



Dreams Of Rivers And Seas

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'For some time now, I have been plagued, perhaps blessed, by dreams of rivers and seas, dreams of water.' Just days after Albert James writes these lines to his son John, in London, he is dead. Abandoning a pretty girlfriend and the lab where he is completing his PhD, John flies to Delhi to join his mother in mourning. A brilliant and controversial anthropologist, the nature of Albert James's research, and the circumstances of his death, are far from clear. On top of this, John must confront his mother's coolness, and the strangeness of the cremation ceremony that she has organised for his father. No sooner is the body consigned to the flames than a journalist arrives, determined to write a biography of the dead man. The widow will have nothing to do with the project, yet seems incapable of keeping away from the journalist.

In Tim Parks's masterly new novel, India, with its vast strangeness, the density and intensity of its street life, its indifference to all distinctions between the religious and the secular, is a constant source of distraction to these westerners in search of clarity and identity. To John, the enigma of his father's dreams of rivers and seas appears to be one with the greater mystery of the country.

Dreams Of Rivers And Seas Details

Date : Published 2008 by Harvill Secker

ISBN : 9781846551130

Author : Tim Parks

Format : Paperback 448 pages

Genre : Cultural, India, Fiction, Travel, Anthropology, Abandoned

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From Reader Review Dreams Of Rivers And Seas for online ebook

Ann says

The story of a dysfunctional family of three: mother, father and son. Albert and Helen James have lived abroad for whole their professional lives. Their son, John, hasn't lived with them since he was old enough to go to boarding school. The book starts with the funeral of Albert, whose death, although he suffered from prostatic cancer is rather unexpected.

Helen is a doctor, whom has always worked in clinics all over the world for free. Albert started out as a doctor too but became gradually more interested in anthropology and especially in ways of communication, be it human or animal. It seems he started several interesting projects but somehow none of them ended in a scientific publication. It is all very unfocused.

Although he's interested in communication he seems unable to communicate with his wife and son.

Helen is also a bit weird. No wonder their son has his own problems in communicating.

Sanjay says

Tim Parks takes his novelistic gaze away from decadent Europe and brings us a story of overseas visitors in India. The central -- though absent -- presence here is that of Albert James, a discipline-crossing anthropologist. Albert dies of prostate cancer while in New Delhi and, following a phone call from his wife, Helen, their son John arrives from London for the funeral. Also in the mix is journalist Paul Roberts, long-time admirer of Albert, who hopes to persuade Helen to assent to his plan of writing a biography of her late husband. The pas de trois that now ensues is complicated a while later with the arrival of John's girlfriend, Elaine.

Parks spins a spider's web of ideas to do with the commonalities and differences in the ways which we interact and, as such, the novel also deals with more modern modes of communication such as text messages and e-mail. It's at times dense, at times unnecessarily drawn out, at times unnerving – and always absorbing.

Marc says

At first sight, this work seems to be very different from what Tim Parks previously published: no book-long, frenetic internal monologue of a middle-aged man, lost in life, but an initially rather traditional family story that is built up very slowly, against the exotic background of a chaotic India.

Two characters are central: Albert James, an anthropologist with initially great world fame but gradually lost in incomprehensible abstractions (Albert is conceived of the model of the equally elusive English social scientist Gregory Bateson); and his wife Helen, who seems to be his antipode: a rather cool nurse who works in a poor clinic in Delhi with great professionalism and commitment. In addition to these characters and their complex relationship, there are two secondary characters, namely Albert and Helen's son John and the American journalist Paul Roberts; they drive the story forward, in their efforts to get hold of Albert and Helen.

The novel begins with the announcement of Albert's death, but that's just the beginning of his brilliant career in this story, because Albert achieves his ultimate goal, namely becoming a "ghost": literally every character is haunted by him, in their attempts to capture what he actually meant for them and for the world. On almost every page we are confronted with a statement or note of Albert that seems to us (and to the characters) to be completely incomprehensible. Only very gradually, and after we have experienced a whirlwind of a story, the attentive reader gets some idea of what Albert James's message is, namely the futility of our attempts to capture reality. And even then, Parks deliberately remains unclear and so we're left in uncertainty.

