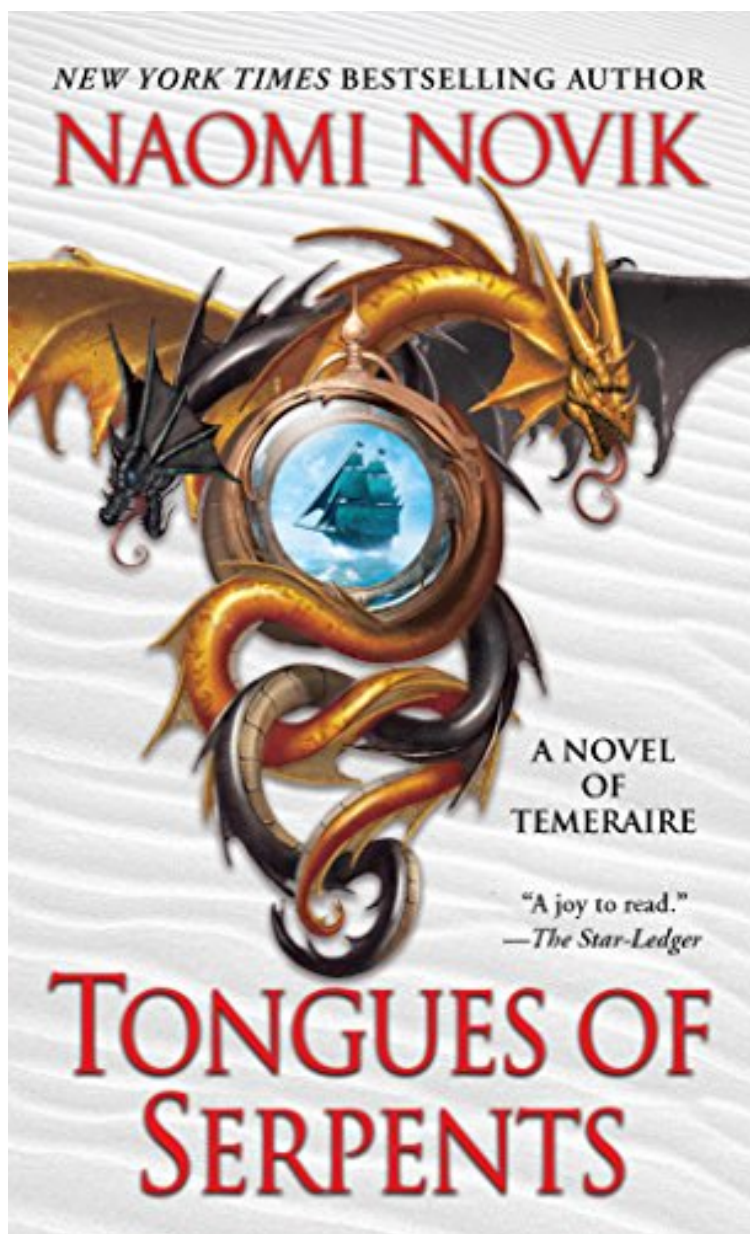


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Tongues of Serpents: A Novel of Temeraire



Par Naomi Novik

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurConvicted of treason despite their heroic defense against Napoleons invasion of England, Temeraire and Capt. Will Laurence have been transported to a prison colony in distant Australiaand into a hornets nest of fresh complications. The colony is in turmoil after the overthrow of military governor William Blighaka Captain Bligh, late of HMSBounty. And when Bligh tries to enlist them in his bid to regain office, the dragon and his captain are caught in the middle of a political power struggle. Their only chance to escape the fray is accepting a mission to blaze a route through the forbidding Blue

