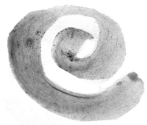
On how climate change continues to turn fiction into reality



Writer Amitav Ghosh on addressing the realities of climate change through the guise of fiction, the solidifying value of multiple edits, and why writing is a deeply mysterious pursuit.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2327 words.

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You've written that climate change is rarely present in literary novels and stories. Do you think that's changed?

I do think that there's been a significant change in the last couple of years. I think there's a much greater awareness of the reality of climate change, and I think that that's true everywhere in the world. It's true in the United States, it's true across Asia. One of the reasons why it's true is simply because the impacts are so clearly evident now. Just look at the most recent heat wave. In Europe, they've had two heat waves within a couple of weeks of each other.

So, there are a whole lot of reasons why it's becoming more and more a part of mainstream discourse. But simply because it's becoming a part of mainstream discourse, we also see a pushback. I think in recent history, it's hard to think of any American administration that has been so cavalier in regards to environmental issues. They're just sort of flat out denying the reality of climate change. I mean, it is an ostrich trying to make a sound with its head under the sand.

Do you find that these changes have been reflected in literature?

Well, I think Richard Powers' *The Overstory* was a very important book. I think its publication really mounts a significant change in attitude, in the way that books on these subjects are received now.

You've written a novel, *Gun Island*, in which the characters notice and remark on the changing climate. It seems to me that the changing climate even propels parts of the plot. Did you set out to write about climate change?

Not really. I felt that I was writing a book about the realities of our time. The realities of our time are exactly this, and because I'm from this particular part of India, I've seen the impact in front of my eyes over many, many years. I started visiting this region kind of seriously in about 2000, and already then you could see the impact of climate change quite clearly in the landscape and the impact that it is having on people's lives. In the years since then, it's just grown worse and worse. I was just setting out to write about the world as it exists today.

I suppose where you're living makes some difference, but in fact, the really weird thing is that now there's no escaping it. It's everywhere.

It seems hard to write about an issue as big and omnipresent as climate change while still focusing on individual

characters. How did you go about doing that?

It is very difficult to write about something so vast with so many different strands to it. I wish I could tell you that I had a plan and that I just carried out the plan, but it wasn't really like that at all. I don't think stories happen like that. This is a lot of different things coming together in my head. But I did realize a couple things way back when I was writing *The Great Derangement*. One was that to write about climate change, to write about the world that we are living in today, you can't any longer focus on particular locations or places or settings because this is a global phenomenon. It's happening internationally. It's creating all sorts of connections internationally, so you have to take that on board. You have to try to write books which are not localized in that particular way.

***Gun Island* is not an apocalyptic novel. There are massive storms, there are strange animal encounters, but it seems to me that it's in the realist tradition.**

I just felt that I was writing about the real world. That, for me, was a kind of touchstone that I was writing about the real world with the techniques of the novelist. At the same time, the real world that we live in today is really profoundly uncanny. All kinds of really strange things keep happening. Actually, in the process of writing this book and the aftermath have been so strange and so uncanny in so many ways. I mean, I constantly get messages now from people saying this thing that you talked about in your book, it just happened here. That in itself is just such a peculiar experience.

In Gun Island, Deen—the main character—considers himself to be a very rational thinker, but his ideas are challenged by his friend who believes in myth and coincidence. Maybe you could even call it magical thinking. Do you think the return to these types of storytelling is important right now?

Yeah, I think it's certainly the case that only stories can tell us about certain aspects of the world that we live in, about the consciousness of non-human beings of various kinds. About various sorts of events which, on the surface, seem to be related only through chance, but which possess other possibilities. We're living in a world that is really *unreal*. So, we have to find ways of telling these stories that are at once real and unreal. I think only in fiction can we do that.

You've said that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is increasingly strained amid climate change. Can you say more about that?

Well, I think what I was trying to say there is that one writes things as fiction and suddenly they become nonfiction. I wrote about these poisonous spiders in Venice. The other day I got a message from a friend who lives in Venice, and he said he had to take his son to the hospital because of a poisonous spider bite. I mean, you just constantly come across these things now.

It's as though we need to allow fiction to accommodate for the weirdness and uncanniness of the real world.

Yeah, that's right.

You've also said that moving away from individual stories and toward more collective stories and issues may help writers confront things like climate change. Is that something you've tried to do in your own work?

Going back a long way, my work has never been so focused upon individuals, really. But I do feel that, yes, we have to find ways of telling stories where the focus is not just on identity or individual journeys or whatever. We have to try and find these connections between many different people, from many different places—and how they are being thrust together.

Technology features prominently in *Gun Island*. There are characters who have these long conversations about the plus sides and the perils of personal tech. What's your own relationship like with social media and e-mail and other online distractions?

