

# Book Review

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*This is a book review. First read through the whole review once before you start with the tasks. In some answers you have to use words from the text; in other answers you may choose to use your own words. You need not write a complete sentence if you feel that a short phrase is enough.*

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## ***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 expression in the opening paragraph indicates that the novel is favourably reviewed?

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2 In what way are the novel's main characters described as different?

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

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4 What word is used to show that Matteo's feelings for "the Mother" are very strong?

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5 What expression indicates Sophie's feelings about Matteo's behaviour?

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6 What kind of information does Sophie hope to get by making a journey on her own?

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7 Find a phrase that expresses that the centre of the book is Indian society.

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8 What details does Desai use to create the unique atmosphere of a place?

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9 Quote one word that sums up Desai's method of telling the story.

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10 How is the central theme of the novel expressed in the final paragraph of the review?

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