Mountains and into the interior of Australia. But the theft of a precious dragon egg turns their expedition into a desperate recovery operation leading to a shocking discovery and a dangerous new complication in the global war between Britain and Napoleon. BONUS: This edition includes an excerpt from Naomi Novik's *Crucible of Gold*. **Chapter One** There were few streets in the main port of Sydney which deserved the name, besides the one main thoroughfare, and even that bare packed dirt, lined only with a handful of small and wretched buildings that formed all the permanence of the colony. Tharkay turned off from this and led the way down a cramped, irregularly arranged alley-way between two wooden-slat buildings to a courtyard full of men drinking, in surly attitudes, under no roof but a tarpaulin. Along one side of the courtyard, the further from the kitchens, the convicts sat in their drab and faded duck trousers, dusty from the fields and quarries and weighted down with fatigue; along the other, small parties of men from the New South Wales Corps watched with candidly unfriendly faces as Laurence and his companions seated themselves at a small table near the edge of the establishment. Besides their being strangers, Granby's coat drew the eye: bottle-green was not in the common way, and though he had put off the worst excesses of gold braid and buttons with which Iskierka insisted upon adorning him, the embroidery at cuffs and collar could not be so easily detached. Laurence wore plain brown, himself: to make a pretense of standing in the Aerial Corps now was wholly out of the question, of course, and if his dress raised questions concerning his situation, that was certainly no less than honest, as neither he nor anyone else had yet managed to work out what that ought in any practical sense to be. I suppose this fellow will be here soon enough, Granby said, unhappily; he had insisted on coming, but not from any approval of the scheme. I fixed the hour at six, Tharkay answered, and then turned his head: one of the younger officers had risen from the tables and was coming towards them. Eight months aboard ship with no duties of his own and shipmates nearly united in their determination to show disdain had prepared Laurence for the scene which, with almost tiresome similarity, unfolded yet again. The insult itself was irritating for demanding some answer, more than anything else; it had not the power to wound in the mouth of a coarse young boor, stinking of rum and visibly unworthy to stand among even the shabby ranks of a military force alternately called the Rum Corps. Laurence regarded Lieutenant Agreuth only with distaste, and said briefly, Sir, you are drunk; go back to your table, and leave us at ours. There the similarity ended, however: I don't see why I, Agreuth said, his tongue tangling awkwardly, so he had to stop and repeat himself, speaking with excessive care, why I should listen to anything out of a piss-pot whorson traitors fucking mouth. Laurence stared, and heard the tirade with mounting incredulity; he would have expected the gutter language out of a dockyard pickpocket in a temper, and hardly knew how to hear it from an officer. Granby had evidently less difficulty, and sprang to his feet saying, By God, you will apologize, or for halfpence I will have you flogged through the streets. I would like to see you try it, Agreuth said, and leaning over spat into Granby's glass; Laurence stood too late to catch Granby's arm from throwing it into Agreuth's face. That was of course an end to even the barest hope or pretense of civility; Laurence instead pulled Granby back by his arm, out of the way of Agreuth's wildly swinging fist, and letting go struck back with the same hand, clenched, as it came again at his face. He did not hold back; if brawling was outrageous, it looked inevitable, and he would as soon have it over with quickly. So the blow was armed with all the strength built up from childhood on rope-lines and harness, and Laurence knocked Agreuth directly upon the jaw: the lieutenant lifted half-an-inch from the ground, his head tipping back and leading the rest of his frame. Stumbling a few steps as he came down, he pitched face-front onto the floor straight through the neighboring table, to the accompaniment of several shattering glasses and the stink of cheap rum. That might have been enough, but Agreuth's companions, though officers and some of them older and more sober than he, showed no reluctance in flinging themselves at once into the fray thus begun. The men at the overturned table, sailors on an East India merchantman, were as quick to take offense at the disruption of their drinking; and a mingled crowd of sailors and laborers and soldiers, all better than three-quarters of the way drunk, and a great scarcity of women, as compared to what would have been found in nearly every other dockyard house of the world which Laurence knew, was a powder-keg ready for the slow-match in any case. The rum had not finished sinking between the paving-stones before men were rising from their chairs all around them. Another officer of the New South Wales Corps threw himself on Laurence: a bigger man than Agreuth, sodden and heavy with liquor. Laurence twisted himself loose and heaved him down onto the floor, shoving him as well as could be managed under the table. Tharkay was already with a practical air seizing the bottle of rum by the neck, and when another man lunged this one wholly unconnected with Agreuth, and by all appearances simply pleased to fight anyone at all, Tharkay clubbed him upon the temple swiftly. Granby had been seized upon by three men at once: two of them, Agreuth's fellows, for spite, and one

