

### **Flood of Fire** by Amitav Ghosh

John Murray, 624pp; £20

The last volume in the Ibis trilogy, a saga about colonial-era India, centres on a particularly dirty episode. Having destroyed the Indian textile industry (in the interest of Manchester's mills) and forced the cultivation of opium, Britain compelled China, by gunboat, into national drug addiction. Will we pay for the "century of humiliation" we inflicted on China and our (mis)treatment of India? Ghosh's fiction balances the question. He has, he reckons, 47 novels to go before reaching an answer.

This doorstopper of a novel, thick as curry with Anglo-Indian patois and with a bundle of rattlingly good narratives, makes one desperate that he does continue.

### **The Kindness** by Polly Samson

Bloomsbury Circus, 304pp; £14.99

If there were a prize for the best opening line in a novel this year,

I would award it to *The Kindness*: "Lucifer flew well for her in the fading light, falling through the sky when she summoned him and away again towards a great bruising sunset." There's a background web of allusion — as that first word signals — to *Paradise Lost*. And it reminds us (as did Robert Graves in *The Story of Marie Powell: Wife to Mr Milton*) that the epic poem is, at its centre, about marriage and marital betrayals.

### **The Appearance of Murder** by John

Nightingale Spider Monkey, 420pp; £12.99

Sometimes one just wants the uncomplicated pleasures of genre fiction. The most teasingly pleasurable crime mystery novel I've come across this year is *The Appearance of Murder*. The plot is cunningly set up around a novelist writing a crime mystery novel which then dissolves into the real thing. Or perhaps not. The play of appearance and reality is maintained to a satisfying denouement.