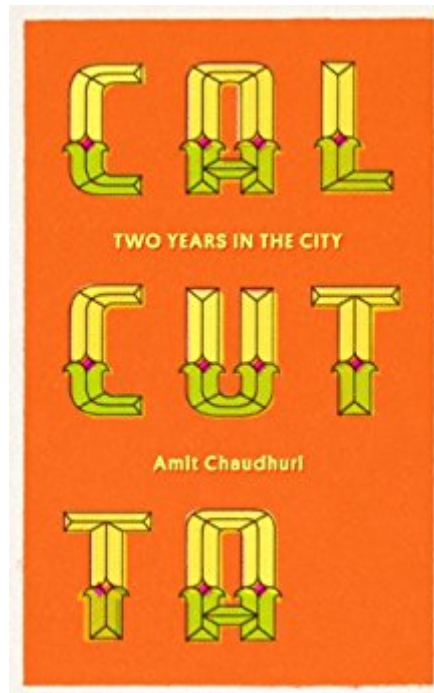




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Calcutta: Two Years In The City



Synopsis

In 1999, Amit Chaudhuri moved back to Calcutta, the city in which he was born. It was a place he had loved in his youth and the place he had made his name writing about. But upon his return he discovered that the Calcutta of his imagination had receded and another had taken its place. Lyrical, observant and profound, Calcutta is a personal account of two years (2009-2011) spent in one of the least known yet greatest cities of our time by one of our leading novelists. Using the historic elections of 2011 as a fulcrum, Chaudhuri looks back to the nineteenth century, when the city burst with a new vitality, and towards the twenty-first, when utterly changed it seems to be on the verge of another turn. Along the way he evokes all that is most particular and extraordinary. From the homeless and the working class to the old, declining haute bourgeois; from the new malls and hotels to old houses being destroyed by developers; from politicians on their way out to the city's fitful attempts to embrace globalisation, Calcutta brings a multifarious universe to life.

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Customer Reviews

First of all, Chaudhuri writes fantastically well--great vocabulary, great connections between

disparate things, great turn of phrase. Obviously, he's erudite; but, he doesn't push this at you. (Seems just a natural part of his being.) This memoir is a very personal journey back to Calcutta on Chaudhuri's part. (Some reviewers have said it's too personal. I don't think so.) You won't find this a "guide" to the city. It's not meant to be. It's a "guide" to the author's heart-- as though you're sitting in the room with him listening to him gently talking. Chaudhuri knows this. We learn about his wife, his parents, his extended family, his childhood haunts, favorite restaurants, favorite semi-crumbling parts of the city. In the course of this, we meet street people, chefs in the burgeoning cafe and business society, even maids and his elderly Father's care giver. He says that Calcutta is about people and shows us this. (Bombay is about money and Delhi is about government, he states.) Yes, we hear of the suffocating humidity and the need to escape it by living in England. And, we get a more clear picture of the author, an only child returning to this heat and rain- to Calcutta- to take care of his Father but only partially so. He's also taking care of himself by reconnecting to his past and sorting out his future in this not quite globalized city.

In between his reminiscences of present and past, he makes us miss what we never knew, makes us want to know that whether the life is better now or was it in the past days through his anecdotes of bygone days of the Calcutta. Only the last two chapters ('Study Leave' and 'A Visit') are less engaging and are more like ramblings of an old man. It feels like that they are there for just space occupation, a desperate try to fulfil some pre-set targets.

I don't know why others liked it so much. He rambles on and on, jumping from one topic to the next in a stream of consciousness narrative. I couldn't finish it, it was that bad. The only benefit to reading this book is if you're planning to visit Calcutta. Otherwise, don't bother.

I have read a good bit about India and enjoyed the experience. The memories in this book are very personal and detailed and, at least for me, are hard to get into. It is almost as if I were with an uncle who went on and on, saying we did this and we did that. It does not hold together.

Literature detail of Calcutta vs. travelogue. Calcutta is a fascinating city and Amit does a good job of capturing its essence in this novel.