who was trying his best only to get at the jeweled sword and belt around Granbys waist. Laurence struck the pickpocket on the wrist, and seizing him by the scruff of the collar flung him stumbling across the courtyard;

Granby exclaimed, then, and turning back Laurence found him ducking from a knife, dirty and rust-speckled, being stabbed at his eyes. By God, have you taken all leave of your senses? Laurence said, and seized upon the knife-wielders hand with both his own, twisting the blade away, while Granby efficiently knocked down the third man and turned back to help him. The melee was spreading rapidly now, helped along by Tharkay, who was coolly throwing the toppled chairs across the room, knocking over still more of the tables, and flinging glasses of rum into the faces of the custom as they rose indignantly. Laurence and Granby and Tharkay were only three together, and thanks to the advance of the New South Wales officers well-surrounded, leaving the irritated men no other target but those same officers; a target on which the convicts in particular seemed not loath to vent their spleen. This was not a very coherently directed fury, however, and when the officer before Laurence had been clubbed down with a heavy stool, the choleric assailant behind him swung it with equal fervor at Laurence himself. Laurence slipped upon the wet floorboards, catching the stool away from his face, and went to one knee in a puddle. He shoved the mans leg out from under him, and was rewarded with the full weight of man and stool landing upon his shoulder, so they went sprawling together upon the floor. Splinters drove into Laurences side, where his shirt had ridden up from his breeches and come wholly loose, and the big convict, swearing at him, struck him on the side of his face with a clenched fist. Laurence tasted blood as his lip tore upon his tooth, a dizzying haze over his sight. They were rolling across the floor, and Laurence had no very clear recollection of the next few moments; he was pounding at the other man savagely, a blow with every turn, knocking his head against the boards over and over. It was a vicious, animal struggle, insensible of both feeling and thought; he knew only distantly as he was kicked, by accident, or struck against the wall or some overturned piece of furniture. The limp unconsciousness of his opponent freed him at last from the frenzy, and Laurence with an effort opened his clenched hand and let go the mans hair, and pushed himself up from the floor, staggering. They had fetched up against the wooden counter before the kitchen. Laurence reaching up clutched at the edge and pulled himself to his feet, aware more than he wished to be, all at once, of a deep stabbing pain in his side, and stinging cuts in his cheek and his hands. He fumbled at his face and pulled free a long sliver of broken glass, tossing it upon the counter. The fighting had begun already to die down, oddly quick to Laurences instinctive sense of an action; the participants lacked the appetite of a real engagement, where there was anything worth to be gained. Laurence limping across the room made it to Granbys side: Agreuth and one of his fellow officers had clawed their way back up onto their feet and were yet grappling weakly with him in a corner, vicious but half-exhausted, so they were swaying back and forth more than wrestling. Coming in, Laurence heaved Granby free, and leaning on each other they stumbled out of the courtyard and into the narrow, stinking alley-way outside, which yet seemed fresh out from under the makeshift tarpaulin; a fine misting rain was falling. Laurence leaned gratefully against the far wall made cool and light by the coating of dew, ignoring with a practiced stomach the man a few steps away who was heaving the contents of his belly into the gutters. A couple of women coming down the alley-way lifted their skirts over the trickle of muck and continued past them all without hesitation, not even looking in at the disturbance of the tavern courtyard. My God, you look a fright, Granby said, dismally. I have no doubt, Laurence said, gingerly touching at his face. And I have two ribs cracked, I dare say. I am sorry to say, John, you are not in much better case. No, I am sure not, Granby said. We will have to take a room somewhere, if anyplace will let us through the door, to wash up; what Iskierka would do seeing me in such a state, I have no notion. Laurence had a very good notion what Iskierka would do, and also Temeraire, and between them there would not be much left of the colony to speak of afterwards. Well, Tharkay said, joining them as he wrapped his neckcloth around his own bloodied hand, I believe I saw our man look into the establishment, a little while ago, but I am afraid he thought better of coming in under the circumstances. I will have to inquire after him to arrange another meeting. No, Laurence said, blotting his lip and cheek with his handkerchief. No, I thank you; I think we can dispense with his information. I have seen all I need to, in order to form an opinion of the discipline of the colony, and its military force. Temeraire sighed and toyed with the last bites of kangaroo stew the meat had a pleasantly gamy sort of flavor, not unlike deer, and he had found it at first a very satisfying change from fish, after the long sea-voyage. But he could only really call it palatable when cooked rare, which did not offer much variety; in stew it became quite stringy and tiresome, especially as the supply of spice left even more to be desired. There were some very nice cattle in a pen which he could see, from his vantage upon the harbor promontory, but evidently they were much too dear here for the Corps to

