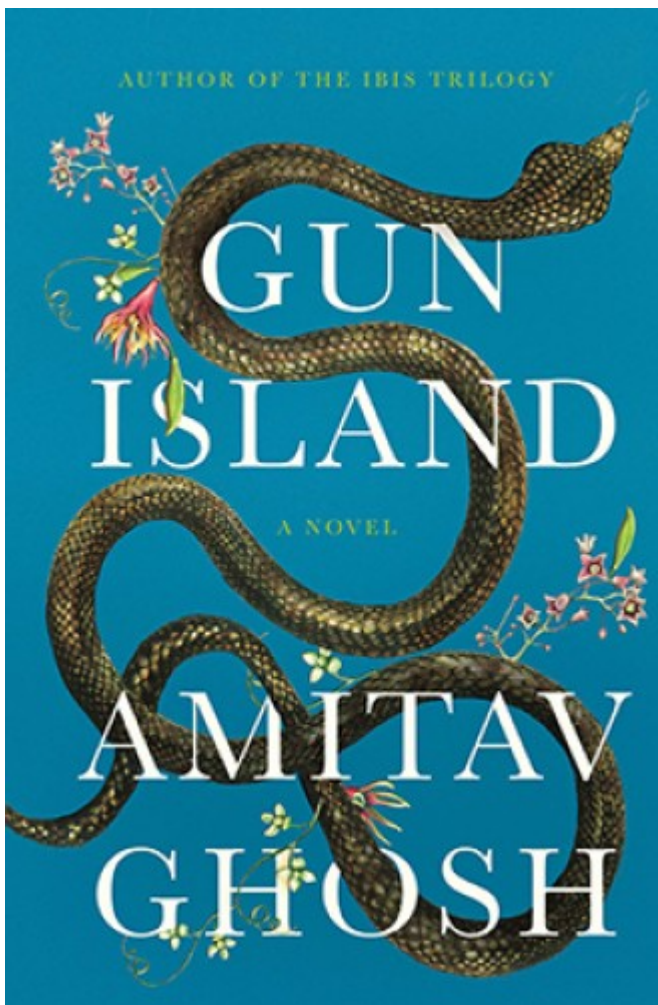


A novel about climate change's impact on all of us

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh practices what he preached in *The Great Derangement*.

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Gun Island

A Novel

By Amitav Ghosh
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Where and what are the Sundarbans? This is the first thing most readers might want to look up as they try to understand Amitav Ghosh's latest novel, which attempts to link the global impact of climate change to the everyday realities of people in several different major cities.

Gun Island follows the story of Dinanath "Deen" Datta, an Indian man who relocated to the American Midwest for graduate school before settling down as a rare book dealer based in Brooklyn. Deen doesn't seem the type to go looking for adventure. In fact, he very nearly turns down the invitation that leads him into the novel's unfolding series of events. This characterization appears deliberate. It's as though Ghosh wants the novel's intellectually curious but comfortably distant readers to see themselves in Deen's discomfort, confusion, and skepticism.

Deen's adventure is driven by the type of academic mystery that readers may associate with Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. He wants to explore the unknown origin of a legend written in hieroglyphics on an old, hidden shrine tucked away on an island in the Sundarbans—the mangrove forest that spreads across the lands amid the confluence of rivers between India and Bangladesh. From the Sundarbans, Deen's search leads him to New York, Los Angeles, and Venice. It connects him to marine biologists and con men, to climate refugees and the criminals who take advantage of them.

Through these carefully detailed settings, Ghosh uses Deen's narrative voice to anchor readers in reality. We need to believe and trust in Deen, even as his story races out of his control and touches on everything from beached dolphins and raging wildfires to international standoffs over the fates of Bangladeshi climate refugees.

It doesn't quite work. Ghosh's writing is clear, thoughtful, neatly organized, and often beautiful. But Deen's passivity and academic skepticism hold us back. Just as they prevent Deen from feeling he's living his life fully, they prevent readers from connecting as deeply as Ghosh seems to want us to. There are multiple points at which Deen claims to be struck breathless by various coincidences and revelations, but the language is too measured and crafted to hit the gut. Instead, even in these moments, the book leads with its plot and ideas.

Fortunately, there's a lot to think about. In a previous work of nonfiction, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh asked why more authors and artists aren't exploring the global crisis of climate change, and he called on them, as well as others, to wake from the delusion that we can keep going about our daily activities without concern for the impact they have on the planet.

Gun Island is proof that Ghosh is willing to practice what he preaches. It offers a picture of the global climate crisis rendered at a human level. That makes the book fantastically ambitious, and in many ways it is largely successful.

Even when Deen and the other characters seem a touch hollow or cheated, *Gun Island* still succeeds by moving quickly, exploring uncommon materials, and asking tough questions. Its plot deftly ties corporate greed and climate change to land erosion, wildfires, and the plight of climate refugees. It dares us to consider how climate change has impacted the lives of animals, especially those that have recently become part of our nearby environment and those that can no longer live in it.

Most importantly, the book unites its strengths and weaknesses alike in its choice of Deen as narrator. His doubt and passivity may detract from the novel's emotional weight, but they implicate us, as readers, in all of the novel's most outlandish events. It's as though Ghosh is saying, "You thought this didn't involve you? You thought you could escape this? So did Deen. There's no escaping the changes that affect us all." We don't need to be active to be involved. We don't need to be polluters or crusaders. There's no standing on the side. We are all part of the story.