I'm on e-mail certainly, as one has to be nowadays. On social media, I have a very limited sort of exposure. I'm not on Facebook. I am on Twitter, and I am sort of in a limited way on Instagram. I find Twitter very useful because I get many kinds of news from it. But I think I'm also very aware that social media can be a very difficult and dangerous place. One has to be very careful in how one deals with social media. I think, for me, one thing that was very revelatory is that while I was writing this book, I spent a fair amount of time, actually quite a long time, in Italy visiting migrant camps and speaking with migrants and refugees. I was really shocked by the degree to which social media and technology played a role in their journey.

It's a very striking thing that, in the past, we used to think of technology as being the province of affluence, so that rich nations had more access to technology. But one thing that has happened with communications technology and IT and so on is that it completely changed that dynamic. In many ways now, it's the world's poorest people who have the greatest access to these technologies. That's a strange thing. But if you look at, say, cell phone use or social media use, you see that in percentage terms the places where they use the most are in fact places like Bangladesh, Kenya, and so on.

On the flip side, it seems that being able to retreat from social media has become a privilege.

Yeah, it very much seems that way.

What do you do when you feel creatively stuck?

I find that it's very important to read. Really, a lot of the time I get my ideas for books or for essays, articles, whatever, from other sources. I think it's very important to read not just literature but also history. It's important to read poetry. It's also very important to read in other languages because that also gives you a perspective on the world which can be very, very fruitful.

How did you figure out how to make a living through your creative work?

I have to say that I think that is my single greatest achievement. It's only when you've done it that you realize how difficult it is and how unlikely it is. And also, that I'm perhaps of the last generation of writers who will actually be able to support themselves solely by writing. I hate to say it, but I think it's the case. When I was in my 20s and 30s as a young writer, even in New York after I came here, so many of the friends in my circle were freelancers. In those days, you could actually make an okay living by freelancing, but now that's become really almost impossible. I mean, magazines and so on that used to pay quite well no longer pay well. So, I think most of all you have to be very versatile. You can't just do one thing. You have to have many, many strings to your bow.

What is something that you wish someone had told you when you began to make art?

One thing that I often tell younger writers is to work at a standing desk. We get used to very sedentary lifestyles, and we sit all day long. But really, working at a standing desk is a very good thing in many different ways. I think it makes me more alert for one thing, but it's also better for your body and so on.

How do you go about editing your own work? Do you edit as you go? Do you edit daily? Do you edit after a full draft is finished?

All of the above is the answer to that. I mean, I edit what I wrote yesterday before starting writing again today, so that's the first sort of layer of editing. Then, suppose I have a chapter, then I'll edit it again and again. Every word I publish has been through 30 edits. My first draft I do with a pencil. I just write freehand with a pencil. I do that for quite a while, and then I write with a pen. I make a draft with a pen. And then I get onto the computer. For me, it would be really kind of crippling if I were to go straight onto a computer. I would just freeze up. I think there's a lot to be said for trying to find ways of not freezing up, of being able to be loose.

Is there something about the impermanence of the pencil?

That’s right. Simply because it’s not so permanent-looking. It’s not intimidating. You can be more playful. You can let your mind wander. I think the whole editing process is essentially one of reducing your thoughts into a kind of solidity. You can’t begin with the solidity. You have to begin with a kind of liquidity, if you like. Even a kind of airiness. The whole process of distilling it down to something very solid is that gradual process of going through multiple edits and so on. I think if you were to start at the other end, trying every day to produce something that’s absolutely solid and determinant, it could have the effect of just making you freeze in anxiety.

Yeah, and sometimes the writing feels airless that way, too.

That’s right.

As far as your writing is concerned, how do you define failure and how do you define success?

Well, I think you always know. I mean, when you’ve done a draft that doesn’t work, you know. You just have to throw it out and start again. I’m constantly doing that. The whole thing about writing is really a mystery. You can make up so many rules and have so many suggestions, but at the end of the day, it really is a mystery. I mean, the most important thing about any piece of writing is that it must have life. There’s no substitute for that. And if it doesn’t, it could still have the most beautiful context, it could have the beautiful sentences, and it could still be completely dead. That’s the one thing I think that’s really not communicable pedagogically to students because whenever I’ve had anything to do with creative writing courses and so on, they create so much self-consciousness about the whole writing process, they push students to really think and rethink and rethink their sentences until they’re completely perfect, but in the process, what’s often lost is a kind of energy, a kind of life.

Amitav Ghosh Recommends:

Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction*

Dahr Jamail’s *The End of Ice*

Annie Proulx’s *Bird Cloud*

Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*

Ana Tsing’s *Mushroom at the End of the World*

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior*

Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*

Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa’s *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*

Name
Amitav Ghosh

Vocation
Writer

Ivo van der Bent