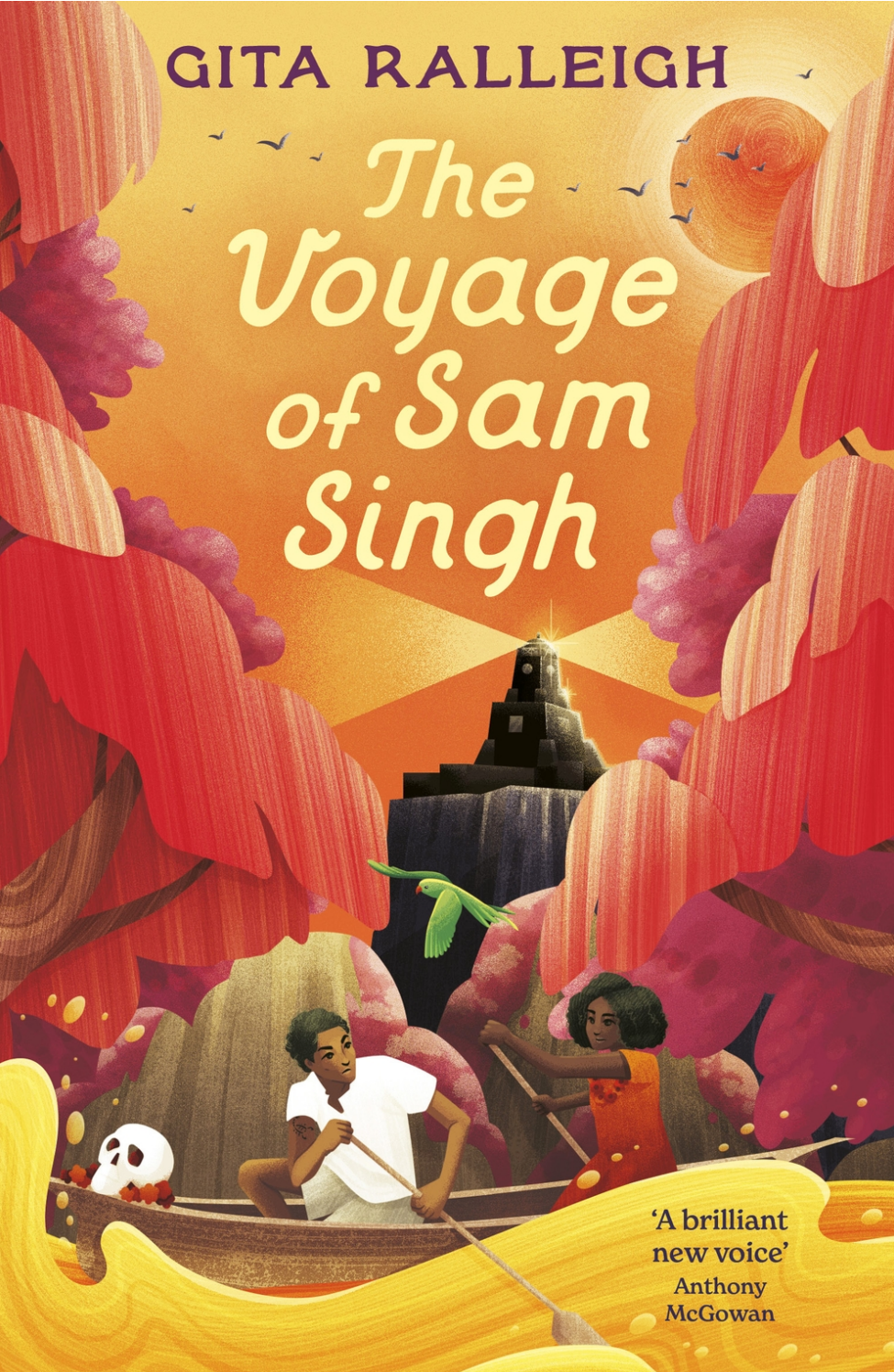


GITA RALLEIGH

*The
Voyage
of Sam
Singh*



'A brilliant
new voice'
Anthony
McGowan

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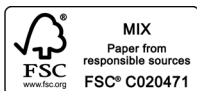
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One

Sam felt the sharp dig of claws almost tug the hair from his scalp, startling him awake. ‘Ow! Suka – that hurt!’

With a flurry of emerald wings, the parrot settled on his chest, tilting his head hopefully. ‘*Breakfast, Sam Singh!*’

Sam yawned, blinked at the glare of daylight and reached to scratch the bird’s rosy neck. The uneasy sway of the ship’s deck had made him horribly seasick last night and he felt too queasy for food. ‘Is it morning already? I don’t have anything for you to eat, Suka – hang on!’ He delved into his pocket and found an old bag of peanuts. ‘How about these?’

‘*Peanuts! Monkey nuts! Cacahuetes!*’

‘*Kadalai, mungfali!* Good boy! We’re due at the port today. Let’s see if we can spot land.’