That is perfectly illustrated when you read the reviews made on this novel, both in the newspapers and here at Goodreads: just about everyone gets something different from the story, and quite some people are very frustrated about the elusive character of the novel. I can really understand that, because that seems to me just what Parks meant to achieve. The key phrase, I think, the code to understand this story, is this one: *"indeed all functioning interrelationships, are thus predicated on falsifying systems of perception, interpretation and communication, of which the language in which this paper is written is but one."* That sounds very abstract, and it is indeed a typical pronunciation of Albert. In this novel Parks illustrates this statement in 2 story lines, resulting in many chaotic, hilarious and often grim scenes.

In a first storyline he focuses on Albert's anthropology and philosophy, and piecemeal tries to reconstruct Albert's efforts to get a take on reality. From the beginning it is clear that Albert quickly distanced himself from the typical Western approach, of objectivity and infinite dissection of things, because this does not succeed in captivating the soul of reality, and certainly not through such a fraudulent thing as language. Another proof of this is the jammed career of Albert's son John, who works in a top bio-medical laboratory and has to break millions of nuclei in the hope of making a futile step forward in science. But what's the alternative? Albert certainly explored a more holistic, oriental approach, focused on gestures and actions instead of language, and he did seemingly absurd experiments with a theater group of girls and boys. Fascinating, but - as Parks suggests - it appears that Albert at the end of his life realized that this also was a dead end. And so he chose - literally - to become fluid, liquid and elusive (hence "dreams of rivers and seas"), and "*dissolve without having a history*".

If you are still here with me, I would like to explore a second story line in which Parks illustrates Albert's statement that all systems of perception, interpretation and communication are misrepresenting. This is about the relational aspect of humanity. Parks looks very deep into the soul of his characters in this novel, and gives a very wry look at the problematic nature of relationships between people. Especially the close couplet Albert-Helen appears to be entangled in a corpse of suppressed and secretly-experienced emotionality and sexuality. Also, the relationship of son John with his mother Helen and with his girlfriend Elaine, and the American journalist Roberts with Helen seem almost equally wry and elusive. I cannot say much more about this without giving away a piece of the plot, except that Parks offers us some particularly crazy, swirling scenes, whose bitter aftertaste remains for a long time. The sweaty epilogue cannot flush away that taste. In this sense, this work does not differ from Parks' previous books.

Parks has been criticized for using the exotic Indian decor as a caricature to paint his tragedy. And it is true that again and again life in Delhi is presented as extremely chaotic, roaring, mysterious and irrational. I cannot really judge the extent to which he went too far, but for me, this alienating framework really works, because it perfectly illustrates the lost feeling of the characters in an elusive world.

To my mind, there are other weak elements in this novel. The very slow start for example. Or the caricature of the American journalist, especially in his sudden moral conversion. The same for Helen, who initially seems extremely cool and professional, but appears to be quite different. And I also had some difficulty with the sweet epilogue scene.

Whoever has read this review to the end (and I apologize for the length, it is just my way of trying to capture the reality of this novel) will notice that it is a very complex, rich novel, which requires a lot from the reader and may hold a great risk of frustration. I admit this is definitely not a perfect novel, but I'm sure that in some decades, we'll see this book as one of the more significant ones of the early 21st century.

Onaiza Khan says

Well honestly, I think the story is too long, unnecessary mention of each and every detail, that are mostly irrelevant. And as far as the story is concerned, it was too abstract and I did not like it at all

Maggie Roessler says

Albert James (based in part on Gregory Bateson) contributes his life to complex and meandering explorations of a postulated acultural network of systems that would underlie all (inter)actions. Within this network, speaking, playing, loving, eating, and dying all lose their surface significance. Activity flows away from individual contexts into ancient universal patterns.

This fluidity seeps into the minds and actions of all who survive him.

I kept waiting for it to be pointed out, that, while Albert devoted his life to describing water/fluidity, he himself was a stone. Note that he learned other languages quickly, yet always spoke with a strong English accent. He held back from his subjects, while working against the idea of independence. Unfortunately, that particular conflict remained unexplored.

Still, a very entertaining book with a satisfying ending.

