational novel, a great love story, a cross-cultural learning experience, and a book about yearning, hope, loss, money and betrayal. It captures the big themes of life and does a great job of keeping the reader turning the pages. The story starts out in 1907 when Amulya takes his family from Calcutta to

Songarh, a small town on the edge of the jungle. He has a wife and two grown sons, along with one daughter-in law. He builds a house in the middle of nowhere. There are no other houses nearby except for one belonging to an English couple across the street. There is dirt, mud, the screech of monkeys and not much else. Kananbala, Amulya's wife, gradually loses her sanity from the loneliness and utters irrelevant profanities at the oddest times. Amulya confines Kananbala to her room so as to avoid embarrassment. There she languishes, for the most part alone and lonely. She takes to watching the comings and goings of the English couple across the street and is witness to a murder. Her interpretation of what she sees has a fascinating outcome. Amulya owns a spice factory where he concocts herbal remedies and perfumes that he sells. The language in Solgarh is Hindi whereas the language in Calcutta, where they came from is Bengali. Gradually, the family becomes fluent in Hindi but it is a struggle. While Amulya is alive, the factory does very well financially and the house he builds for his family is quite grand. As time progresses, Nirmal, the single son, takes a wife named Shanti.

It did not end the way I expected. And the last part is best in this modestly-paced novel of 20th century India. In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, publisher-writer Anuradha Roy (not to be confused with Arundati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things*) traces one family's dysfunction through three generations, offering up a tale of caste and ill-fated love and decaying houses. It begins with patriarch Amulya's decision to move from Calcutta to a small town in Bengal to build a stately home in the country (mining country, at that) for his large family. Then, as sometimes happens in novels about India these days (think *The Inheritance of Loss* or *A Fine Balance*) we witness the ravages wrought by a patriarchal culture and by the larger caste system as well. Women, bullied and battered by their solipsistic husbands, go slowly insane or act out maliciously toward socially inferior women. Boys are raised to be as self-absorbed as their fathers and girls to serve them well. Here we see the trickle down of such dysfunctional trends - both familial and cultural - while the 20th century trods on apace through partition and into the mid-50's. The children of turn-of-the-century mansion-builders unwittingly carry on these legacies as do their children in turn, if in subtler ways and with less reliable outcomes, as houses decay and nature slowly reclaims its jungles and rivers from the men who attempt to control it. (masculine pronoun used advisedly here) In the most recent generation of this particular family, caste-less and marooned orphans attempt to wrest their lives from the ravages of their pasts and their upbringings. But as the novel's title might suggest, their world does not go easy on them either.

Anurada Roy is one of my favorite authors, especially the multi-generational family stories she weaves so skillfully. "An Atlas" begins and ends with a grandiose house built near a river south of Calcutta that is threatening the foundations of the house with every monsoon. The main setting is the village of Songarh, the time is the early 1900's, and the place a small village built on a rocky plateau. Tribal people still live in the surrounding forest, and the patriarch of the Hindi family that settles there, Amulya, discovered the village on a business trip from Calcutta. Songarh spoke to him with its verdant valleys, primal forests, rolling hills and pleasant climate. With background in the pharmaceutical business, he develops the idea to set up a small factory in Songarh manufacturing perfumes and medicinal products from the abundant wild herbs, flowers and leaves that flourish in the area. The forest people know where to find many rare plants like wild hibiscus (the lovely red incarnata), fragrant flowers of the night, and a myriad of wild herbs. Songarh has an ancient past, going back to the time of the Buddha. There is an ancient, giant Banyan tree with its own tangle of aerial roots that he is said to have rested under on one of his journeys. There are collapsing walls of a medieval fort with a domed watchtower. English geologists have discovered and miners have dug deep mines yielding mica and coal leaving behind giant caves. Their settlements encroach on the natives' habitat to some degree, but Songarh still hovers close to the jungle, wild with leopards, tigers and jackals. Amulya hires a Scottish architect and builds a gigantic house (enough to grow a family in) outside of Songarh in scrubland and fields to distance himself from the town.

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