

Room to Read Book Group report by Kate Bailey

***Shadow Lines* by Amitav Gosh - 17 March 2021**

Book group members were divided on our response to this book - some found it very readable and moving, others said it was tedious and a struggle to finish. However, we all agreed that it generated an interesting Zoom discussion about borders, migrations, and family life in India after Partition.

The narrator is a pre-teens boy who is growing up in Calcutta, learning about life from his extended family, particularly his well-educated uncle Tridib, his self-centred cousin Ila, and his opinionated and manipulative grandmother. Shadow lines are everywhere in the background to this story; state boundaries that can't be seen on the ground; lines on maps that fail to respect existing societies and established cultures; family secrets that separate adults and children; wars, riots and violent events that cause people to be banished from their childhood homes.

We have all grown up with stories of the British in India (E.M. Forster etc.). This novel offers the opposing viewpoints of Indian people who are struggling with the aftermath of British rule. The anonymous narrator is a naive, often irritating child, and his descriptions of his family's friendship with the Price family in London tend to be sentimental and unconvincing. But the events at the end, when the earlier disappearance of his uncle Tridib is finally explained, mark his transition (across shadowy barriers) into adulthood.

Most of us agreed that Gosh's writing, language and storytelling abilities are enjoyable and entertaining, the 'sense of place' of Calcutta and Dhaka, and the 'flavour' of middle-class family life in India in the 1960's, are vividly portrayed and full of life. The grandmother Tha'mma keeps tight control of the extended family and is often scathing about her relatives, then becomes a more 'whimsical' character after her retirement as a head-teacher. Many of her stories, such as the sub-division of the family house to keep her father and his brother's families apart, are amusing and there are many perceptive and quotable phrases, 'learning the jungle-craft of gentility' for example.

The scores from the group were 2/3 out of 5 for 'would you recommend this book to a friend' and 4/4.5 out of 5 for 'would you recommend it to another book group'. All in all it was a rewarding U3A book group session, and we look forward to meeting again in April to discuss 'Mrs Bridge' by Evan S. Connell.