Sam clambered up the ladder on to the bridge of the steamship. The funnel billowed sooty smoke into the sky, streaked pink with dawn. Below, the *Yellow Pearl's* foredeck thronged with passengers eager to disembark. Tradesmen with bundles of goods huddled close to the stack, white-uniformed sailors stood between them and the first-class passengers at the ship's prow, who gripped their straw hats as the wind tugged at the brims. Stewards weaved through the crowd, carrying luggage from cabins.

'*Land ahoy! Kinara dekho!*' screeched Suka joyfully, swooping over turquoise water.

In the distance, the turtle-shaped outline of the Isle of Lost Voices emerged from milky sea mist. Sam leaned forward, taking deep breaths of briny air as the Isle grew closer. His eyes roamed its green hills, silver sand and jagged cliffs of rock, unsure of what he was looking for. And then he saw it – a tower made from the Isle's black stone, and polished so that it glittered darkly in the sun.

'The Octopus, Suka!' Sam whispered, as the parrot landed on his shoulder.

His stomach lurched wildly as he stared at the building, hulking over the curve of the bay. 'That's where Moon's locked up. I'm sure of it.'

Moon was Sam's older brother. Their father had died when Sam was small, and Moon provided for the family. Like all land pirates, he could swarm over roofs, scale walls like a monkey and contort himself through the tiniest spaces. Moon had wriggled his way out of every jail, lock-up or police station he'd been held in. Until three years ago, when he'd left on a job and not come home. The police jeered at Sam's widowed mother when she reported his brother missing. He was not popular with the authorities.

Whenever Moon planned a job, he'd say to Sam, *What's the worst that could happen, eh Sam? Transportation!* Sam knew what transportation meant. It meant being shipped to the Isle and its notorious Octopus prison, never to return to the mainland.

'Hey! Boy with the parrot,' a steward called. 'Fetch the professor's trunks. You're not paid to stand around sunning yourself!'

'Yes, sir,' Sam saluted smartly.

A professor – known to Sam's people as the Collector – had paid his passage on the *Yellow Pearl*. The Collector travelled the world, gathering languages. Sam, like Suka, spoke five and had translated the land pirates' lingo for him. When the Collector needed a servant for his trip to the Isle,

Sam offered himself for hire. His mother wasn't happy, but with money tight, Sam's new stepfather had agreed at once.

'Do that boy good to earn for a change,' he'd sneered. 'Twelve years old, he's too big to be in school. And you – ' he'd given Sam a cuff on the ear – 'come straight back with the cash – no running off like your feckless brother!'

Sam had kept his mouth shut and nodded, remembering Moon's words.

What's the worst that could happen, eh, Sam? Transportation!

Moon was the reason Sam had taken the Collector's job and with it, free passage across the Kalinga Sea to the Isle of Lost Voices.

Sam leaped over the railing to a warning shout from one of the lascars and neatly dodged the crane's huge rope, uncoiling to unload the ship's cargo. Threading his way nimbly through piles of mailsacks and travelling cases, he hurried below deck. The professor's cabin door was open and he staggered back up the steps with the man's heavy trunks, groaning as he set them down. What did the professor have in them? Sam only carried the clothes on his back and a packet of peanuts his mother had given him – Suka had eaten most of those. Stacking the trunks on the foredeck, he moved to the guard

rail, Suka perched beside him, to take in the view of the Isle as they drew into harbour.

The Octopus prison reared from the cliff-top, overshadowing the port's huddle of brick warehouses, wooden huts and fishing boats. The domed black tower was studded by round windows, reflecting pale sky. Eight wings snaked from it like dark tentacles, giving the place a monstrous look that made Sam shiver, despite the warm sunshine.

'*Collector! Sam! The Collector!*' Suka had soared from his perch to circle above the passengers' heads.

Sam scanned the crowd and spotted the tall man in his khaki safari suit and helmet at the prow. He ducked quickly from the rail to guard the luggage. Sam did not plan to stick with the Collector for long. Once on the Isle, he'd slip away and find work. Then, he'd be free to do what he'd really come for: find his brother.

He glanced down at the scorpion tattooed on his arm, a mark that identified the boys and men of his tribe, dead or alive.

We are kings of the forest.

Let them tame us if they can!

Moon had taught him those words: the land pirates' greeting. Sam missed his brother terribly.

Life was hard without him, especially with his new stepfather around. Sam's mother had remarried after Moon's disappearance. He now had a little sister who was sweet, if noisy and sticky-faced. He was less fond of his stepfather, who drank too much; any money he earned soon vanished into the bottle. Moon had kept Sam from the life of a land pirate but to his stepfather, Sam was just another mouth to feed. Whatever anyone said, he knew his brother would never run off and abandon him.

Which meant the worst had happened. *Transportation*. And if Moon really was locked up in the Octopus, Sam did not intend to leave the Isle without him.

Two



‘Parrot boy! Where have you been?’ Sam jumped at the booming voice of the Collector. ‘Lie that big case flat! Those are fragile specimens.’

Sam rearranged the cases with a sigh. Suka swooped to his shoulder as the man approached.

‘Well, that’s the first work I’ve seen since we boarded. I know your people are work shy, but I’m not having this!’ The Collector did not sound happy.

