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God's Own Medicine; Books; Fiction

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THE OPIUM CLERK. Kunal Basu. 313pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £12.99. TLS £10.99. 1 861591 90 X.

As late as the eighteenth century, representatives of George III, seeking diplomatic and trade entente with China, had to return with polite messages of refusal to what the Chinese Emperor was pleased to call "the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea". China felt no desire for Western trinkets save silver; its Emperor, possessed of the Mandate of Heaven, sat at the centre of the world. In the next fifty years, opium, the insidious product of the bright poppy fields of India and Afghanistan, "dancing in the breeze like ballerinas in chiffon", was to change all that.

Kunal Basu's first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, does not delve into this history. It is set in a time when the opium trade was already well established, and the Middle Kingdom had been divided off in areas of influence among the British, French, Japanese, Russians and Portuguese. Its protagonist, Hiran, born during the 1857 Mutiny, on the day his priest father was crushed by galloping horses, is a clerk among the many handling the sea of paper that surges through the Auction House at Calcutta. This "posthumous child born in the year of calamity" is given to examining the lines on his palms as often as he gazes at the vast Hooghly flowing past his office window, and he is both a victim of these lines as well as their interpreter. A yearning seeded by a literate uncle and a mission-school education has drawn him away from priesthood and palmistry and placed him among the "gentoos" -Indians with Western clothes and bearing - with whom he witnesses the flow of the "mud" from the fields to the smoking pipes, taking pride in its superior quality and learning of its value to accountants and doctors.

The predictable pattern of his life is destroyed by his increasing proximity to his English superior, Jonathan Crabbe and Crabbe's opium- addicted wife. Troubled by the moans coming from the dark curtained-off rooms of her house, Hiran longs to bring her comfort. Ultimately, he is asked to pay the price of proximity and to procure a child for the couple, a fair-skinned orphan from a penal colony. Hiran then undertakes a voyage that takes the opium chests through cholera and sea storms -past Malacca, Macao and Hong Kong -to Canton, where he is caught in his superior's game of deception and counter-deception, corruption and connivance. He becomes an unlikely pawn in a rebellion, playing out a role that he hardly understands. Basu skilfully juxtaposes the brutality of public beheadings against visions of pure beauty, as Hiran travels to a distant village and finds an intriguing hint of a love that goes no further than a few letters.

On his return to Calcutta, corruption finally catches up with Crabbe, and he leaves India with his wife in disgrace, unceremoniously discarding the adopted child with Hiran, who gains thereby a cause to live for, to lengthen the line in the palm of his hand. The rest of the book is the story of the child, Douglas, who grows into a troubled soul, seeking his peace as a correct Customs officer in Sarawak, Borneo, and venting his occasional black moods among the "Dayaks, Chinese, Malays, Sikhs, Madrassesees, and the English -one hell of a large family".

The Opium Clerk is a first novel of rare assurance, imaginatively set and richly textured with tales that spin away into elliptical orbits. Basu's evocative descriptions conjure the magic and heartbreak of the East. This is the East of Pearl S. Buck and Somerset Maugham, inhabited by pirates and priests, prim teachers and buccaneer sailors, brave soldiers of fortune and devious conspirators. It is a phantasmagoric world, rich in stories, visions and dreams, not unlike those

inspired by the heinous drug itself. For the most part, Basu exploits the material fully, but halfway through the book, there is a sag in the plot and readers unfamiliar with the historical and political context may yearn for more clarity. Somewhat disappointingly, too, Hiran disappears for the last sixty pages, save for a passing reference at the end. But then, perhaps, it is not the story of Hiran or Douglas, but of God's Own Medicine. As Pinkie Perkyns, the gin-swilling dreamer of a customs officer in Sarawak says: "Opium is the real story. The others are mere distractions."