Jacko Cabrera says

Me ha gustado, quizá se enmarañe demasiado en algunos tramos pero se deja leer. La historia del matrimonio James o, mejor dicho, del tramo final de su matrimonio y de como su hijo John afronta los acontecimientos es de esos relatos densos donde nada es lo que parece. Los buenos nunca lo fueron y los malos no eran tan malos. Las vidas de sus múltiples protagonistas se ven abocadas al cambio, obligadas por las circunstancias y por la poderosa presencia de un escenario caótico, a veces, apocalíptico, como son las calles de la vieja Delhi. El final, demasiado abierto para mi gusto es la razón por la que no le doy cuatro estrellas.

Dora Okeyo says

I expected a lot from this book. I'm sorry to say that I was disappointed.

The story follows the James' family. John gets a phone call from his mother who is in India telling him that his father is dead. His father, Albert James, is known as a researcher and what follows is John's attempt to make sense of it all.

First, John is spoilt, and comes off as the kid who is self entitled. He wants things to fall at his feet, and after his father's death, they don't. He is forced to find his own way because his mother is busy with her life, trying to move on by keeping her clinic running. Then comes a writer, Paul, who wants to write a biography of Albert, and he gets involved with John's mother, and slowly the story opens up about Albert.

I did not find John quite important to the story. It's true that of all the characters he seems to grow up before my eyes, but his foolishness and self entitlement made it seem as though his parents had lived for nothing. I would have enjoyed it more had he been slow to demand for money and attention from his mom and Elaine, it would have been more appealing.

But somewhere along the way, I did pick up on a few lines, like when Paul tells Elaine on pg 314, 'If people saw things coming, we wouldn't have any history, would we?'

When it comes down to it all, the one enigma in this story would be Helen, Albert's widow, because she did take with her so much about Albert, and I was left asking who John's real father was, and if indeed she was telling the story or just messing with us.

It's quite some tale, I can't quite describe it, but after finishing it, I didn't feel anything. It was as though nothing had happened in the past hours.

Jonathan says

I came across this novel whilst searching for works by Gregory Bateson on bookdepository.com and was intrigued by the notion of an anthropologist's world portrayed through the realm of fiction.

I wasn't necessarily expecting much but came out pleasantly surprised. The story, which follows the aftermath of Albert James's (based on Bateson) death, traverses the lives of his wife Helen James, their son John James, John's girlfriend Elaine, and a mystery American biographer named Paul.

What captured me most, was the way in which Parks beautifully illustrated the disparity between our inner thoughts and outer actions. Each character provides glimpses into the social situations that produced them, while leaving the readers imagination enough ambiguity to wander. Their interactions give life to the web of social connections that so fascinated Albert James. Its purpose is at once direct and detailed, yet aloof and obscure. Much like life.

The boundaries between the real and mystical briefly wear thin in places, alluding to the fragility of the social norms and conventions that order the chaos of our minds. This dynamic presents itself in Helen's ongoing conversations with her late husband, and in John's constant search for stability and emotional recognition. The cast of minor characters add colour and layers of complexity to an already bizarre situation.

Parks's portrayal of life in India is seen through the various protagonists eyes and reflects their own character traits as much as it does the external landscape. John, for example, sees much of the grime, superstition, and over-crowdedness that shape India as a threat to the stability he so avidly yearns for, while Paul begins to develop an affinity with the same surroundings, as well as the social situations he finds himself immersed in.

The undertones of sexuality, which weave their way through the book, are masterfully hinted at, often without ever fully being realised, adding tension, excitement and complexity to the emotional entanglements

that fill the books pages.

Immensely colourful, the intensity of the sights, sounds and smells of India progress in tangent with the main story, adding to its hysteria, as the various layers revealed throughout crescendo in a moment of fervour, capturing the synergy of life and death that pillar the book's themes and meanings.

I was left oddly unsatisfied with the finish, yet it on some level it almost felt like the denial of the ordered sequence of events I craved was the most adequate way to finish the story.

Claudia says

I read this book in German but couldn't find the German version on Goodreads.

The novel is very well written. The problem I had with it at first was the main character who comes across thoroughly annoying. After some time, however, one is drawn into this strange tale of a scientist who goes to India where his parents live after he receives news that his father has died. He tries to come to grips with his relationship to his father and also to his surviving mother who does not really want to talk about anything. Well, I won't recount the plot here.

The trouble is, I really can't tell you what it was that I liked about this book apart from its style. Part of it is a way of describing India that is not idealizing but more or less shockingly, drably realistic. Part of it is the psychology of the way being in India changes people (in this case, Europeans, one American).