Sam looked at his feet and tried to appear sorry. Maybe he’d get the sack, leaving him free to look for Moon.

‘*Seasick!*’ Suka screeched unhelpfully. ‘*Sam Singh, seasick! Beemar! Malade!*’

An elegant young woman in a white lace sari turned to look at Sam as she passed by. She frowned

at the Collector, her eyes masked by a huge pair of glasses.

‘Professor Bogusz, surely you wouldn’t dismiss this boy if he was seasick?’ she said sharply. ‘How old is he, anyway? Have you had breakfast, Sam Singh?’

Sam shook his head. ‘I haven’t eaten since we left Indica,’ he said truthfully, his stomach growling to back him up.

The Collector flushed. ‘Naturally I would not, Princess. He’s all right, aren’t you, boy? Tough people, his tribe of land pirates. Hunters, craftsmen and petty thieves, but spirited with it.’

The princess smiled at Sam. ‘And who is this remarkable parrot?’

‘Suka! Suka!’ the bird shrieked in answer.

‘Suka! How wonderful. Well, I must be off, Sam. Perhaps we’ll meet again on the Isle?’

Sam watched the passengers shuffle and part to make way for the princess, who glided across the gangway ahead of the crowd. She was followed by a porter carrying her bags and a young man in a yellow turban, whistling.

He looked again and rubbed his eyes. Last night, shivering and retching, while half-asleep on deck, he’d heard a voice say, ‘By the Lady – you’re in a bad way! Drink this.’

Sam was so thirsty, he'd drunk the cool lemony water in one long gulp and fallen into a deep sleep. He remembered now. In the blue moonlight, all he'd seen of his helper was a yellow turban and the glint of a diamond earring. The fellow who'd cured his seasickness was the princess's servant!

The Collector turned to another of the first-class passengers. 'Not what I'd call a *real* princess. They're hardly proper royalty – she's from one of those tiny states. Moonlally, I think it's called.'

Sam stared after the princess at the mention of Moonlally. Land pirates named their children for the city where they were born. Moonlally was his brother Moon's real name, just as Samudra, the great city on the Indican Ocean, was Sam's. The princess meant well, but hadn't done him a favour by intervening with the Collector. Now Sam would have to find the right moment to slip away.

'She's visiting the Isle to inspect the prison,' the Collector droned on. 'We struck up quite an acquaintance – very young, of course, but not unintelligent. I told her of my theories on—' The ship's foghorn blared out, drowning the rest of his words.

Sam brightened. If the princess was visiting the jail, he could ask the servant in the yellow turban to help him find Moon.

As the sound of the horn faded, the Collector looked round to see the other passenger edging away.

‘Know what that big black building is, boy?’ he barked.

Sam nodded. ‘A jail, sir – they call it the Octopus.’

‘Of course! I’ll wager some of your lot are inside. They don’t call you land pirates for nothing – wily bunch of thieves and scoundrels.’

Sam jumped. ‘Er, I don’t know of anyone, sir.’ He touched the inked scorpion on his arm, hoping the Collector hadn’t seen his reaction.

Sam knew Moon wouldn’t have done anything too awful. Land pirates were honourable thieves who took only what they needed and robbed from those too rich to notice. But he wasn’t silly enough to tell the Collector – outsiders had their own opinions of right and wrong. Besides, Moon had wanted more for Sam. He’d taken all the risks of land-pirate ways so his younger brother could stay in school.

‘The interior of the Isle is where we’re heading: dense, impenetrable jungle,’ the Collector continued. ‘The governor has arranged for the forest people to guide us – if they turn up. Their tribe’s as unreliable as you land pirates, I hear.’

Now, take the luggage to his car – I’m staying at the Residence tonight.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Sam saluted. He lugged the Collector’s trunks down the gangway, wishing he could carry them on his head, like the porters jostling for business. Sam was sure he’d learn to balance stacks of luggage as easily as they did – the port would be a good place to find work while he schemed his way into the Octopus.

Passengers poured down the gangway from the steamer as the crane swung back and forth, unloading its cargo: crates of spices, tea and grain, which spilled on to the dock. Sam spotted the Collector’s pith helmet beside the gleaming black motor car belonging to the governor.

He loaded the cases into the trunk and hesitated, before climbing up on the running board of the car. If he was going to run, he ought to run now. But he was faint with hunger, his stomach rumbling loudly over the sound of the engine. The Collector hadn’t paid him, he didn’t have another job – and there wouldn’t be easy pickings at the port, too many uniforms. He’d be wiser to sneak away tonight, after a decent meal.

The car trundled off. Suka flew above as they jolted slowly along the dusty road, lined with windblown palm trees. Hearing shouts, Sam

looked back at the dock. Flanked by their guards, a line of downcast prisoners in black trudged from the *Yellow Pearl*, chains clanking. Sam couldn't tear his eyes away until they'd rounded the corner and the men were out of sight. He was gripped by fear as he pictured Moon among them – shackled in the hold for the desperate, rolling sea voyage and reaching land, to be locked in that horrible jail. Shuddering, he turned to face the road that unfurled ahead, hoping – believing – it might lead him to his brother.