

Book Review

Read the following review. Answer the questions that follow by writing a few words. Base your answers on the information in the text.

***Journey to Ithaca* by Anita Desai**

Anita Desai, one of India's leading novelists, is the author of ten previous books, two of which, *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984), were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her excellent new novel, *Journey to Ithaca*, takes India itself—especially its status as holy grail to those seeking spiritual inspiration—as its subject.

In 1975, Sophie and Matteo, “having first married to pacify their tearful and lamenting parents, left for India, dressed in identical blue jeans and T-shirts and sports shoes, carrying identical rucksacks on their backs, as did so many of their generation in Europe”. But while Matteo is an absolute idealist, carrying Hesse's *The Journey to the East* in his pocket, Sophie is a blunt materialist. Their fundamental disagreement provides much of the novel's tension.

Dragged from guru to temple to *ashram* by her husband, Sophie's frustration reaches a peak when he finds inspiration in the shape of “the Mother”, an ageing guru by whom he becomes

obsessed. Sophie decides to go on a journey of her own: to investigate the Mother's past, believing that if she destroys the woman's enigma she can break the “spell” that Matteo is under and so save their marriage.

India is the novel's core, but Desai's scope is dazzlingly international. The action moves in time and space between contemporary Italy, Cairo, Paris and New York in the 1920s, as well as India. Sights, sounds and smells crowd the reader's imagination, as Desai conjures up the unique atmosphere—physical, political and social—of each place and period.

The complex narrative structure, with layers of flashback, quantum shifts of location, and recurrent imagery make this a book that repays re-reading. More importantly, Desai's exploration of the universal yearning for meaning in life is carried out with an intelligence, generosity and a total lack of pretension that make her book exceptional.



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- 1 What is true of Desai's novel?
 - A This is her most successful work yet
 - B This work is different than her others
 - C The reviewer has a positive attitude
 - D The sales have been poor outside India

 - 2 What was behind the young couple's decision to marry?

 - 3 In what way are the novel's main characters different?

 - 4 What can be said about the guru?
 - A She guides the characters on a journey
 - B She has a strong hold on one of the characters
 - C She is not what she seems to be
 - D She kidnaps one of the characters

 - 5 What word or phrase in the review tells us that the centre of the book is Indian society?

 - 6 How does Desai bring the reader into the different settings she uses?

 - 7 What, according to the reviewer, is one reason to read this novel?
 - A It portrays conflicts excitingly
 - B It has a universal appeal
 - C The realistic dialogue
 - D The nonlinear storytelling