Well: read for yourselves!

Georg says

I really loved Destiny and liked Judge Savage and enjoyed [Rapids:] and Cleaver, but Dreams of Rivers and Seas is a difficult one. A stupid young Englishman, his boring (but large-breasted) girl-friend, his strange mother, her late (and even stranger) husband and his obese biographer meet or don't meet or miss each other in New Delhi. Too strange, too self-centered and too dumb to talk and to listen. They are described as brilliant and well educated academics with a high IQ but their behaviour tells quite another story. Makes you nervous just to watch their moves and listen to their errors.

And even Tim Parks doesn't seem to understand this sad family.

Page 46: "It was a characteristic of all members of the James family that they would drop an argument in a matter of moments. Nobody ever said sorry."

Page 65: ""John!" Helen James was alarmed...
"I'm sorry," he said."

That is bad enough. But you would think the location had some meaning or impact to the story but it has not. It's worse. Indians in this book are prostitutes, drunks, clowns, sick and crazy people, servants, beggars or just people without their own characterization (in German: "egale Menschen"). The city itself is like you imagine

New Delhi in a children's book: Loud, rainy, hot, stormy, full of (dead) animals, shitting people everywhere, dust, sewers and filth.

Tadzio Koelb says

"Dreams of Rivers and Seas tells an engaging story. Immediately, the setting excites, the depiction brisk but vivid. (Indian critics may have something to say about the use of their country as a default backdrop to stories of European self-discovery, and I won't disagree – although in Tim Park's defence, it is Delhi's hyper-urbanism, rather than any supposedly innate spirituality, that matters here.) Albert James, like Nelson Denoon in Norman Rush's *Mating*, is a fascinating – if infuriatingly pompous – eccentric who thrives on being a white man abroad even as he challenges the system his status represents. His disrespect for convention is inspiring, his influence from beyond the grave unnerving. Geniuses are notoriously difficult characters to depict: if Adrian Leverkühn is the rare success, *Will Hunting* perhaps represents the sad average. Parks wisely avoids any direct encounters with his great man; instead he makes our instinct to venerate the dead serve as armature for a plausibly larger-than-life Albert James. "

From my review for the TLS.

Bookmaniac70 says

I liked the book less than I expected. There was not a single character in the novel that I might like at least a bit. Albert James seemed like an intriguing and extraordinary person at the beginning but the myth of his original philosophy and personality was shattered in the course of events. There is a general problem of communication between all the characters in the book, although they possess modern gadgets like SMS and email. The James family are a selfish and self-centered. They had more concern for the Third World and their brilliant ideas than for their own son.

John, on the other side, is confused. His life is devoid of purpose and direction. He needs money. He needs a stable relationship. He tries to reach his mother but she rejects every attempt of communication.

It's not a pleasant book. Its power lies in exposing a couple of people and revealing the lies behind the curtain of a family. I have to admit, this was very well done. So I'm going to look after other titles of Tim Parks.

Maarten says

This book got me hooked from page one, and kept me going like that till the end. It has a pace and a believability I always look for in a book. As the story progresses, so do the rivers of human connections and just like the monsoon storm in Delhi at the near end of the book, everything becomes unsettled, unclear, violent.

Communication is one of the main themes in the book, and it struck me how this is the first novel set in contemporary days that I read, where modern means of communication, like e-mail and text messages, are a completely natural part of the world of its characters. All the same, the characters remain largely a mystery to one another, practically unable to communicate clearly and honestly.

Nor do the characters know themselves at all. They question their own motives and what is going on in their lives. They take action but feel governed by currents not their own. They also try and fail to understand each other. But they totally come alive on the page. Tim Parks has a great mastery of language, of pace, of composing his sentences to full effect. All I can say is that this has been a great read that will linger in my mind for quite some time.

Anton Segers says

Een mindere Parks.

Valt tussen 2 stoelen: wie zich wil onderdompelen in Indië en Indiërs zal af en toe best geboeid zijn, maar dat wordt vaak doorkruist door de gevoelens en gedachten van westerlingen, personages die op zich te vaag ingevuld worden om mij als lezer te boeien.

Dat Parks kan schrijven houdt je aan de praat, maar inhoudelijk haak je op de duur af.

Anne says

Dislikeable characters, silly plot, quite unpleasant reading.