provide. And Temeraire of course could not propose such an expense to Laurence, not when he had been responsible for the loss of Laurences fortune; instead Temeraire had silenced all his mild complaints about the lack of variety: but sadly Gong Su had taken this as encouragement, and it had been nothing but kangaroo morning and night, four days running not even a bit of tunny. I do not see why we maynt at least go hunting further along, Iskierka said, even while licking out her own bowl indecorously she quite refused to learn anything resembling polite manners. This is a large country, and it stands to reason there ought to be something more worth eating if we looked. Perhaps there are some of those elephants which you have been on and on about; I should like to try one of those. Temeraire would have given a great deal for a delicious elephant, seasoned with a generous amount of pepper and perhaps some sage, but Iskierka was never to be encouraged in anything whatsoever. You are very welcome to go flying away anywhere you like, he said, and to surely get quite lost. No one has any notion of what this countryside is like, past the mountains, and there is no one in it, either, to ask for directions: not people or dragons. That is very silly, Iskierka said. I do not say these kangaroos are very good eating, because they are not, and there are not enough of them, either; but they are certainly no worse than what we had in Scotland during the last campaign, so it is stuff to say there is no one living here; why wouldnt there be? I dare say there are plenty of dragons here, only they are somewhere else, eating much better than we are. This struck Temeraire as not an unlikely possibility, and he made a note to discuss it privately with Laurence, later; which recalled him to Laurences absence, and thence to the advancing hour. Roland, he called, with a little anxiety of course Laurence did not need nursemaiding, but he had promised to return before the supper hour, and read a little more of the novel which he had acquired in town the day before. Roland, is it not past five? Lord, yes, it must be almost six, Emily Roland answered, putting down her sword; she and Demane were fencing a little, in the yard. She patted her face down with a tugged-free tail of her shirt, and ran to the promontory edge to call down to the sailors below, and came back to say, No, I am wrong: it is a quarter past seven: how strange the day is so long, when it is almost Christmas! It is not strange at all, Demane said. It is only strange that you keep insisting it must be winter here only because it is in England. But where is Granby, if it is so late? Iskierka said, prickling up at once, overhearing. He did not mean to go anywhere particularly nice, he assured me, or I should never have let him go looking so shabby. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* A joy to read. *The Star-Ledger* I'm more excited about [Naomi] Novik's series than I ever have been. . . . *Tongues of Serpents* might just be the best. *Clay Kallam, Contra Costa Times* Praise for the novels of Temeraire Completely involving and probably addictive. *San Francisco Chronicle* Enthralling reading. "Time Gripping adventure. *Entertainment Weekly*