The author introduces the reader to a wide range of Calcutta's characters here - from street stall owners to chefs in fancy hotels - from his family members to Mamata Banarjee, the woman who

presented an alternative to the Communist/Maoist Party that had so long prevailed in the area. Unfortunately, these individuals often get lost in a maze of run-on sentences crammed with subordinate clauses. Chaudhuri seems to be aiming at an imitation of Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past." He ostentatiously lets every observation trigger a stream of consciousness in him, flowing back and forth and around - from Bombay where he was born, to present-day Calcutta, to the Calcutta of his youth, to Oxford and Norwich where he studies/teaches in England. He is impressed by his own presumed ability to notice every detail and to imbue it with import. Reading "Calcutta" is like watching a loom whose shuttle has gone tilt. The result is something that might have been meant as a tapestry, but that ends up being more of a crazy quilt. This kind of undisciplined style could be forgiven if the writer made up for it with a generally likeable, engaging persona. But Chaudhuri doesn't endear himself. He comes across as taking too superior an attitude. This is evident as he goes rather pointlessly from poll to poll on election day, asking voters if they think the election "will change things." He makes it clear all these contacts are interview subjects, to be harvested for their answers and then left behind. There's also his revealing reference to his wife, who is only identified as "R" in the body of the book. Chaudhuri starts one long reflection by saying, "By the time I married R..." A more inclusive, loving person would have referred to "the day we got married." One passage will serve to illustrate these difficulties with the book. Chaudhuri finally gets around to visiting his mother's oldest friend, who is dying in a not-too-distant town. Chaudhuri launches off - "Shobhabazar is in North Calcutta; so the narrow lane in which Mini mashi and her elder sister lived doggedly in a government flat, a five-minute walk from Tagores' house in Jorasanko, two minutes from Mallickbari or the marble Palace, and not far at all from Mahajati Sadan, the playhouse; an area as littered with the relics of history as Shobhabazar is thriving (besides still being home to the obscure mansions of erstwhile rajas and landlords) with stalls selling wedding cards, saris, dress material - but predominantly wedding cards." Then in the next sentences, he justifies not having visited Mini mashi sooner by pointing out that his own home is in the more industrially progressive southern part of Calcutta. So the voyage up north always loomed for him as involving "pushing in the opposite direction, of bracing myself to travel against the current." This is an odd, abstractly inhumane reason for not visiting a friend. The topics Chaudhuri chooses to notice also seem a little too eccentric. He writes about the players and cheerleaders being imported from other countries to make up the newly popular football games in India. But he doesn't mention much about the poverty there. He writes about the difficulties Italian chefs face getting Calcutta citizens to appreciate "al dente" food. But he doesn't mention much about the ecology of the area. He talks about how delightful Christmastime in Calcutta is, but says little about

water shortages or pollution. Perhaps though, the obliqueness of Chaudhuri's observations is a good thing. The book certainly doesn't present the stereotypical picture of India as a teeming, steaming, impoverished country. It puts India in general, and Calcutta in particular, in a whole new light, as a place of unexpected daily details. There are tigers of forceful ideas that will spring out at you from the undergrowth of this book. You're likely to find some reflective gems amid the slough of verbiage. Because of all its convoluted, padded sentences, this is a hard book to skim through in order to find such treasure though. You pretty much either have to commit yourself to reading the book thoroughly, or else forego it altogether. On balance, I'd say you'd be better off for the reading of it. It will take you along a different sort of passage to India.

I think this series of essays on life in Calcutta would have been better produced as a documentary. At times it's difficult for me to understand how people thrive when they are living in Calcutta and poor. Chaudhuri experienced Calcutta from boyhood visits to his uncle living there. Calcutta defines what a city is in terms of stark contradictions. There is grinding poverty and anarchy next to purposefulness and vibrancy. The author showed the possibilities of discovering neighborhoods in Calcutta that speak for the world at large. His experiences there take us to the inside, things we would as a tourist or traveler not be likely to observe or know. Calcutta is in significant ways the opposite of an American suburb. It houses stark poverty next to affluence as an almost normal condition.

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